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Autonomy in Abuse: Glimpses of Freedom in New Orleans

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Abstract:

This paper examines unusual opportunities for autonomy found by women of African descent in New Orleans, from the time the city was acquired by the United States until the Civil War. The city's unique history partially explains the availability of such options. The rest is revealed through an examination of individual women who actively claimed personal freedoms. The independence they grasped is illustrated in a variety of contexts: from slave women suing for manumission to prostitutes seeking monetary self-sufficiency. Every woman who sought independence also exposed herself to inherent risks. The hazards and benefits found within white society were greater than those found in the African American community. Whatever avenue the women chose to pursue, they tested and explored the limits of the society they inhabited in a search for forms of independence.

Commence! We Speak through tears.
Commence, S'il vous plait, Madame, call the great drum!
-Sybil Kein, "To the Widow Paris"[1]

Introduction

From the time of American acquisition until after the Civil War, New Orleans offered opportunities for women of African American descent elusive in other Southern cities. Such women often found pathways to cultural, economic, and personal freedoms that did not exist in neighboring regions. The uniqueness of their experiences can be partially attributed to the city's unusual history, which propagated moral permissiveness and peculiar customs. The women themselves account for the final factor. They did not passively gain autonomy, but rather actively sought freedoms by exploring and testing the limits of the society they inhabited. Some gained a limited amount of autonomy without venturing into the world of the white master class. Though this route was safer, ultimately it afforded narrowed prospects. Within white society, African women found broader avenues with freedoms, but moving in white society carried added risks of violence and abuse. Freedom flowered in a strange manner in New Orleans while women of African descent found a way to "Speak through tears."

Numerous historians such as Ira Berlin and Roger A. Fischer have documented and argued for the uniqueness of New Orleans' society during this time period. Other authors including Daniel E. Walker provide stirring information concerning the abuse women of African descent faced within the city. Historians agree that women seldom remained passive in the face of abuse and discrimination. Even so, women's active search for independence within the context of the barriers they faced remains relatively unexplored.

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1 Martha Ward, Voodoo Queen: *The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 154.

Historical and Legal Precedents

Opportunities afforded women of African descent can be traced to historical antecedents set in place while the city lay under French jurisdiction. Berlin points to many of the oddities occurring in French New Orleans. While similar communities were working to strengthen gaps between the races in support of the slave institution, those of African descent in New Orleans mixed freely with Europeans and Native Americans.[2] During a period when other colonies worked to bring elements of European culture into the New World, French inhabitants of New Orleans embraced indigenous culture. Instead of adding an element of Europeanization, French women immigrating to the colony "went native, working barefooted and bare breasted in the fields."[3] Not only did the colonists reject European culture, they had little reverence for European religion. Missionaries venturing to the colony expressed concern over the "unraveling" civilization.[4] A society comprised in significant part of Native Americans, African natives, civil servants, and criminals could scarcely be expected to evolve in any other manner.[5]

Spain took the colony from France in 1763. Rule by Spain further confused the lines between races as the French legal *Code Noir*, which made manumission almost impossible, became void. Under the Spanish many slaves bought their way into freedom. Berlin asserts, "the free black population of New Orleans…tripled during the first decade of Spanish rule."[6] African Americans in New Orleans could not be assumed slaves, as they might in other places. Further, liaisons between individuals of differing races resulted in a population that recognizably bore the characteristics of multiple races. Attempting to impose racial classifications in New Orleans became in some instances impossible.

The United States acquired the unruly colony, and along with it the city of New Orleans in 1803, upon completion of the Louisiana Purchase. Not unexpectedly slavery in the colony and inside New Orleans itself lacked many of the harsh realities present elsewhere. Those commenting on the institution of slavery in New Orleans after American acquisition reveal its leniency. Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, a visitor to New Orleans during the early 1800s, observed, "the Americans treat and feed and clothe their slaves well."[7] He elaborates on this statement writing, "recreation is certainly not forbidden, neither walking, nor dancing, nor music, nor any other act that gives innocent pleasure."[8] Latrobe's insights on slavery in the city portray a nearly pleasant kind of enslavement. Though still lacking basic freedoms he judges the slaves of New Orleans to be well provided for, to the extent that they participate in leisure activities. In agreement with Latrobe's observations is Joseph G. Tregle Jr., who in his article, "Early New Orleans Society: a Reappraisal," claims, "Slaves were seemingly

2 Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 79.
3 Ibed., 80.
4 Ibed., 80.
5 Ibed., 79.
6 Ibed., 333.
7 Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans: Diary and Sketches 1818-1820* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 47.
8 Ibed., 47.

masters of their own time in a great number of instances."[9] Fischer extends Tregle's assertion further with the statement: "Control over the Negro population was, in short, virtually nonexistent in New Orleans."[10] Through these authors' voices, slavery in New Orleans surfaces as an inept institution that was hardly capable of controlling those subject to its implications. Though such descriptions do display an element of truth, their views concerning the status of slaves are somewhat exaggerated. Slaves were not free and those with African blood were not afforded the same privileges as the ruling class.

Strict laws constrained the actions of individuals of African American descent in New Orleans. The Civil Code of Louisiana, fully installed by 1825, provides an example. The code clearly states, "The slave is entirely subject to the will of his master."[11] Measures prohibiting slaves from holding public office, serving as witnesses in trials, or marrying without the consent of their owners, also appear in the code.[12] This document does not portray Louisiana as a place where slaves held large quantities of freedom. Legal language consistently supports masters' rights over their slaves.

Independence Outside "White" Society

While the Civil Code remained an accessible tool for slave owners wishing to punish or control their human chattel, its implementation did not destroy cultural prerogatives set in place earlier by the French and Spanish. Locations like Congo Square and the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, where voodoo rituals were held, thrived as outlets for African culture and expression. Their legitimacy received little questioning and provided paths for women of African descent to participate in activities expressing their autonomy outside the structure of white society.

Congo Square found a foothold through the cities' irreverence for the Sabbath. H. Brad Fearon, a visitor to New Orleans in the early 19th Century, noted with some surprise, "markets, shops, theatres, circus, gambling houses, and public ballrooms" were all open on a day of the week reserved for church and rest in other parts of the country.[13] French New Orleans' absence of appreciation for European religion affected the city long after it fell under the ownership of the United States. Slaves participated regularly in Sunday activities. Latrobe notes they were assured release from their duties on Sundays, with exceptions for sugar boiling season and times when the river rose dangerously high.[14] In such instances, slaves received reimbursement for their Sunday labors illustrating their right to a day for themselves.[15] The enslaved population readily took advantage of their day by pursuing activities perpetuating their cultural heritage, economic base, and allowing for captured moments of leisure. Congo Square offered avenues for all three options.

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9 Joseph G. Tregle, "Early New Orleans: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Southern History* 18, no. 1 (1952): 33.

10 Roger A. Fischer, "Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans," *The American Historical Review* 74, no.3 (1969): 930.

11 Civil Code of Louisiana: 1824. In *The African American Odyssey*, Vol. 2, to 1877, edited by Hine, Darlene Clark, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harold [CD ROM 6-1] (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005), 2.

12 Ibed., 2.

13 Henry Bradshaw Fearon, "Open on Sunday," in *The World from Jackson Square: A New Orleans Reader*, ed. Etolia S. Basso (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1948), 92.

14 Latrobe, 47.

15 Ibed., 47.

The Square, known as the main gathering spot, held between 500 and 600 individuals on Sundays. [16] Historian Gary A. Donaldson writes the Square was a place to, "renew old loves, and to gather new friendships; to talk over affairs of the past week, and to lay new plans for enjoyment in the coming ones."[17] Besides being a general meeting place, the Square perpetuated African culture. Inside, "reunions of African nations that the Diaspora and the Atlantic slave had dismembered" occurred.[18] Over time the Square garnered a negative reputation from the white populace. John A. Paxton, in the city directory he compiled, reports,"[Congo Square] is very noted on account of its being a place where Congo and other Negroes dance, carouse, and debauch on the Sabbath."[19] Congo Square continued on despite white complaints. Women participated in the Square's events alongside males, and Latrobe provided lengthy descriptions of participants singing and dancing.[20] Women also used Congo Square to provide for themselves economically. Donaldson describes "the old negresses with their spruce beer and pralines of peanuts, coconuts, and popcorn" who "did a thriving trade."[21] While Congo Square offered opportunities for autonomy, those opportunities remained limited. The Square only opened once a week and no woman would grow rich by selling peanuts.

Outside Congo Square, New Orleans on Sundays offered a broader range of activities for those of African descent. Slaves and free blacks took advantage of the entertainments afforded by a broad range of establishments. Among other activities they "hired carriages, went to balls and carousals," according to Tregle.[22] Even on holiday, reminders of racial discrimination persisted. Theatres and exhibitions were segregated in 1816.[23] Segregation provided a reminder of racial inequalities. Others, generally women, took advantage of Sundays to sell a variety of foodstuffs like vegetables and fowls, in various marketplaces. White residents came to depend on the markets run by black women, creating a favorable interdependence.[24]

African American women also found ways to benefit from trading activities carried on throughout the week. Shopkeepers, in accordance with a tradition leftover from French New Orleans, frequently sent black women out from their establishments to peddle wares door to door.[25] Women used their jobs peddling goods to sell items at exaggerated prices and in the process pocketed the excess money for themselves. Claiming ignorance of mathematics provided the necessary explanation for unaccounted monetary discrepancies.[26] More ambitious free women of African descent formed their own businesses. Tregle suggests many women of color maintained, "modest shops or presided over oyster, gumbo, and coffee stalls."[27] Though these

16 Ibed., 49.
17 Gary A.Donaldson, "A Window on Slave Culture: Dances at Congo Square in New Orleans, 1880-1869," *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 2 (1984), 66.
18 Ward, 6.
19 Donaldson, 66.
20 Latrobe, 50.
21 Donaldson, 67.
22 Tregle, 33.
23 Fischer, 931.
24 Latrobe, 47.
25 Ibed., 101.
26 Ibed., 101.
27 Tregle, 34.

economic outlets were not as lucrative as others, they offered a form of legitimate employment and independence.

Others found more unique modes of sustenance. Marie Laveau and her daughter, the second Marie Laveau, worked independently as conjurers.[28] The two mixed voodoo with Catholicism resulting in a religion unique to the city. Owing to their conjurations and mystical status: the two maintained the respect of most white persons who feared their magical abilities. It was said of the first Laveau, "She knows how to make a man fall in love with you, keep him faithful to you, bring him home when he strays or fix things so he leaves town forever."[29] The Laveaus successfully blended the culture of voodoo with their own economic aspirations, and in so doing gained a large amount of autonomy for themselves.

While some women of African American descent were able to find autonomy at Congo Square (through participation in the marketplace), or by using their creativity, many more resorted to extracting freedoms through their interactions within white society. More advantageous possibilities appeared in white society. Such possibilities were always coupled with accompanying risks. Market women, though not expecting great riches or manumission from their endeavors, were exempt from some of the worries plaguing their more ambitious counterparts.

Relations Between White Men and Slave Women

The experiences found by women of African American descent within white society can be partially attributed to the need for domestics, a field dominated by women in the city. This brought a unique demographic composition to the city. More African American women than African American men lived in New Orleans. In 1830 there were 9,651 slave women of African descent in the city, and only 6,988 males of corresponding status.[30] Statistics showing percentages pertaining to the white population for the same period reveal the opposite in regard to ratios between the sexes. In 1830, 12,600 white males and only 8,681 white females called New Orleans home.[31] Tregle describes the white males inside the city: "perhaps half of the city's men were bachelors living in rooming houses or husbands whose wives were still in the North."[32] The intermixing of unattached white males with slave women of African descent inevitably emerged. An absence of protection from male, African, family members only served to encourage activity between the two groups. In many ways the mixing of women of African descent with white men opened opportunities for freedom, yet abuse and violence also occurred within the dynamics of such relationships.

Lacking protection from close family members and without ready access to recourse against those committing assaults, many women were left with no choice but to succumb to advances. Buried behind the cruelties of forced liaisons, lay the potential for the advancement of personal interests. If circumstances worked in their favor, relations with white men might lead to economic advancement and

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28 Ward, xvi.

29 Ibed., 39.

30 University of Virginia, "Historical Census Browser," in "Geospatial and Statistical Data Center," [http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php] 18 November 2005.

31 Ibed.

32 Tregle, 34.

emancipation. Always overshadowing positives was the potential for abuse, and more specifically, sexual abuse.

Louisa Picquet's story details an example of this sort of relationship. Picquet faced her sale on the New Orleans slave market at the young age of fourteen.[33] Mr. Williams, a gentleman who earlier separated from his wife, bought her.[34] Williams found in Picquet someone he intended to "end his days" with.[35] Stated otherwise, Williams relished the idea of being able to buy a woman who could perform all the duties of a wife and in addition remain subject to him as a slave. Unlike his wife, Picquet could not leave.

Although she had been taught earlier in life that "It was adultery to stay with any one without bein' married", Picquet bore four children with Williams.[36] She does not seem proud of her relationship with Williams and instead answered queries about her relationship with, "and I thought, now I shall be committen' adultery, and there's no chance for me…I had this trouble with him and my soul the whole time."[37] When asked if she ever mentioned her qualms about their relation with Williams, Picquet responded with:

> Yes, sir: I told him often. Then he would dam' at it. He said he had all that to answer for himself. If I was only then I could get religion-that needn't hinder me from gettin' religion. But I knew better than that. I thought it was of no prayin', and livin' in sin.[38]

Though she never directly mentions sexual coercion it can be implied from her answer. In the end, Picquet's trials with Williams led to her emancipation. While on his deathbed Williams told Picquet, "that if I would promise him that I would go New York he would leave me and the children free."[39] Picquet cherished her new status as a free woman. Soon after her emancipation, she went to church for the "first time…in six years."[40] Picquet actively claimed freedom after Williams died. Her children benefited to even larger extent as they were exempt from the slave status Picquet held for most of her adult life.

Though numbing, Picquet's biography is not singular. Just as she never directly states her probable sexual abuse by Williams, she provides little description of the market where Williams first bought her. Walker provides this description of the slave trade in New Orleans in relation to women:

> At the beginning of the public sales, the slave women were paraded out onto the stage. Their dresses were removed to the waist, exposing their half-naked bodies to potential purchasers and passing voyeurs.[41]

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33 Hiram Mattison, "Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or inside Views of Southern Domestic Living." In "Documenting the American South," [http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet.html] 4 October 2005, 16.
34 Ibed., 18.
35 Ibed., 18.
36 Ibed., 19-20.
37 Ibed., 20.
38 Ibed., 22.
39 Ibed., 22.
40 Ibed., 24.
41 Daniel E. Walker, *No More, no more: slavery and cultural resistance in Havana and New Orleans,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 78.

This description was written about slave women for sale on the regular market. The treatment of those sold as "fancy girls" was substantially worse. The "fancy trade" dealt in the commodity of "fancy girls," who were slave women sold on the market, not as domestics or field hands, but for the purpose of providing sexual services. Generally the "girls were physically attractive, fair-to-almost-white-skinned, young females," according to Walker.[42] Slave owners typically spent over double what they might on a healthy male slave to purchase the girls.[43] Their high monetary value did nothing to shelter the girls from the abuses of the slave market. Walker alleges the examination received from potential buyers could include, "groping and placing fingers and hands in selected orifices."[44] Picquet never directly states whether she was a part of the "fancy trade," but her status as an octoroon, and her brief description of the market where she was sold and in the process almost stripped naked, suggest possible involvement in the "fancy trade."[45]

For other slave women, being used for sexual purposes did not negate the possibility of exposure to harsh plantation realities. New Orleans historian Al Rose notes there were planters who "came to town renting their nubile, octoroon slave girls" for sexual purposes.[46] The "fancy trade" exemplifies another institution that, while cruel in itself, held possibilities of freedom for attractive females. As white men combined their own genes with those of slaves, the possibility of freedom for the ensuing mothers and their children became greater.

Slave women were active in seeking freedom if they thought their situation warranted it. Though forbidden to testify in court by the Louisiana Civil Code women often bypassed the stipulation by suing for freedom in New Orleans' civil courts. Louisiana historian Judith Kelleher Schafer illustrates several examples where slaves grasped legal rights they did not technically have. She writes, "some slaves found ingenious and remarkably sophisticated ways to use the law, lawyers, judges, and the local courts to gain their freedom."[47] The case of Sally Dowd, illustrated in Schafer's book, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862,* portrays a slave woman who sued for her freedom and won. Dowd's owner, Henry Stream, tried to nullify a contract he made with her allowing her to purchase her freedom, but was unsuccessful.[48] Dowd's success in suing for her freedom demonstrates the ability of slave women to grasp autonomy in situations where they technically should have been unable to do so.

Relations Between White Men and Free Women of African Descent

Unlike those chained by slavery, free women of African descent could resist white men, but often did not. Once again this can be partially explained by investigating sexual ratios among the free black populace. In 1830 there were 7,042

42 Ibed., 78.
43 Ibed., 78.
44 Ibed., 78.
45 Mattison, 16.
46 Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District* (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 15.
47 Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), xiii.
48 Ibed., 53.

free "colored" females residing in the county of Orleans and only 4,864 "colored" men with the same status.[49] The same discrepancy revealed in the slave population held true for the free population. For some African American women, "being a white man's mistress was the only opportunity they had to enter into a sexual union with a man."[50] The discrepancy found in the ratios between the sexes of men and free women of African heritage does not fully explain why black women were willing to enter into relations with white men. Like enslaved women, free women also looked to white men for opportunities to advance their own economic and personal situations, as well as that of their children. Because they were free, the possibility of genuine attraction remains an additional explanation.

Marriage was legally forbidden between white men and black women; however, a parallel institution called placage did exist. The rights of a woman bound by placage hardly compare with what could be expected from a legally sanctioned and defined marriage. Women were expected to remain loyal to the men, but white males were not expected to return their fidelity.[51] Placage did not guarantee a woman a substantial portion of her partner's income should he pass on. According to Thomas N. Ingersoll's article, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812," the female partner could only claim up to 10 percent of the deceased's estate and illegitimate children might be awarded up 25 percent.[52] These percentages (though law) did not always translate into reality. If a woman was crafty, ways of skirting the law existed. For instance, following the disappearance of her first husband sometime during the 1820s, Marie Laveau married a white man named Christophe Glapion.[53] In order to add legitimacy to the marriage and ensure that it was condoned by the local Catholic Church, Glapion changed his officially documented race from "white" to "colored."[54] Even after changing his race, city officials attempted to block Laveau's rights as a married woman. When Glapion died in 1855, his status as a colored married man became void and several men lay claim to the property Laveau and her children expected to receive. By bequeathing his properties earlier to his children and discretely discussing his affairs with Monsieur Pierre Biron, who would become the executioner of his will, Glapion's property found its way into the hands of his family.[55] Laveau did not claim her share as the wife of Glapion, but rather according to Biron as the, "old woman who always attended on the deceased during his sickness."[56] Laveau eventually claimed her rights as a wife, but under the guise of a servant. In order for her to do so, the couple resorted to trickery and deception.

Immediate material gain, not dependent on the death of a white male, also lured women of African descent into compromising situations. Melinda Parker received a proposition to become attached in this sort of engagement. She relates a story where a man approached her and promised to give her, "everthin' I wanted," if Parker would

49 University of Virginia, "Historical Census Browser".
50 Walker, 80.
51 Ibed., 83.
52 Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1991):197.
53 Ward, 45.
54 Ibed., 45.
55 Ibed., 103.
56 Ibed., 103.

agree to become the man's mistress.[57] Parker refused, telling the man he should spend his time and money with his family. Like Parker, other women also took action against placage. Henriette Delille became a nun to avoid living "in an immoral arrangement with a man who was not her husband."[58] To women who were less morally concerned and receiving low wages for doing hard labor, placage held more appeal. Some elite African American mothers searched out placements as mistresses for their daughters, hoping to make a deal whereby a white man might give the daughter "a house and an allowance in return for a visiting schedule," according to Ward.[59] In doing so mothers' supported unions proposed for monetary gain and so gained a degree of economic autonomy for their daughters.

More blatant in their requests for money from the master class, were women of African descent who openly engaged in prostitution. Women with African blood might have been prohibited from marrying white men, but they were in no way barred from selling their own sexuality. Carter Hodding, author of *Past as Prelude; New Orleans 1718-1968*, bestowed the title "prostitution capital of all America" on New Orleans in the years prior to the Civil War.[60] Prostitution proliferated so rampantly according to Hodding, by 1850 resultant profits were second only to that brought in from the ports.[61] Seemingly, prostitutes ran their businesses unhindered. In 1857 the city's Common Council voted to begin taxing prostitutes, but by 1859 the law was declared unconstitutional, as local harlots rebelled against the imposition.[62] In an area referred to as the "Swamp," along Gallatin Street, and eventually on Basin Street, prostitutes from all nationalities erected large houses, and some succeeded in amassing small fortunes.[63]

Women of African descent profited along with women of other nationalities. Rose gives several examples of such women. Hattie Hamilton arrived in New Orleans from Cuba as a "veteran strumpet," and eventually became the madam of a large business.[64] Minnie Ha-Ha, "a beautiful Negro madame," claimed a royal Native American lineage, and by the "late 1860s hers was one of the most elaborate mansions in the city."[65] These women assumed wealth not available to other free women who worked scrubbing floors or caring for children. In order to do so they sacrificed any chance of forming ties with "respectable" society, although the society they did inhabit exhibited a lack of discrimination not found elsewhere.

Those not directly of African heritage, but living in places like Basin Street, utilized and adopted the cultural traits of their darker neighbors. In 1860 a prostitute referred to as Fanny Sweet turned to an African woman noted for her specialization in voodoo as an aid for attracting patrons to her brothel.[66] Sweet was later found to

57 Melinda Parker, *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940* Library of Congress [http://memory.loc.gov/cgibin/query/D?wpa:1:./temp/~ammem_IHAB::@@@mdb=mcc], 4.

58 Ward, 37.

59 Ibed., 36.

60 Carter Hodding, *Past as Prelude; New Orleans, 1718-1968*. (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing House: 1968), 236.

61 Ibed., 236.

62 Rose, 8-9.

63 Ibed., 8-9.

64 Hodding, 237.

65 Rose, 13.

66 Ibed., 14.

be in possession of many voodoo relics herself.[67] Her own retention of relics from African culture shows Sweet not only accepting, but adopting borrowed elements from that culture. The Basin St. area was more accepting of African culture than other environments like a white women's parlor might be. Cultural acceptance combined with monetary reward acted as powerful influencers. Additionally, unlike placage, prostitution allowed women to express their autonomy as they managed businesses and retained mastership of their own careers.

Even so, seeking this kind of career required an almost fool-hearty bravery. Between 1820 and 1850 the "Swamp" hosted approximately eight hundred murders.[68] The risks in running such a business were numerous. Exposing oneself in areas where, as Rose asserts, "fugitives from every nation's laws found shelter" posed multiple hazards.[69] Presentable women of color tended to avoid establishments housing criminal activity (like the areas prostitutes inhabited). Parker relays the experiences of one girl who rejected domestic employment when "they told her that there was a lot of dope smugglers" at a residence requesting domestic service.[70] Prostitution voided any chance women might have of avoiding unsavory criminals. It surely required they welcome questionable characters not only into their businesses, but also into their bedrooms. The freedoms afforded by aspiring to be a madam appear to have motivated numerous women of African descent toward the gilded palaces. For some, the inherent risks were overcome by their desire for economic and personal autonomy.

The rampant mingling of white males and women of African descent naturally resulted in a racially diverse population. By the time of American acquisition, generations of biracial children had already been born. In French New Orleans, Berlin declares, "Native Americans, whites, and blacks all joined in sexual unions."[71] Children did not always profit in these arrangements. The Civil Code of Louisiana stipulated "Children born of a mother then in a state of slavery, whether married or not, follow the condition of their mother."[72] Some white men chose to free their biracial offspring. Henry Bibb, a slave who wrote about his experiences in the New Orleans' market, wrote of such men, "Many of them set their mulatto children free, and make slaveholders of them."[73]

Reactions From White Women

Large numbers of individual emancipations allowed the free African American population to grow. By 1840 the free population peaked at 20,000.[74] As more individuals with African backgrounds assumed the label "free," the lines between freedom and enslavement grew increasingly blurred. Generalizations based on skin color provided some guidelines in ascertaining status. Those with black skin were

67 Ibed., 14.
68 Ibed., 7.
69 Ibed., 9.
70 Parker, 1.
71 Berlin, 86.
72 "Civil Code of Louisiana: 1824", 2.
73 Henry Bibb, "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself," in *Slave Narratives*, edited by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2002), 499.
74 Fischer, 929.

generally considered slaves while mulattoes were "presumed to be free."[75] Adding to the confusion, and partially owing to the abysmal realities of the prostitution business, slavery in the city evolved into an institution not totally defined by skin color. White slavery proliferated in the red light district where high prices were paid for young virgins. Mary Fozette, a young white girl, was charged with stealing herself after she escaped from a brothel.[76] The historian John Bailey accidentally discovered records revealing the story of Sally Miller, a young German girl who was located "working in a squalid cabaret near the New Orleans waterfront" in 1843.[77] The enslavement of white females suggests slave status could be partially attributed to sex as well as race. Confirmation of this reality brought retaliation from white females who sought to consolidate their own position by maintaining their superiority on the racial hierarchy. Added to their reactions against women of African descent were feelings of jealously and rage resulting from the actions of white men involved with women of African descent. White women were inherently "powerless when male relatives upon whom they depended–husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, or grandfathers–picked women of color as mistresses."[78] Though they were powerless in stopping the men in their lives from having liaisons with women of African descent, white women consistently affirmed their position by physically abusing their darker counterparts.

The abuse white women imparted upon women of African descent violated images of women prevalent in the 1800s. Latrobe illustrates this discrepancy:

> And yet several, I had almost said many, of these soft beauties handle *themselves* the cowskin, with a sort of savage pleasure, & those soft eyes can look on the tortures of their slaves, inflicted by their orders, with satisfaction, & cooly prescribe the dose of infliction, the measure of which shall stop short of the life of their property.[79]

Latrobe also offers individual examples of abuse. He exposes Bernard Marigny's wife who ordered a "naked woman tied up on a ladder…to undergo the punishment of the whip."[80] Also noted is Madame Lanusse a "Hellcat" who whipped "a negress to death," but was not convicted after the affair was "hushed up."[81] Openly retaliating against white women was simply not an option for many serving beneath them. Though the individuals facing floggings may have been innocent of the behaviors supposedly causing such wrath, they were left without any method of recourse. Fighting a population who could easily hush an incident like murder without legal freedom was not a practical task.

White women were also motivated by rage when faced with the natural outcome of white males' sexual relations outside the white race. Latrobe describes Mrs. Tremoult, the owner of a boarding house who had a variety of servants including

75 Ingersoll, 198.
76 Rose, 15.
77 John Bailey, *The Lost German Slave Girl* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), x.
78 Ward, 36.
79 Latrobe, 53.
80 Ibed., 54.
81 Ibed., 54.

a "Mulatto woman."[82] Tremoult held this single servant responsible for "waiting on tables, making beds, and sewing two shirts a day."[83] In spite of her many tasks the servant was apparently "modest, obliging, and incredibly active."[84] One day when the woman did not make a bed at the required time, because someone was occupying the bed, she was "stripped quite naked, tied to a bed post" and whipped by both Mrs. Tremoult and her daughter.[85] The racial characteristics of the girl though (namely that she was a mulatto) probably provoked the rage Tremoult focused on her.

The presence of mulattoes in New Orleans was a constant reminder of the sexual permissiveness between white men and black women. Women who appeared to descend from pure black racial lines were less likely to receive the kind of cruel treatment Tremoult doled out on her mulatto servant. Eliza Moore Chinn McHatton Ripley, in her book *Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of My Girlhood*, titled an entire chapter, "Monument to Mammies."[86] The Mammy of Ripley's book is anything but a sexual threat. Mammy is described as "nosed and homely." In addition, this unattractive woman is praised for having "no adulterated blood" and appearing "as black as her Sunday silk."[87] Not only is Mammy ugly, but she does not represent the mixing of white men with colored women.

Even so, white women could not obliterate the presence of the offspring of biracial unions. Biracial women were considered to be preferable house servants. Parker writes of an acquaintance referred to as Emily. Because "she's French an' she's light-colored … she gets the good jobs," Parker states.[88] Emily's light skin also gave her an amount of freedom and she had more ability to choose between employers than did her darker counterparts. Though white women were able to succeed in abusing biracial women they had close contact with, ultimately they could not stop such women from assuming a position in society just below their own.

The case of the Quadroon balls further exemplifies the ability of biracial women to achieve victory over the demands of white women. These events allowed opportunities for "Any fairly light Negro woman" to meet with white men.[89] Often "elite women of color" arranged the meetings and "made semiformal contracts with white men who admired their daughters."[90] The balls caused various reactions among white women. Some "attended out of curiosity."[91] Others were horrified by the events. Because of white women's protests, the city issued an ordinance in 1828 banning the balls, however the ordinance was not well enforced and the balls continued.[92]

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82 Ibed., 53.
83 Ibed., 53.
84 Ibed., 54.
85 Ibed., 54.
86 Eliza Moore Chinn McHatton Ripley, "Social Life in Old New Orleans, Being Recollections of my Girlhood," in "Documenting the American South," [http://docsouth.unc.edu/ripley/ripley.html], 209.
87 Ibed., 210.
88 Parker, 1.
89 Tregle, 35.
90 Ward, 36.
91 Tregle, 35.
92 Fischer, 935.

Conclusion

Whether women of African descent looked toward Congo Square, the marketplace, or white men, an active striving for varieties of autonomy is present in their stories. They pocketed money, participated in activities rooted in African culture, sued in court for freedom, sold their bodies for economic independence, and on a large scale defeated white women's protests against them. In so doing they succeeded in taking advantage of the unique society of New Orleans. The city consistently afforded unusual opportunities for women of African descent, while surrounded by the dismal realities of the pre-Civil War American South. Yet, it was the women themselves, who with bravery and persistence, tested limits and redefined societal boundaries.

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