# Black Women Activists in Nineteenth Century New Orleans

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## *Marie Laveaux and Henriette Delille*

By

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# CHAPTER ONE

# HISTORICIZING NEW ORLEANS AND ITS NINETEENTH CENTURY CITIZENRY

I recall in junior high school we were required to take a course about Louisiana from its early history to its 1980s present. My teacher was a gentleman from Opelousas who came alive during instruction when the discussion centered on Louisiana's geographical boundaries and New Orleans. Even though the information that the teacher relayed to us in hindsight was accurate based on available information presented in the textbook the school district had chosen, it pales in comparison to what is currently available. The internet has for me made the state in which I have lived all my life come alive in nuanced ways as previously written French and Spanish archival records are readily translated into English. In the past, one was hard pressed to locate a translator willing to sift through these records or gain access to these documents because they are aged and fragile which makes them priceless and irreplaceable. Flash forward to my undergraduate studies at a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU) where I enrolled in a course titled Louisiana History, Culture, and Geography. Like my junior high teacher, the professor used New Orleans as his starting and ending points for all things Louisiana, regardless of the topic, with the justification that New Orleans' development was an anomaly in the wider construction of the entire state. This made me curious about New Orleans, but at the time I relied on the textbook, lectures, and extensive visits to the public library to fill in the blanks left after completing this course.

For instance, we learned that the French Quarter was originally called *Vieux Carré* (which means "Old District" or "Old Square") and that it was the oldest neighborhood in New Orleans. Furthermore, the professor stressed that the French Quarter was Louisiana's seat of government under French

and Spanish colonialism. My professor discussed the architecture, specifically the iron casts and designs that appear on buildings such as the Pontalba Buildings and St. Louis Cathedral both located near Jackson Square in the French Quarter. He then announced with an almost celebratory tone that slaves had performed such architectural details. I later learned that African-born men enslaved in eighteenth century New Orleans, who had been skilled blacksmiths in Africa were instrumental in creating the intricate designs contained in the metal work for which the French Quarter in well-known. These African-born men used their knowledge and physical strength to carve symbols into the iron casts that paid homage to their African heritage and cultural practices. This was my first time realizing that apart from being enslaved, African-born human beings and their New World descendants had contributed to the development of Louisiana and its architectural artifacts.

By graduate school, I had filed these early memories in the archives of my mind until I began working on my doctorate degree and enrolled in Caribbean Studies courses where I learned that southeast Louisiana was considered by some scholars as a circumscribe part of the Caribbean. I found myself drawn to this idea as we began studying France's New World colonies, particularly the relationship between Saint-Domingue (Haiti) and New Orleans in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Needless to say, my mind was blown when I realized that Saint-Domingue and New Orleans had been French colonies that traded commercial goods (e.g., coffee, cacao), people (e.g., immigrants, slaves), ideologies (e.g., *Code Noir*), and cultural practices (e.g., Vodou). I became more interested in the people that migrated to New Orleans from Saint-Domingue and learned that many began immigrating to the city before, during, and after the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803). Even though French colonial records document the presence of light-skinned persons of African descent born from unions between European men and African-born women as early as 1796. The presence of these French colonists and native-French speakers in New Orleans revitalized the citizens, specifically *gens de couleur libres* or free persons of color, into action across social, political, and geographical lines. By mid-semester, the course had progressed to the accomplishments that male *gens de couleur libres* like Norbert Rillieux (1806-1894) and Andre Cailloux (1825-1863) had made in their New Orleans communities, but

failed to mention those made by women such as Rose Nicaud (1812-1880) and Marie Couvent (1757-1837). Nicaud was a *negress libre* who owned and operated her own business in the *Vieux Carré* while *Couvent,* who was also a *negress libre*, became a philanthropist in her community. These women like their male counterparts served as activists in nineteenth century New Orleans at a time when both genders were marginalized by European colonialism.

I was further flabbergasted when two years later, I enrolled in a graduate seminar course titled Louisiana Curriculum History and we were assigned to read Donna Porche-Frilot's dissertation 'Propelled by Faith: Henriette Delille and the Literacy Practices of Black Women Religious in Antebellum New Orleans' (2005) and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1992) which piqued my interest in Henriette Delille and Marie Laveaux respectively. For my final project, I explored how *femme de couleur libres* or free women of color influenced New Orleans's cultural landscape through their literacy practices, spiritualism, and activism. I drew on the exotic *Les Sirene* mythology adapted from the African religious pantheon. *Les Sirene* or Mami Wata is a half-fish, half-woman *lwas* or spirit venerated by worshippers who desire wealth, healing, or fertility. I recontextualized *Les Sirene* in my study to reflect the erotic underpinnings that plagued *femme de couleur libres* in New Orleans based on their African heritage, light-skin complexion, and European features. I conducted this exploration using Laveaux and Delille as my subjects in a comparative analysis regarding how each used religion as a literacy practice to construct their activism in their immediate communities and the larger New Orleans area.

The research surrounding Laveaux and Delille has increased since I was a graduate student as new knowledge has emerged shedding an illuminating light on the revolutionary nature of their activism in nineteenth century New Orleans. Previously, scholars have focused their research on the Louisiana lore encasing Laveaux and her Vodou Queen moniker while Delille's life before becoming a nun has been spurred forward by her potential canonization as a Catholic saint. The failure of contemporary investigators to excavate further than the superficial contributions that Laveaux and

Delille made in nineteenth century New Orleans as black women activists is the gap in knowledge that my book attempts to fill. I examine how Laveaux and Delille acted as race women when their African descended counterparts were marginalized and/or enslaved in New Orleans. I deconstruct how their status as *femme de couleur libres* from the *quadroon* and *octoroon* classes respectively enabled them to overcome many of the barriers that limited Africana women in the nineteenth century.

My book navigates how Laveaux and Delille used their situated knowledge to create cyphers that enabled them to address the needs of their race across intersections of gender, class, and geography. Using an individualized comparative analytical approach, I transform Laveaux and Delille from iconic spiritual figures into black women activists in nineteenth century New Orleans. In studying their individual and collective contributions to nineteenth century New Orleans, particularly in the poor, enslaved, and disenfranchised communities, I determined that their services extended beyond spiritual guidance and financial assistance. This book is an exploration of Laveaux's and Delille's activism in nineteenth century New Orleans. Regrettably, my research into the extent of Laveaux's and Delille's activism was limited by an inability to locate primary sources documenting how these black women activists used their social positions to advocate for New Orleans's poor, enslaved, and disenfranchised populations. Nonetheless, my book lays a foundation for persons interested in understanding how *femme de couleur libres* in nineteenth century New Orleans worked as activists to uplift their race and community. I begin this journey by historicizing New Orleans from its European colonization through its Americanization and statehood.

## French New Orleans, the *Code Noir*, and African-born Human Beings

I learned the rudimentary aspects of Louisiana History in eighth grade, but had not been fully exposed to the state as an indigenous location that was *reconquista* or reclaimed territory. New Orleans, like Louisiana, was claimed for France by Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle (1643-1687), a French explorer and fur trader in 1682. By the 1690s, New Orleans had become a hub for fur trappers and traders who lived in encampments along

the bayous. These men later built St. Jean, a fort along Bayou St. Jean in 1701 which became the city's first unofficial settlement. Hoping to create a profitable colony in North America as it had done in the Caribbean, the French government began granting land parcels to French colonists willing to relocate from Alabama to Louisiana. These French settlers attempted to establish a colony in New Orleans, but were met with agricultural challenges that forced many to abandon the area and relocate to the state's interior. Such settlements, however, were sporadic with transient occupants until 1718 when Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, Sieur de Bienville (1680-1767), established the first permanent French colony in New Orleans. Bienville named the new township *La Nouvelle-Orleans* in honor of Philip II (1674-1723), the Duke of Orleans and a Regent of France. The *Vieux Carré* was selected by Bienville as Louisiana's first colonial site and its seat of government. Dissecting the ways in which New Orleans had been colonized and geographically structured by the French, Richard Campanella in "Straight Streets in a Curvaceous Crescent: Colonial Urban Planning and its Impact on Modern New Orleans" (2018), found that New Orleans provided its French colonizers with a "bulwark" or fortification "near the mouth of the Mississippi River" that offered a natural defense against an enemy's attack.[1] This parapet prevented 'the Spanish and English from doing the same' in their proximal territories.[2] Furthermore, New Orleans allowed French colonists easy access to alternative waterways such as the Gulf of Mexico, Bayou St. Jean, and Lake Pontchartrain as well as access to alluvial soil which made the area agriculturally well-suited for planting.

Pleased with its financial prospects in New Orleans, the French Crown appointed Philip II, their Emissary in Louisiana a position that allowed him to grant John Law (1671-1729), a Scottish economist and Controller General of Finances, to open and operate the Mississippi Company in 1720. The Mississippi Company was a private monopoly business that had received a twenty-five-year trade agreement from Philip II on France's behalf. This arrangement enabled Law to create what modern economists

[1] Richard Campanella, "Straight Streets in a Curvaceous Crescent: Colonial Urban Planning and its Impact on Modern New Orleans." *Journal of Planning History*, (2018): 1.
[2] Campanella, "Straight Streets in a Curvaceous Crescent," 1.

have labeled as a pyramid scheme designed not only for monetary gain, but also as enticement for increasing the city's population. Under the Mississippi Company large tobacco plantations were established which increased the need for African-born human beings to work the land as slaves. Initially, only African-born males were brought to New Orleans to work on huge plantations and to perform other labor-intensive work such as land clearing, harvesting crops, and irrigating the land. Later, African-born females were imported to New Orleans once their dual value (e.g., reproduction, labor) was realized by slave brokers and plantation owners. Unfortunately, Law's ploy backfired which resulted in the 'Mississippi Bubble' in the late-1720s which led to financial distress among investors in France and in New Orleans (Campanella 4). Following the failure of Law's Mississippi Company, New Orleans' colonial management was transferred to the Company of the West Indies who assumed responsibility for the importation of African-born human beings into the city during the eighteenth century. The Company of the West Indies, in addition, oversaw the city's colonization by French citizens which included criminals, prostitutes, the mentally impaired, and dishonorably discharged service men. These individuals were relocated to Louisiana as indentured servants 'for three years' and they were given a parcel of land in return for their services.[3] Many of these indentured servants were unhappy with the harshness of the land and the inhumane treatment they received from colonists and the colonial government returned to France where they stated their grievances to the King. The loss of this free labor contributed to the French Crown turning to Africa for a ready supply of cheap, free laborers and led to the movement of slavery from the Caribbean to the North American continent.

Prior to French colonization and the importation of African-born human beings, New Orleans was a vast wasteland that Bienville organized into an inhabitable space; however, the Mississippi River's "flood threat" in 1719 demonstrated the city's fragility in regards to natural disasters. Still, in 1722, New Orleans became the capital of French Louisiana, and this new territory experienced a hurricane that ravished the colony and destroyed its

[3] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, 5.

infrastructure. This property loss inspired the French colonial government to implement a grid plan designed by Bienville which remains in use in the French Quarter. Once New Orleans was restored, the French government began recolonizing the city by sending criminals, adventurers, and other degenerates to the city as punishment for their misdeeds. Their influx coincided with the importation of African-born human beings brought to the region as slaves while marking New Orleans' transition into a French colony. In the New World, France had already established its presence with colonies in the Caribbean where slavery was used to provide a free labor force and increase the country's monetary and territorial gains. Subsequently, the practice of importing African-born human beings to French Louisiana was part of a normalized practice that continued during Spanish colonialism as well as when Louisiana became an American territory in 1803. The first African-born human beings were transported to Louisiana as slaves beginning in 1712 to work on agricultural plantations with the "first [official] slave ships [arriving] in New Orleans in 1719" (Sumpter 21). The French government had developed and implemented the *Code Noir* or Black Codes in its Caribbean colonies "to govern relations between Africans and Europeans and to regulate the emancipation of slaves" and govern the movements of their *gens de couleur libres* population.[4] French New Orleans was being established on a plantation slavery economic system and its colonial government thought it prudent to enact legislation governing this practice. As a result, the *Code Noir* was revised in 1722 and enacted by the French colonial government with addendums blending France's "politics, culture, and religion" with its governments desire to Christianize these African-born human beings to justify slavery in New Orleans.[5] Additionally, the *Code Noir* included restrictive clauses that granted slave owners more control over their slaves in New Orleans; however, its overall "policies concerning the evangelization of slaves remained intact."[6]

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[4] Amy R. Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans," *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. (2008): 21.
[5] Deggs, Sister Mary Bernard, *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth Century New Orleans*, edited by Virginia Meacham Gould and Charles E. Nolan. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, XXV.
[6] (Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, XXV).

Under the *Code Noir* African-born human beings and their New World descendants, in New Orleans, were subjected to forced religious conversion from their traditional African spiritual practices to Catholicism as outlined in Article 3 and Article 4 of the document. For instance, Article 3 "Permits the exercise of the Roman Catholic creed only. Every other mode of worship is prohibited" hence, making Catholicism the territory's official religion while other spiritual practices were "prohibited" or illegal and punishable by law (Louisiana's *Code Noir*, 1724). Whereas Article 4, states that "Negroes placed under the direction or supervision of any other person than a Catholic, are liable for confiscation" which limited a slave's ownership to a person who is a devout, practicing Catholic.[7] The limitation placed on slavery under French colonialism was upheld during Spanish colonization, but it became a point of contention once Louisiana became an American acquisition in 1803.

## Spanish New Orleans and *Las Siete Partidas*

The French colonial government made a concerted effort to transform New Orleans into a profitable French territory which was halted in 1754 when several conflicts arose between England and France. Both countries had claimed land and waterways located in the Upper Ohio River Valley which had been inhabited by Native American tribes for generations. With England and France laying claim to this already occupied land, leading to the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), a series of skirmishes that expanded into a global conflict as European allies joined the fighting. Spain, Sweden, and Austria sided with France against England who received support from Prussia abroad as this North American conflict became a global battle for supremacy. Following the Seven Years War conclusion, France ceded New Orleans to Spain and its Canadian territories to England under the Treaty of Fontainebleau (1762) and the Treaty of Paris (1763). In France, the Treaty of Fontainebleau ended Napoleon Bonaparte's reign as Emperor of France and exiled him to Elba; however, he died on England's St. Helena island in 1821. Whereas the Treaty of Paris formally ended the Seven Years' War between England and France in North America while confirming the

[7] Louisiana *Code Noir* (1724). Accessed from https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/louisianas-code-noir-1724/ on June 30, 2022.

transference of New Orleans to Spain. Once this transaction was officially ratified, the Spanish Crown appointed Antonio de Ulloa (1716-1795) as the first Spanish governor of New Orleans and he arrived in the city in 1766. His presence was met with an unsuccessful insurgence in 1768 that ousted Ulloa, who fled to Havana, Cuba. Upon receiving news regarding Ulloa's abrupt departure from New Orleans, the Spanish Crown responded by sending General Alejandro O'Reilly (1723-1794) as governor and he led military forces that suppressed this revolt. O'Reilly punished the rebel leaders and reasserted Spain's colonial authority in formerly French New Orleans. During his tenure, O'Reilly passed legislation that blended the Laws of the Indies and *Las Siete Partidas* or the Seven Divisions (1491) with France's 1724 *Code Noir* in ways that reflected Spanish colonialism in the city.

The *Las Siete Partidas* were Castilian normative civil codes derived from Roman Laws that were drafted and implemented during the reign of Alfonso X "the Wise". The Spanish Crown redrafted *Las Siete Partidas* paternalistically while viewing enslaved African human beings and their descendants as disjointed, which led them to write codicils that pacified these groups in hopes of preventing slave rebellions such as 1521 Santo Domingo Slave Revolt, 1733 St John Slave Rebellion, and Tacky's War (1760) which occurred in the Caribbean. In Spanish New Orleans, the colonial government further revised *Las Siete Partidas* in ways that offered more pathways to freedom for enslaved persons than France's *Code Noir* (1724). Initially, these new statutes added to *Las Siete Partidas* were designed to unify Spain, its territories, and citizens under one recognized authority which was the King which O'Reilly addressed by decentralizing the French colonial administration and judicial systems. As governor, O'Reilly modernized *Las Siete Partidas* to reduce future insurgences, specifically slave rebellions (e.g., the Haitian Revolution, 1843 Triunvirato Rebellion), by outlining the circumstances under which an enslaved person could purchase their freedom (*coartación*) or receive manumission from their owner. These governmental structures were replaced with the *Cabildo*, which served as the seat for the Spanish colonial government with its *Sala Capitular* acting as a courtroom and townhall meeting location.

By 1769, O'Reilly had firmly established Spanish authority in New Orleans as he began recontextualizing the legislative measures that the French had implemented to address slavery and the city's growing *gens de couleur libre* population. Beginning with the *Code Noir* (1724), O'Reilly solidified Spanish colonial rule in New Orleans by maintaining key components of France's *Code Noir* while adding statutes that were applicable to the community at large such as miscegenation, concubinage, and the growing *gens de couleur libre* population. Under O'Reilly's leadership, New Orleans experienced an influx of European immigrants (e.g., Germans, Polish, Irish) and had become a commercial center with the Mississippi River acting as a major importation and exportation thoroughfare with Carondelet Canal connecting this waterway to Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. Jean. Sadly, New Orleans faced a devastating fire in 1788 that destroyed eight hundred and fifty-six wooden buildings that had been erected during French colonialism. This massive property loss was repeated in 1794 when a second fire occurred and engulfed two hundred and twelve buildings. The damaged infrastructure was replaced with Spanish architecture in which bricks and stucco were used in construction to prevent other fires from leveling the city's edifices and substructures such a buildings and roads. These Spanish constructed buildings such as the *Cabildo*, St. Louis Cathedral, and the Presbyter remain visible in the French Quarter today. This series of events accompanied the colonies expansion into the sugar industry between 1795 and 1796 which changed the city's agricultural and economic hierarchies as well as its racial pecking order.

During Spain's forty-year reign in New Orleans, the city prospered, and its citizenry expanded to include German, Polish, and Irish immigrants as well a growing Creole and *gens de couleur libres* population until 1800 when the Spanish Crown retroceded New Orleans back to France. In 1802, Napoleon was engaged in a military battle against rebel slaves in Saint-Domingue (the Haitian Revolution) and he required additional funds to recruit additional service men. Furthermore, Napoleon wanted to avoid an incursion with England on the North American continent over Louisiana, and New Orleans by proxy, therefore, he coerced the Spanish Crown into secretly returning Louisiana to France. The Third Treaty of Ildefonso was signed on October 1, 1800, between the French and Spanish governments and it retroceded

Louisiana to France in exchange for France ceding Tuscany to Spain. While the Treaty of Aranjuez finalized the arrangement contained in the Third Treaty of Ildefonso, and made the land transfer public with Louisiana and New Orleans officially rebecoming a French territory on December 3, 1802. This agreement was short-lived because in 1803 Bonaparte, after accumulating massive debt during the Haitian Revolution, decided to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States in an event (the Louisiana Purchase) for fifteen million dollars in 1804.

During the interim, the French Crown appointed Pierre Clement de Laussat (1756-1835), a French magistrate, as governor of New Orleans for six months before turning the city over to the United States. While governor, de Laussat abolished the *Cabildo*, the Spanish colonial government seat of power established by O'Reilly and rescinded its judicial authority in New Orleans, but allowed the enforcement of the *Code Noir* and *Las Siete Partidas* for the remainder of French colonialism in the area. At the time that the Louisiana Purchase occurred, New Orleans had "a large free population of color living amidst enslaved people of color" which attests to the fluidity in which race had been constructed during French and Spanish colonialism in New Orleans.[8] These dynamics established the city's race relations which were fluid under French and Spanish colonialism and more rigid amid Americanization which made New Orleans ripe for black women activists.

## New Orleans Undergoes Americanization

Prior to the Louisiana Purchase, a person's skin-color determined their racial affiliation; however, this cultural practice was challenged in the nineteenth century by *gens de couleur libres* who began creating their own subgroups such as *quadroon*, *octoroon*, and *quintroon*. New Orleans's complex "colonial and historical history" demonstrates the ways in which race and ethnicity which were fluid became more static in 'the first five decades of U.S. statehood.'[9] These new racialized narratives placed *gens de couleur libres* in a precarious position that intersected their skin-color as a

[8] Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 19.
[9] Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 19.

racial marker with citizenship recognition. The French and Spanish colonial governments had created a racial umbrella that enabled *gens de couleur libres* to enjoy 'many of the same privileges that whites enjoyed;' however, the Louisiana Purchase uprooted these accepted European colonial practices. This transaction situated *gens de couleur libres* in an ambiguous predicament and deconstructed the city's well-established racial hierarchy that had allowed this group to own property and receive an education. France's *Code Noir* like Spain's *Las Siete Partidas* had permitted miscegenation to varying degrees; but these documents were rescinded and replaced with stricter American laws. In 1804, the United States formally assumed control of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans under the Organic Act of 1804 which enabled the government to subdivide the landmass into two regions: the Territory of Louisiana and the Territory of New Orleans. Under the Organic Act of 1804, New Orleans operated as an independent city-state with its own government and economic revenue sources.

By the time the Louisiana Purchase occurred, New Orleans had become a polyglot or multicultural city where racial hierarchies existed, but skin-color was fluid. The Haitian Revolution contributed to a massive influx of native-French speakers from Saint-Domingue who brought their families and slaves with them as well as a larger number of *gens de couleur libres*. This population increase facilitated the American colonial government to establish its authority in New Orleans by revising the city's racial hierarchy in 1850 which reclassified *gens de couleur libres* regardless of their ancestry, geographical origins, and skin-color by denoting them as black Creoles. This new racial category was then subdivided by the American colonial government who expanded the term Creole to include French Creoles and Creoles of Color to denote persons born in New Orleans as well as those of African descent. The term Creole was derived from the Portuguese word *crioulo* "meaning a slave born in the New World, however in nineteenth century New Orleans", and "refers exclusively to the people and culture of lower Louisiana."'[10] During French and Spanish colonialism in New Orleans, the word Creole was redefined as a slave categorization designating New World-born slaves from their African-born counterparts.

[10] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana,* 157.

Still, Creoles of Color (e.g., black Creoles, *gens de couleur libres*) during Spanish colonialism, unlike under the French and American colonial governments, had emerged as a separate class that flourished even though miscegenation and concubine relationships were illegal under *Las Siete Partidas*. By the early nineteenth century, the term Creole was used to denote mixed-raced persons particularly *gens de couleur libres* who had been born and reared in New Orleans until 1803 when the Americans began restructuring the city.

New Orleans' Americanization began with Governor William C. C. Claiborne (1775-1817) passing legislation prohibiting or limiting the immigration of French citizens and *gens de couleur libres* into the city. These measures were likely implemented to prevent or detour slave rebellions which became an area of concern among plantation owners following the Haitian Revolution's successful outcome and the failed 1811 German Coast Uprising in which over one-hundred slaves had revolted. The latter lasted for two days and resulted in the American colonial government devising and enacting more stringent Black Codes while welcoming new citizens into the territory. Until New Orleans was ceded from Spain to France, the Spanish colonial government "like the French, had a fluid concept of race that considered many factors, including skin-color and ancestry."[11] This wholistic racialized view was dismissed once the United States purchased Louisiana and began reordering the territory. In "Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans" (2008), Amy R. Sumpter studies the recontextualization of race in nineteenth century New Orleans from 1682 through 1850. Sumpter focuses on European constructs versus the United States restructuring of the racial categories established by the French and colonial governments who chose to include *gens de couleur libres* in their equation. *Gens de couleur libres* under French and Spanish colonialism shared almost the same status that was held by white European colonists until the 1830s. This time span was marked by the arrival of Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Métier, the Marquis de la Fayette (1757-1834), a French aristocrat, military leader, and freemason among other colonists.

[11] Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 21.

The presence of native-French speakers in New Orleans did little to deter the United States government from bringing the city and the state of Louisiana into the Union. Once the American government began colonizing New Orleans, in 1804, its colonial government had passed and was enforcing Pig Laws to keep its newly minted black citizenry under control. By the 1830s, New Orleans had become third wealthiest and third most populated city in the United States. The city's growth was accompanied by technological innovations and engineering marvels such as natural gas, Pontchartrain railroad system founding, the steam powered cotton press, riverboats, and the establishment of its first public school system. In 1836, New Orleans was separated into municipalities: the French Quarter and Faubourg Treme, Uptown, and Downtown which lasted for twenty years. A large number of *gens de couleur libres* resided in the French Quarter, but during the Americanization other adjacent communities were established such as Faubourg Tremé, Faubourg Marigny by this group. These were the social, cultural, and historical dynamics that Laveaux and Delille encountered as each embarked upon their activist journeys in nineteenth century New Orleans.

## Catholicism, *Placage* Unions, *Femme de Couleurs Libres*

Religious differences in New Orleans contributed to the ways in which enslaved populations and European colonists in the city were treated during Americanization and after statehood was granted. Under French and Spanish colonialism, Catholicism had been deemed the religion for New Orleans and its citizens. The *Code Noir* (1724) had prohibited the practices of alternative spiritualism a declaration that was upheld during Spanish colonialism. In Louisiana, Catholicism was introduced into the region in the late seventeenth century by French missionaries who arrived and began evangelizing French soldiers and indigenous populations. The expansion of religion into Louisiana's interior began spreading into New Orleans with Pierre Francis-Xavier de Charlevoix (1682-1761), a Jesuit priest and historian, who traveled to the city from Quebec, Canada, in 1721. Charlevoix's visit to New Orleans was followed in 1722 by Capuchin friars, who relocated to Louisiana where they settled in the lower Mississippi Valley, while the Jesuits established their religious presence in the city.

Wishing to spread France's religious reach into its new territory, King Louis XV, turned to the Ursuline Nuns, a religious congregation founded in 1535 for assistance and tasked them with encouraging marriage among colonists and educating their community. The Ursuline Nuns, left Rouen, France, and arrived in New Orleans, in 1726, where they began their mission by ministering to the city's poor, infirmed, and disenfranchised populations. This religious order soon settled into its first residence, and they expanded their ministry to include educating enslaved girls, *femme de couleur libres*, and Native American girls from nearby tribes. Moreover, the Ursuline Nuns began housing and caring for a group of young women and girls, in 1728, referenced as King's Daughters, who arrived in New Orleans with a small dowry and hope for finding a suitable mate. These ladies were between ages fourteen and nineteen, and they were placed with the Ursuline Nuns who evangelized and educated them until they were married. The French Crown recruited the King's Daughters because they were virtuous women from impoverished backgrounds who had worked or resided in the Ursuline Nun's convent or orphanages in France. Later, the French Crown increased the number of King's Daughters sent to New Orleans to curve the miscegenation that was occurring between male French colonists and enslaved women as well as Native American women. Unlike the Spanish colonial government, the French colonial government had attempted to discourage or at least control the miscegenation occurring in its New Orleans colony by importing King's Daughters into the city as potential mates and creating a precedent for *placage* unions (1769-1803).

Returning to French New Orleans, I explore how the role that *placage* unions or "formalized mistress relationships" placed in constructing the activism exhibited by Laveaux and Delille in nineteenth century New Orleans.[12] I began by revisiting pivotal codicils contained in the document addressing relationships between white French men and women of African descent (e.g., free, enslaved) in its New Orleans colony. Initially, colonial New Orleans had a large European male population, and many entered into relationships with Native American women as a form of informal colonization among these groups. These relationships were referenced as *marriage a la*

[12] Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 22.

*facon du pays* or common-law marriages that allowed these European men to satisfy their desire for intimacy and companionship until they were financially stable then they would marry white European women. By the mid-eighteenth century this practice had evolved into *placage* with wealthy European colonists entering into intimate contractual relationships with *femme de couleur libres* from all ethnic distinctions. The men (*placer*) were required to purchase a home usually in the *Vieux Carré* for the woman (*placee*) and provide financially for her and any children born during their relationship who were classified as *gens de couleur libres.*[13] Even though such arrangements were intended as long-lasting non-legal unions, some ended when the man decided to legally marry and produced legitimate heirs.

During French and Spanish colonialism, the *Code Noir* and *Las Siete Partidas* recategorized its *gens de couleur libres* citizenry into categories based on skin-color and racial heritage such as *mulatto/mulatta* (bi-racial), *negre/negress libres* (ex-slaves), *quadroon* (one-fourth African ancestry), *octoroon* (one-eighth African ancestry), and *quintroon* (one-sixteenth African ancestry). These multi-ethnic African descended men and women were typically the children produced during *placage* unions or concubine relationships which were disregarded in the *Code Noir* and *Las Siete Partidas* which prohibited miscegenation. Still, this subpopulation flourished under French and Spanish colonialism, and remained intact until American statehood in 1812.

The word *placage* is derived from the French language and it means "to place with." As a social practice, *placage* denotes an accepted cultural tradition that began in France's New World colonies such as Martinique and Guadeloupe. Originating on Saint-Domingue, after the French Crown discontinued sending women from *La Pitie Salpetriere*, a facility caring for elderly, mentally impaired, and medically fragile women in 1743 as potential brides for available male colonists. An economically based system *placage* in Saint-Domingue and later, New Orleans contained underpinnings that unofficially recognized a *placee* (mistress) as her *placers* (paramour)

[13] Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color," 22.

non-legal spouse. In the event that their *placers* died, *placées* sometimes took

legal action against the *placer's* European relatives who often contested the *placer*'s last will and testaments or the *placées* legal rights. A prime example is Eulalie de Mandeville (1774–1848) (birthname CeCe McCarty) who was the biological daughter of Pierre Philippe Mandeville de Marigny, a wealthy, French aristocrat, and Marie-Jeanne, his slave and concubine. In 1779, Eulalie was manumitted by her paternal grandfather who assumed custody of her and reared her as his own child. Eulalie grew up in her family's wealth and enjoyed a high social status on her grandfather's plantation as a *femme de couleur libre*.

When Eulalie became a respectable age possibly a teenager, she entered into a *placage* union, in with Eugene McCarty, a prominent Louisiana-born French Creole, from a large military family, that had been arranged by her father in 1795. Scholars contend that Eulalie and Eugene had legally married, but based on their race and the miscegenation laws that existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries their relationship was most likely a *placage* union. Upon Eulalie's grandfather's death, in 1799, Eulalie inherited money and property that included livestock, thirty-two slaves, and the family's plantation home. With her newfound wealth, Eulalie opened and operated several businesses including a dairy farm and retail store with her *placer* until his death on October 27, 1845, which caused a contentious legal battle between Eulalie and Eugene's, wealthy, white European relatives including Marie Delphine McCarty LaLaurie (1787-1849), the infamous New Orleans socialite and serial murderer, who challenged Eulalie's and Eugene's union's authenticity. Ultimately, Eulalie won her case on June 26, 1847, after a nine month long legal battle, which legitimized her relationship with Eugene and elevated her standing in her free and enslaved communities.

*Femme de couleur libres* such as Eulalie had received and enjoyed limited freedoms with women like Laveaux and Delille "who were phenotypically mixed" through *placage* unions and "were able to find sources to elevate themselves socially" and in many instances become economically self-

sufficient.[14] These women "acquired unofficial acceptance in New Orleans" which was further facilitated by their intergenerational, matrilineal participation "in the famous quadroon balls" and their becoming "mistresses to white men."[15] Such women emerged as leaders in their communities; however, they were restricted by their gender and financial instability which hindered their upward mobility into the larger society under France's *Code Noir* and later Spain's *Las Siete Partidas*. *Femme de couleur libres*, who were of age, where taken usually by their mothers to Quadroon Balls where they were presented to a group of wealthy, white European men as potential *placage* mates. These intimate relationships were usually arranged by "a *representant*" who was either "the young woman's mother or another lose relative" usually a female.[16] Such individuals "negotiated a contract" outlining the terms and conditions for their arrangement which included "financial support for the young woman" as well as for any children produced during their union.[17] These children were considered a "natural" rather than a biological child based on French and later Spanish laws, a distinction that was Americanized by the Louisiana Code of 1828. This punitive miscegenation laws under America's colonial restructured racial system identified all *gens de couleur libres* as black regardless of their "ancestry and blood relations."[18]

I was introduced to this phenomenon as a young girl in the 1970s with the film *Quadroon* (1970), a blaxploitation movie starring Marinda French, Kathrine McKee, David Snow, Tim Kincaid, and George Lupo to list but a few. This cinematic rendering was loosely based on New Orleans's *placage* practices and its related Quadroon Balls. Set in 1835 New Orleans when the city was undergoing Americanized gentrification and its European practices (e.g., miscegenation, *placage*) were being erased from the city's historical

[14] Madeline Bello, "Partner, Let Me Upgrade You: *Placage* in Antebellum New Orleans," 4.
[15] Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988, 4.
[16] Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868,*112.
[17] Bell, "Partner, Let Me Upgrade You," 112.
[18] Bello, "Partner, Let Me Upgrade You," 14.

and cultural landscapes. *Quadroon* explores the lived experiences of *femme de couleur libres* from the *quadroon* class in New Orleans's changing social climate. A young, white American named Caleb, travels to New Orleans where his services as a teacher are solicited by Aunt Nancy, a black Creole and brothel owner, who wishes for her daughter, Coral, to learn to read, write, and hold an appropriate conversation with potential white, wealthy European and American suitors. During the film, Caleb meets his adult students and becomes smitten with Coral, who is an *octoroon* woman with an aggressive oratory style much to her mother's chagrin. Aunt Nancy plans to present Coral at a Quadroon Ball the following month and she wishes for Coral enter into a *placage* union with an appropriate, well-established gentleman. Ultimately, Coral and Caleb fall in love, a relationship that is forbidden by law and custom, hence, setting in motion a chain of events that undercuts the movie's overall storyline. Even though there are historical accuracies contained in the film, there exists inaccuracies such as Coral, who unlike *femme de couleur libres* who engaged in *placage* unions and were usually informally educated (e.g., French literature, music appreciation, dancing, and lay nursing skills) by their mothers or another close female relative.

In reality, Quadroon Balls were yearly social gatherings where *femme de couleur libres* and wealthy, white European men met and, in many situations, established long-term non-legal relationships. These formal meetings were initially referenced as *Redoutes des filles de couleur* on Saint-Domingue became known *Bals des Cordon Bleu*s or Quadroon Balls in nineteenth century New Orleans. The first of these gatherings began in 1805 and they were hosted by Albert Tessier, a Saint-Domingue immigrant, twice weekly, at 717 Orleans Street with a restrictive racial policy which excluded male gens de couleur libres. Participation was limited to *femme de couleur libres* from the *quadroon* and *octoroon* classes. Prior to Tessier's recontextualization of Quadroon Balls, these social meetings had been held as early as the 1790s in New Orleans and were open to *gens de couleur libres* as well as *femme de couleur libres* from all class categories including *mulatta* and *negress libres.* The mass influx of Saint-Domingue refugees into New Orleans following the Haitian Revolution, however, contributed to Quadroon Balls becoming exclusively for *placage* unions between

wealthy, white European men, and *femme de couleur libres* and it became "the most famous of these events" with "the finest women of color and the richest white" men under one roof.[19] Even though these non-legal, culturally accepted marriages began in the French West Indies with planters entering into relationships with their female slaves or *mulatta* (bi-racial) slaves, this practice ultimately spread to New Orleans where a large population of *gens de couleur libres* began emerging under French colonialism and continued under Spanish colonialism.[20] Like the French, the Spanish colonial government had allowed miscegenation which enabled *placag*e unions to occur without legal ramifications. But the transfer of New Orleans to the United States after forty years of Spanish colonialism in 1803 uprooted these accepted social practices. Additionally, the movement from a European cultural system placed *gens de couleur libres* in an ambiguous predicament since New Orleans had a well-established racial hierarchy that permitted these individuals to own property including slaves and to receive an education. This is the world that Laveaux and Delille navigated as each embarked on their journey towards activism in nineteenth century New Orleans.

I return to the city's unique history and its diverse population hierarchy to discuss how black women activists in nineteenth century New Orleans such as Laveaux and Delille were patriarchally and legislatively hindered. Like its Caribbean colonies, the French Crown hoped to control or prevent *placage* with Article 6 of the *Code Noir* (1724) which outlines the expectations and penalties for violators. The framers wrote,

> We forbid our white subjects, of both sexes, to marry with the blacks, under the penalty of being fined and subjected to some other arbitrary punishment. We forbid all curates, priests, or missionaries of our secular or regular clergy, and even our chaplains in our navy to sanction such marriages. We forbid all curates, priests, or missionaries of our secular or regular clergy, and even our chaplains in our navy to sanction such marriages. Should there be any issue from this kind of intercourse, it is our will that the person so offending, and the master of the slave, should pay each a fine of three

[19] Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influences.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007, 144.
[20] Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 49.

> hundred livres. Should said issue be the result of the concubinage of the master with his slave, said master shall not only pay the fine, but be deprived of the slave and of the children, who shall be adjudged to the hospital of the locality, and said slaves shall be forever incapable of being set free. But should this illicit intercourse have existed between a free black and his slave, when said free black had no legitimate wife, and should said black marry said slave according to the forms prescribed by the church, said slave shall be thereby set free, and the children shall also become free and legitimate; and in such a case, there shall be no application of the penalties mentioned in the present article.[21]

The "We" is the French government and their "white subjects" or colonist regardless of their gender were prohibited from legally marrying "the blacks" or persons of African descent. Those who chose to enter such unions faced "penalty" or criminal charges such as "fines" or another "arbitrary punishment" for their offense. These marriages were illegal even among "manumitted or free-born blacks" and religious figures such as "curates, priests, or missions" were prohibited from performing or recognizing such unions despite biblical teachings. European men who chose such relationships faced economic penalties including the loss of their slaves and offspring, whereas if *gens de couleur libres* who are unmarried engage in "illicit intercourse" or sexual relations with their slave, then they are allowed to marry her without penalty and legitimize their children.

Despite the *Code Noir's* punitive clauses, sexual relationships between wealthy European men and *femme de couleur libres* were informally practiced by the start of the nineteenth century when the Quadroon balls were established and *placage* unions socially normalized. This legislative clause became a sticking point in New Orleans as the city became home to a large number of European men who were unable to find suitable white European women for legal marriage and they turned to *placage* unions. Even with these initiatives, in New Orleans, *placage* became an unwritten social policy that evolved into a culturally sanctioned practice during French and later Spanish colonialism. During French and Spanish colonialism as well as under Americanization, New Orleans underwent population bursts influenced by the arrival of Saint-Domingue immigrants which possibly

[21] Louisiana 1724 *Code Noir*

fueled Laveaux's and Delille's activism in the nineteenth century. With the "historical moments" that contributed to my exploration firmly in place, I now turn my attention on choosing an appropriate qualitative research methodology and conceptual framework.[22] I use these overlapping and divergent discourses as data as I began deciphering the myths and realities associated with Laveaux and Delille across time and space.

## Conceptual Framework and Research Method

Scholars have described New Orleans as a uniquely nocturnal city shrouded in supernatural mythology in which historical facts give way to fictitious accounts of its inhabitants and monuments. For me, New Orleans is a place where the peculiarity of enslaved African-born human beings and *gens de couleur libres* challenged European colonialism across intersections of race, gender, class, and geography. These unusual dynamics created cyphers where *gens de couleur libres* occupied spaces between their African ancestry and European lineage with *femme de couleur libres* serving as the gatekeepers. With this in mind I considered how New Orleans historical foundation contributed to the avenues that black women activists employed in the nineteenth century in service to the city's poor, enslaved, and disenfranchised populations. I narrowed my focus specifically on Laveaux and Delille using Robert E. Stake's *The Art of the Case Study Research* (1995) in which he describes this approach as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" which prompted me to explore Laveaux's and Delille's activism as two distinct case studies.[23] I blend Case Study with Narrative Inquiry as my qualitative research methodologies to conduct a close comparative analysis of Laveaux's and Delille's mythology and historical records. I chose to include Narrative Inquiry as an addendum to Case Study because this multifaceted research approach enables me to analyze "existing structural understandings of the world" using my present-

[22] Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Inquiry for the Social Sciences*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2008, 8.
[23] Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 1995, xi.

day lens.[24]Case Study, like Narrative Inquiry allow researchers to interpret and articulate how individuals express their understanding of a given phenomenon based on their prior knowledge and/or lived experiences. Both are qualitative research modalities that allow researchers to meaningfully organize data (e.g., oral, written, auditory) in ways that are purposeful transmissions of information to readers or audiences. Such "narratives are composed for particular audiences at moments in history, and they draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture."[25] This enables me to view Laveaux's and Delille's works as black women activists in nineteenth century New Orleans as nuanced interpretations of their precipitating events (e.g., internal, external) and their recorded lived experiences (e.g., biographical, autobiographical). Using this perspective, I excavate "how" and "why" Laveaux and Delille were able to overcome the social barriers that marginalized *femme de couleur libres* in the nineteenth century.

The studies I reviewed for my book superficially explored black women activism in nineteenth century New Orleans. Instead, such investigations centered on black women religious who were Catholic practitioners in geographical areas such as Baltimore or Philadelphia. Such studies often separated these women's activism from their faith-based practices and the "historical moments" that contributed to their advocacy.[26] In New Orleans, black women like Laveaux and Delille's activism blended African derived spiritual tenets with Catholicism which they replicated in their family, social interactions, and communities. For many, *placage* unions provided them with agency and enabled them to open various pathways towards obtaining their independence (e.g., personal, financial) from the racialized patriarchal and familial expectations placed upon them. I endeavor to uncover the transgressive artifacts contained in Laveaux's and Delille's advocacy by exposing the counter-narratives as extensions of the "stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to

[24] Deborah Youdell, "Diversity, Inequality, and a Post-Structural Politics for Education," *Discourse* 27, no. 1 (2006): 35.
[25] Riessman, *Narrative Inquiry*, 3.
[26] Riessman, *Narrative Inquiry*, 8.

dominant cultural narratives."[27] This enables me to dissect, analyze, and interpret older stories surrounding Laveaux and Delille while allowing me to situate their narratives beyond their spiritual practices. I, instead, place Laveaux and Delille's actions in their larger historical contexts and in the "historical moments" that precede and follow. From these identified events, I draw on the cultural resonance that produced the discourses that enabled their activism to flourish in nineteenth century New Orleans.[28]

After determining my qualitative research methodologies, I turned my attention towards selecting a conceptual framework that allowed me to look at these women and their activism from multiple points of view simultaneously. I wanted to employ an investigative lens that permitted me as an investigator to excavate and deconstruct Laveaux's and Delille's activism in ways that demonstrated the revolutionary nature of their chosen journeys. I also wanted to choose a lens that respected the integrity of my investigation as well as worked congruently with Case Study and Narrative Inquiry. I selected Public Pedagogy as my conceptual framework because it provided me with a malleable approach for viewing Laveaux and Delille as black women activists and not just as spiritual figures. Public Pedagogy enables me to create cyphers that permitted me to see these women holistically and gage the totality of their experiences in nineteenth century New Orleans across intersections of race, gender, class, and geography. This allowed me to place Laveaux and Delille in a scholarly context that disrupts their metanarratives that have been intergenerationally handed down and replace these discourses with counternarratives rationalizing the historical agency in their advocacy. In this book, I rely on Louisiana lore, previous research, and archival records to conduct my exploration as a vehicle for exploring the intertextual dynamics inherent in the lives of *femme de couleur libres* in nineteenth century New Orleans.

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[27] Molly Andrews, "Counternarratives and the Power to Oppose," In *Considering Counternarratives: Narrating, Resisting, Sense-Making* pp. 1-6 edited by Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004, 1.

[28] Molly Andrews, Corine Squire, and Maria Tamboukou, *Doing Narrative Research*, Los Angeles: Sage Publishing, 2008, 169; Riessman, *Narrative Inquiry*, 8.