
Donna Marie Porche-Frilot

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, dporche@lsu.edu

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PROPELLED BY FAITH:
HENRIETTE DELILLE AND THE LITERACY PRACTICES
OF BLACK WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN ANTEBELLUM NEW ORLEANS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by
Donna Marie Porche-Frilot
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1992
M.A, Louisiana State University, 1998
May 2006
Shall it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force? By no means. Let every female heart become united . . .

— Maria Stewart, 1831

The religious spirit which has animated women in all ages, showed itself at this time. It has made them, by turns, martyrs, apostles, warriors, and concluded in making them divines and scholars.

— Maria Stewart, 1833

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a [hu]man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he[/she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

— Robert F. Kennedy (1925 - 1968), South Africa, 1966
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Special thanks goes out to my advisory committee, which included William Doll, Nancy Nelson, Claudia Eppert, John Lowe, and Tiwanna Simpson. I appreciate the amount of time that each of you took to read and critique my work, and how you added dimension to the manner in which I approached the topic of black women religious. Many thanks and deep affection go out to Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, who advised and encouraged my as I completed this work. I would also like to recall the names of a very special contributors to this project: Miss Edna Jordan, Librarian and historian associated with the Genealogy Room of the Bluebonnet Regional Library and Linda Beshears of St. Francis Xavier School in Baton Rouge. Each supplied me with critical documents, personal wishes of support, and access to
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None of this would be possible without the support of some very special people. For grounding and familial nurturance, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my husband Leopold, and my sons, Leo and Julian, who are my personal inspiration. And who earn my gratitude for putting up with me through the long days and nights of my field research and dissertation writing. To my parents, sister and brothers, and extended family, I offer my appreciation to you for your support, ideas, and words of encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank my peers at Louisiana State University, who enriched my life and learning experiences with their engaging dialogue and collaborative spirit.
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Abstract

The ability to imagine literacy influences the way we historicize literacy and research its dilemmas and challenges. Recent trends in literacy theorizing and research forwarded by New Literacy Studies scholars such Deborah Brandt and Brian Street have converged around contextualized approaches to literacy, directing educators to new imaginings of both our literacy-present and our literacy-past. This study draws upon this expanded literacy framework to theorize literacy in the lives of antebellum black women religious of New Orleans. The focus of the study is Henriette Delille (1812-1862), a free woman of color who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family (1842), the first black religious order in the Lower South. Propelled by faith, empowered by a vibrant Afro-Latin Creole milieu, and supported by the Roman Catholic Church, Delille created new spaces for black female action, advocacy, and activism. She founded a community and an institutional matrix (a convent, schools, church ministries, a nursing home and an infirmary) that served as a place of respite from low moral and intellectual expectations for black females.

The study discusses how, in pursuing her unique vision of black womanhood, Delille carved out a previously unauthorized role for black women in society as knowers, agents of morality, institution builders, representatives of their community, and most importantly, as sponsors of literacy. The study concludes that understanding literacy in the lives of these women requires the recognition of the multiple literacies engaged in their daily practices: within conventual culture, within schooling contexts, and within families and the broader society in which they were situated. Literacy as conceived by black women religious was enacted along three critical lines, first, as a communal act: holistic, interdependent, and deeply committed. Secondly, literacy was experienced and advocated spatially: literacy was conceived
as an embodied act, and advocated by producing and negating spaces. Finally, literacy was
conceived as humanizing act, as a public assertion of the black women’s full and equal
potentiality. These analyses suggest that from nineteenth century black women religious we
might glean an approach to literacy and literacy learning that is at once holistic, community-
based, resistant, change-oriented, and pragmatic. [349 words]
Chapter One
Theorizing Literacy in the Lives of Antebellum Black Women Religious

Paulo Freire in 1985 wrote, “All educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part.”1 Our efforts to understand the perplexities and consequences of teaching and learning, he would seem to say, emerge not only from philosophy but also from praxis, which he defined as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”2 From Freire’s point of view, every human being has the capacity to look critically at the world and give voice to conscious understandings of the relationships between self, other, and the world. A growing body of radical poststructuralist and feminist work in the field of education now asserts that the acts of composing theory, writing history, and doing philosophical work have been unfairly reserved by dominant discourses to the specific ways of theorizing which arise out of the Western male academic tradition. Feminist and African American historians have led the way in reconceptualizing our notions of theory and knowledge, leading to new, more inclusive ideas about who can be considered an intellectual and what determines if a person is literate.

Alongside Freire, feminists and other critical theorists like Gerda Lerner, Patricia Hill Collins, Shirley Brice Heath, and Petra Munro, among others, have pushed stridently for a true democratization of the fields of educational theory, history, and philosophy.3 They have asserted that educational theory can be produced by whoever is actively engaged in developing educational praxis and wherever it may occur, be it within the walls of academia, or the

1 Paulo Freire, The Politics of Education (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985), 42.
schoolhouse, or the shaded spaces beneath a grand acacia tree. Theoretical paradigm is in the process of being refigured and remapped by inclusion of the thoughts and ideas which have emanated from women of antiquity, medieval mystics, Native American sages, settlement workers, African American women born into slavery, as well as by school cafeteria workers and university janitors.

To these new voices and perspectives that currently invigorate the field of education, I add Black Catholic women religious, in particular, Henriette Delille (1812-1862), the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans. During the early antebellum period the young Catholic evangelizer and teacher founded the first Black Catholic sisterhood in all the Lower South, only the second in the nation. In a place and at a time when the impingement of race on American culture and literacy were clearly and tellingly expressed, Delille created a space for black self-organizing and collective action in the name of black education. Propelled by a deep sense of faith in God and a clear vision of the role that black women could play in reforming a Southern slave society, Henriette Delille organized a small band of women into a Catholic teaching congregation and dedicated their ministry to the cause of black literacy in numerous ways. Accorded the protection of the Roman Catholic Church and the support of the traditions of female agency so effectively promulgated by the Ursulines,

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4 Large acacia trees, found in Western and Northern parts of Africa, with their wide expanse of boughs and proximity to riverbanks have, since ancient times, served as community meeting sites, courtrooms, and schoolrooms.


6 I employ the modifiers black and Catholic in a compound fashion and in uppercase form with Black Catholic referring to that sector of Louisiana’s Catholic community who have grouped themselves and been grouped under the African American identity. I use the terms black and free people of color and African American interchangeably.

7 The term antebellum refers here to the period between 1813 and 1861, after American statehood and before the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865). Typically, the Lower South refers to region which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.
Henriette Delille transcended prevalent literacy barriers and deterrents. She instructed enslaved women and girls, as well as poor free blacks, in religion; she established a convent boarding school and supervised the generation of one of the first and most enduring black female teacher corps.

The origins, theories, and consequences of Henriette Delille’s pattern of literacy advocacy are the subject of this dissertation. Motivated by years of study on the topics of women’s history, black history, curriculum studies, and literacy studies, and spurred by the observation that black women religious constitute a topic largely unexplored by academia, I pursue here multiple lines of inquiry which converge on the notion of recovering and reviving the thoughts and experiences of the founder as a literacy theorist. It is my thesis that, contrary to general representations of antebellum black women as being illiterate, unknowing, passive victims of white oppression, and beings without a public voice or role, free women of color religious of New Orleans self-organized in the name of literacy and used religious literacy in a conscious way to bring about societal change. Henriette Delille used the notion of a Catholic religious order as a platform from which to launch a movement whereby black women could become at once agents of faith and literacy. I assert the idea that this pattern of advocacy represents the initiation of a long-unrecognized educational reform movement. Through the formation of a Black Roman Catholic teaching order, Henriette Delille established a congregation which outlasted the antebellum milieu and exceeded the bounds of the city of New Orleans. Across the generations, for over 164 years, the spiritual daughters, or subsequent Holy Family sisters of Henriette Delille, continued to follow her model and carry her ideas beyond the city of New Orleans and even the state of Louisiana. Over generations, the women expanded their matrix of sponsoring institutions to Black Catholic communities in
Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, California, and Alabama, as well as the nations of Belize and Nigeria. In so doing, I credit Henriette Delille with launching a Black Catholic women’s intellectual tradition, movement, and worldview, one with direct implications for the history of literacy in America, and our understanding of the concept of literacy in general.

The time frame of this study is marked at the beginning by the event of the formation of a pious association called The Sisters of the Presentation. In 1836, Henriette brought together approximately twenty-eight women to commence this, a pious women’s association, which eventually became the foundation for the Sisters of the Holy Family. The time frame of this study closes on the event of Henriette Delille’s death in 1862, just five years before her convent school evolved into St. Mary’s, a school for black girls, one that eventually became a landmark black female academy that continues to this date. This investigation was framed, in part, by posing and following fundamental “angles” of inquiry which illuminated the complex narrative of the emergence of Henriette Delille and the Holy Family congregation. The primary angle was historical; this perspective sought to identify and generate better understanding of the figure/figurations of Henriette Delille in terms of the contexts which she inhabited. What were the critical actions and events in the life history of Henriette Delille and in the institutional history of the SHF? What historical-socio-political contexts situated this knowledge? The second angle was conceptual: How might literacy be theorized in the lives of Henriette Delille and SHF, in other words, as literacy theorist Jacqueline Jones Royster put it, “to give account for how, within this group, literacy has been practiced and made usable.”? The third angle was formative: What was the formative nature of their community of practice,

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especially with respect to print literacy education? Lastly, a fourth angle of inquiry was interpretive: How did these formations inform our understanding of the antebellum black women’s roles in society?

Rather than reproduce reductive tendencies associated with conventional historical traditions, I chose to weave together a wide band of discursive threads and voices, many of which have been excluded, repressed, or simply ignored in past historiography. Therefore I presented together, and with equal regard, those voices, accounts, and theoretical frameworks that have been regarded as being in a state of dialectical opposition: diarist and “official” accounts, notions of the secular and religious, and contemporary critical theories paired with my own personal ways of knowing. In assembling the fragments of the history of Henriette Delille’s life and the religious order, I gave serious weight and consideration to the rich, extensive, polyphonic oral tradition of the Sisters of the Holy Family—especially in the absence of traditional historical evidence. In the absence of either oral tradition or other forms of evidence, I also relied on personal cultural knowledge gleaned from being a participant-observer of the Holy Family culture, visiting their convent, observing their conventual culture, and participating in community life. I drew upon not only my hours spent in the archives, but knowledge gleaned as a Black Catholic and an Afro-French Creole from New Orleans.

**Biographical Sketch**

Henriette Delille was born around 1812. She was, by any reckoning, one of the most intriguing of figures in the history of antebellum Louisiana. A free born woman with inherited wealth, she was likely still an adolescent when she decided to abandon a comfortable lifestyle to pursue the vocation of a Catholic religious life. However, she was disqualified from the prospect of becoming a nun by the conditions of her birth. Ordinarily, and in keeping with a
women’s tradition dating back to second century Christianity, a female aspirant would submit an appeal in writing to a local nunnery with recommendations from her parish pastor. She would offer a dowry or sizable financial contribution to the congregation’s Mother Superior, or leader. She would also have been required to supply evidence of a suitable pedigree. While a sizable dowry and a personal testimonial on the status of her piety were possible, the last of these Delille could not supply. Though her appearance was nearly white, she was *une femme de couleur libre*, a free woman of color; she was both a woman of African descent and the descendent of enslaved persons. Henriette Delille was the daughter of Marie Josephe Dias, a free woman of color, an active member of New Orleans’ free black community. To compound matters further, Henriette Delille was—in accordance with the vernacular of the day—a “natural” daughter, that is, the offspring of a union that had not been officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church. Her father was a white Frenchman, Jean Baptiste Delille Sarpy, the former attorney general for the city of New Orleans.\(^\text{10}\) None of the four Catholic sisterhoods that maintained convents in New Orleans during the early nineteenth century—the Ursulines, the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mount Carmel, and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart—would have knowingly accepted a woman who bore either the visible stigma of African slavery or the secret “stain of illegitimacy” in her pedigree brought by the occasion of her birth outside the bounds of wedlock.\(^\text{11}\)

In the face of such obstacles Henriette Delille chose instead to establish a new tradition. In 1836, in the spirit of an ordained Catholic religious, she privately vowed “to live and die for

\(^{10}\) Henriette Delille’s paternal line remains unsettled. She had knowledge of her father but he was not directly involved in his daughter’s life. See Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 12-14.

\(^{11}\) “Neither fair skin nor blood relations assured Louisiana Free Negroes of the affection or respect of whites. Not only did most free Negroes bear the stain of illegitimacy, but many whites thought mulattoes even more dangerous than blacks.” Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 111.
God.” She then convened a group of like-minded women and publicly expressed to them her vision to form a sisterhood for pious women of color, one dedicated to the cause of worshipping and serving God by addressing the spiritual, social, and corporeal needs of others. Together with a dozen other French Creole women—including a childhood friend, Juliette Gaudin, and a zealous white benefactor, Marie Aliquot—Delille founded the Sisters of the Presentation, a private female association that approximated the apostolic mode of female piety promoted by French Catholic women religious in Louisiana during the eighteen hundreds. The association of pious women called upon its members to strive toward a state of holiness, defined as a condition of personal perfection and sense of unity with God. They were to achieve that state by working actively toward the salvation of the world through Catholic proselytizing, religious education, and acts of charity. The members consecrated themselves to the care of one another and to the nearly impossible cause of alleviating the spiritual, social, intellectual, and physical sufferings of antebellum blacks living under the mantle of slavery. Toward these ends, Henriette Delille and the women gathered regularly to worship and to plan the implementation of their self-chosen mission. For the next thirty years or more years Henriette Delille and the women proselytized in the black community (free and enslaved), catechized (tutored new entrants in the knowledge and beliefs of the Roman Catholic faith system), and acted as personal sponsors to poor and free slaves in sacred Catholic religious rites (e.g., marriages and baptisms).

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12 These words were found written in her prayer book also with her signature and the date March, 1836. Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family.
In 1842, after nearly a decade of work as independent church missionaries and then as an organized association of lay persons, the members of the Sisters of the Presentation earned formal acknowledgment by local church leaders. In 1842 Étienne Rousselon, the group’s appointed clerical advisor, received approval for the collective from the Vatican for their work caring for the sick and poor and for instructing adolescent girls. They became a recognized Catholic congregation. With that development, Delille had succeeded in establishing the first Catholic congregation for black women in all the lower Southern states, and only the second surviving black sisterhood in all of the Northern Hemisphere. Delille was recognized as the group’s leader and the group’s name was ultimately changed to the Sisters of the Holy Family.

For the next two decades, Henriette Delille led a handful of dedicated women into the religious life, that is, into that manner of living traditionally associated with nineteenth century Catholic nuns or sisters: personal sanctification, communal habitation, centralized leadership, and a rigorous schedule of missionary work. Delille and her compatriots established a convent near the Vieux Carré. The House of the Holy Family, as it was then called, immediately became an epicenter for black female leadership and community reform. From that base Delille initiated a personal campaign to offer to free black women an alternative lifestyle, one apart from the traditional roles for women as wives and mothers. Through example and personal teachings, she showed the manner in which black women could to take an active public role in ameliorating the deleterious effects of slavery and racism in their families and communities.

14 The first Catholic religious order to attempt to include black women was the short-lived Sisters of Loretto (1812) of Kentucky. The first order to be founded specifically for black women was established in the Catholic stronghold, Baltimore, Maryland. There, in 1829, Haitian émigrés Elizabeth Lange and Marie Balas, in collaboration with Father Joubert, formed the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Although at least four black Catholic sisterhoods were attempted between the years 1809 and 1842, the Sisters of the Holy Family and the Oblates are the only surviving orders. It should be noted that nearly all of these orders or attempted orders were active or apostolic teaching congregations. See Cyprian Davis, History of Black Catholics.
She utilized the trope of the Catholic convent to establish a platform for building some of the first sanctioned black-run humanitarian institutions in the antebellum South: a nursing home for abandoned elderly slaves, an infirmary for free blacks, an orphanage, religious literacy programs for the enslaved, a free school, and a convent school for girls.

Indeed, education was a core theme of Delille’s life and vocation; she steadfastly directed the new congregation in the direction of becoming a formal teaching congregation. It was a portentous choice in terms of the harsh contexts created for black educational developments in antebellum New Orleans. The foundation of schools for blacks was seen by Southern whites as a dangerous proposition; schooling for blacks was strongly discouraged, and literacy instruction for the enslaved was prohibited. Henriette Delille had herself likely been a student at a pioneering schooling institution for blacks, St. Claude’s School; when it was formed in the 1830s, it represented one of the first Catholic parochial schools for girls of color in the Southern states. Oral tradition maintains that Delille retained a presence at the school after completing her studies, where she worked beside and at the behest of French nuns to tutor free girls and mentor the enslaved. These personal interactions netted the founder concrete accounts of the misery of plantation slavery; she purportedly came to a sharp appreciation of the uses and consequences of ignorance and illiteracy on the lives of enslaved women and girls. Deeply impressed, Delille made literacy a central tenet of her mission. When she composed the organizational rules and regulations for the Sisters of the Presentation, Delille set down as one of its main purposes the “instruction of the ignorant.”¹⁵ Moreover, the members were encouraged to learn from one another through lectures, and to reach out and perform good works through instructing others. Upon receiving recognition as a congregation

¹⁵ Henriette Delille, “Regles et Règlements,” 1836, ledger book, ASHF.
in 1842, Henriette Delille worked to establish formal schooling options for free black girls. By 1850 she succeeded in establishing St. Augustine’s, a free school, and the Bayou Road School for Colored Girls, the first black-run convent school for girls.

Henriette Delille did not live to see the liberation of the enslaved or the rise of free blacks to positions of power in Louisiana that occurred during the Reconstruction Era. Serious physical ailments had plagued her throughout her life; she came close to death on at least two occasions and was inspired to compose not less than three wills, in 1851, 1852, and 1860. When the Civil War thundered into New Orleans in 1861, Henriette Delille’s longstanding health problems worsened suddenly, and considerably. On November 16, 1862, just weeks before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, she died. The event inspired an anonymous tribute to her in the local paper for being a woman who humbly “devoted herself without reserve to the religious instruction of the unlettered, principally of slaves.”

The Holy Family congregation immediately entered a period of loss and struggle when numerous young women abandoned the order. The reactive response was, in effect, a testimonial to the personal charisma of the founder.

The depleted and dispirited order persisted nonetheless. Juliette Gaudin, Josephine Charles, and Marie Aliquot worked hard to fill the enormous vacuum left in the wake of Henriette Delille’s death. Juliette, then later Josephine, each became Mothers Superior. Juliette Gaudin maintained the convent school which later re-emerged in the 1880s as St. Mary’s Academy, a premier black girl’s academy which survives to the present. Under Josephine Charles’ tenure, the convent moved to the heart of the Vieux Carré on Orleans Street, where it became a central feature on New Orleans’ social landscape through 1955. In the decades to

follow the surviving charter members of the congregation oversaw the transfer of Henriette Delille’s ideas, spirit, philosophy, and practices, to a subsequent generation of Holy Family teaching sisters, who in their turn, oversaw the order’s development into the largest, most significant Black Catholic order in American history.\(^\text{17}\)

**Historical Mappings**

Henriette Delille, as well as the cofounders Sisters Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, come down to us through history largely unknown. Despite the potential scholarly value of their history and its clear relevance to the history of education, Henriette Delille and the charter Sisters of the Holy Family have been largely overlooked as a topic of serious scholarly investigation. In fact, for more than a hundred years after their images were captured on film, the photographs of the founding Mother Superior, as well as that of the cofounders—each of whom eventually assumed the post of Mother Superior—remained vaulted in the archives, unattributed, unpursued, and unaccessed by historical researchers for generations. Furthermore, beyond the brief flashes of historical consciousness expressed through their portraits, knowledge of these founding women was remanded to the safe-keeping of oral tradition for more than sixty years.\(^\text{18}\) Prior to 1976, very little interest had been shown in the history of the order or its legacy in the present. Even when writing about Louisiana, few scholarly writers working outside of the domain of Catholic history even expressed knowledge of the existence of a Black Catholic sisterhood—let alone offered analysis of the role they may have played in the development of the character of the city or the educational outlook of its


\(^{18}\) Fifty-nine years passed between the year of the Henriette Delille’s photograph and her first historical attribution as Superior, which occurred in 1911 in Desdunes, *Our People, Our History*. The link between the name Henriette Delille and the photograph that is now attributed to her was not made until the modern era. See Rodolphe Desdunes, *Our People and Our History: Fifty Creole Portraits*, trans. and ed. Sister Dorothea Olga McCants, Daughter of the Cross (1911; repr., Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1973).
black community. This is true despite the fact that the religious organization Henriette Delille pioneered, the institutions the order collectively built, and the broader black educational legacy/movement she symbolizes are vibrant, compelling stories of long-term educational success. Though their effort was initially small and limited in scope, these three women gave birth to an Afro-Creole literacy tradition and a Black Catholic educational movement which persisted and grew during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras—and beyond.

In this sense, the three images (see figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3) tell the story of the marginalization of the women and the organization from mainstream discourses of history. It is in their failure to be recognized as historic—that is, to be deemed valuable and informative of history and generative of critical lines of inquiry regarding conventional representations of their particular group, event, or milieu—that these artifacts speak to the inimical relationship between black women and the traditions of history. In truth, it is in the very nature of a historical journey whose destination is black women religious that one should encounter the most critical faults on the conceptual geography of human history. All along the way, the voids, faultiness, and other discontinuities which trouble its topography become manifest. Each aspect of the three women’s multiple identities—as women of color, as antebellum blacks, and as Catholic women religious—has its own local domain that has been complicated by the omissions, falsehoods, and misrepresent-ations born of conventional history. The convergence of these intersecting social identities, on these women, their organization, and their mission to educate blacks, has inevitably resigned them to a place located somewhere far off from the edges of the historical map—a place that feminist historian Cheryl Glenn describes as “the shadowy regions where the roads run off the edge of the paper and drop away. . . like those
Figure 1.1 Henriette Delille (Detail of a photo by A. Constant, courtesy of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family).
those murky territories on Renaissance charts that bore warnings of monsters beyond the sea.”

Theorist Raymond Williams also discerned this repeating pattern of omission, distortion, and abjection on the topography of mainstream knowledge regarding blacks, women, and the lower classes across a wide spectrum of disciplinary knowledge. He theorized that the competition among narrative viewpoints represents a broader struggle for our nation’s cultural identity. As such, it constitutes an apparatus of power. He wrote,

From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded. Yet within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is usually presented and usually passed off as “the tradition,” “the significant past.”

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19 Detail of a photo by unknown photographer, courtesy of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family.
20 Ibid.
Fitted with this framework for understanding the dominant traditions of history as selective, it should be apparent that pursuits in the field of history should never be regarded as objective or politically neutral. Williams would warn today that we should remain vigilant about the ways in which categorizing groups of people like black women religious as marginal, non-traditional, or others serves to preserve power for the dominant social order by installing a self-interested discursive hierarchy. With these designations, the history of their thoughts and experiences necessarily assumes the lowest status and as a consequence, they, like all non-white, non-males, lose the opportunity to become true “subjects” of study (as opposed to objects).23

Gender played a role in antebellum free black women’s location on the edge of the map of history. Their accounts were displaced by tendencies among historians to make room for the narratives of “great and powerful men whose texts, lives, and actions surely transcended the particularities of history and circumstance,” says Cheryl Glenn.24 Further, feminist historian Gerda Lerner charged that patriarchal traditions of history have displaced women from their rightful place at the center of historical discussion, for “it is in recorded history that women have been obliterated or marginalized.”25 Academic traditions of history have pursued not actual experiences, but a unified heroic narrative based on the normative human experience: white, male, and upper class. The quest, Petra Munro offered, “is predicated on subjugation and erasure” of women’s experiences.26 Importantly, it is this interdiction from mainstream

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24 Cheryl Glenn, Rhetoric Retold, 3.
history which Lerner links to women’s longstanding deprivation of access to education and their displacement from academic platforms of validation. In a cyclical fashion, women’s absence from the pages of history become justification for suppressing women’s work to discover their collective thoughts, actions, perspectives and accomplishments.

The engendering of education history has had a particularly acute effect on the history of women religious. Both an Anglo-Protestant point of view and the male-dominated historical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church colluded to silence the remarkable history of the women who were responsible for building the largest American private school system.27 Fittingly, it was a system that was first launched in New Orleans, on the occasion of the arrival of Ursuline nuns in 1727. With the establishment of their boarding school in the Vieux Carré, colonial America gained not only its first convent school but its first female academy.28 From these first stirrings European Catholic sisterhoods surged into the U.S. by the dozens to work alongside newly formed American foundations. Together, they formed a network of woman-led humanitarian and educational institutions, which by 1860 included 381 convents and at least 202 girls’ academies.29 Coburn and Smith observed that this growth trend continued at a stunning rate well beyond the period, creating the foundation on which America built its system of private education.30 They pointed out that by 1920 the network proliferated to include 709 academies as well as over “6,000 parochial schools . . . serving 1.7 million schoolchildren in every region of the country.” The size and scope of the network they formed,

Coburn and Smith argue, suggested that women religious had shaped not only Catholic culture but American life through the twentieth century. The women’s collective movement to conserve the faith and educate America’s youth, Coburn and Smith maintain, has suffered the effects of androcentrism. They observed,

Historically seen as docile handmaidens and submissive subordinates in the expansion and growth of the Catholic Church, nuns have only recently become the subjects of serious scholarship. Caught in a double bind of gender and religious marginality, American sisters have consistently been ignored by scholars of Catholic history and women’s history. This is a remarkable omission since the majority of Catholic schools...created in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States were created and/or maintained by American nuns.31

Moreover, they maintain that it is largely because of their work, that tens of thousands of early Americans girls and boys—including impoverished Native American and African Americans—gained access to a formal education.

Compounding issues of gender and vocation is race. It is perhaps the most important determinant in the silence regarding the historical contributions of black women religious in America. As such, there is the unfortunate perception that this history belongs only to African Americans and speaks only to the African American experience. Historian Benjamin Quarles wrote:

Until recent times the role of the Afro-American in our national life was thought to be hardly worth considering. An intellectual “white flight” held sway; most writers in the social sciences and the humanities, whatever their individual specialties, assumed they knew as much about blacks as they needed to know or as their readers cared to learn.32

Further, issues regarding their exceptionality as upper class free black women have hindered interest in full, responsible historical treatment of their efforts. The women are seen as belonging a small and exclusive group that did not experience oppression, risk, or that did not

31 Coburn and Smith, Spirited Lives, 3.
align themselves with the struggle for black equality, inclusion, and social justice. Elizabeth McHenry described this scholarly tendency as one which yields to “the myth of the monolithic black community,” which limits and simplifies “our ideas about what has constituted resistance for African Americans.”\(^3^3\) What gets reduced or obscured from view, she argued, is the diversity of attitudes, practices, and behaviors that different sectors of the black community employed to resist oppression and bring an end to slavery. There is at present, she argued, a “tendency to present the working class as the symbolic representative of the ideal,” thereby denying “a significant portion of the black community whose experience was different from that of the black working class.”\(^3^4\) Such a point of view not only denies variety in the types of struggles African American’s experienced, but overlooks the effort and social cost dispensed when blacks did come together to strategize for the collective good. Narratives of how privileged women of color responded to the racial climate and the disastrous effects of slavery and black educational disenfranchisement in antebellum New Orleans offers nuance, balance, and complexity—hence greater historical accuracy—to our understanding of both American history in general, and the broader contexts of the struggle for universal literacy, in particular.

In sum, nineteenth century black women religious of New Orleans lay far outside the central intellectual traditions of Western thought, placed there by a combination of forces and tendencies which repositioned from the center of mainstream historical concerns. Their corporeal and social identities, regional location, and choice of vocation and intracommunity status acted in overlapping ways to place their names, faces and history of accomplishment on the edges of the map of history.

\(^3^4\) Ibid., 16.
A survey of literature produced about black women religious affirms their location at the periphery of history—in regard to both secular and religious domains. During the lifetime of Henriette Delille, and through the first fifty years of the congregation’s existence, no written histories were produced by or for the order. The nature of black religious life and the specific type of spirituality espoused by the nascent community conflicted with the demands of history. Consequently, study of the topics of the individual charter members, the organization, and their activities during the antebellum period have largely relied on written recordings of oral tradition and brief tributes within larger works about the city of New Orleans or the state of Louisiana. I discovered no significant work on the history of the order until the end of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1970s, a small group of Roman Catholic scholars became interested in the stories of the genesis of the congregation as the order prepared to introduce consideration of Henriette Delille to the Vatican to become a Catholic saint. The new corpus of Catholic scholarship both challenged and affirmed the oral tradition. The scant remains of primary sources from the order, which included photographs, wills, bills of sale, letters, and the remnants of the order’s book collection, were then put to use to attempt to render the life and life work of Henriette Delille. However, the narrowness of the religious commission—to ascertain the truth about the spiritual and religious life of Henriette Delille—in many ways diverted attention from the order’s secular impact, especially its educational mission. Also, I found that prior writings failed to offer an account of how the women themselves may have influenced secular society or the male-dominated church.\(^\text{35}\) Despite high levels of popular

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interest and historical activity in the present era, none of the historical treatments located for this review treat the women, their institutions, and their unique brand of community activism or literacy as the sole topic of an investigation from the perspective of the history of education.

**Catholic Literature**

The greatest source for historical treatment of the Sisters of the Holy Family arises from local Catholic scholarship. For more than a century and a half, the vast majority of writings about black women religious were produced by members of the congregation or Catholic religious scholars. However, no attempt was made to record the history of the order until decades after all the charter members had died. The most common reason given by scholars is that the austerity of the apostolic religious life, coupled with the challenge of fulfilling an understaffed mission to care for and instruct the “least” of society” left no time for the women to initiate a written historical tradition. Instead, the women of the order relied on oral tradition. One congregation historian noted: “It has as often been said that in the early period of any new undertaking its members are usually too busy making history to write history.” Indeed, the charter Holy Family women and subsequent cohorts spent a large proportion of their time occupied with the task of begging for their basic provisions. One congregational historian explained that a sense of modesty and discretion and full time commitment were characteristic of the group. Sr. Mary Francis Borgia Hart wrote:

They often fail[ed] to file notes, letters, or such material that would assist the historian at some future date. This was the case with those intrepid women [of the early congregation] who toiled and suffered with no thought of publicity, never dreaming that their work was of such historic importance that their records would be valuable long after their demise.

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Yet, from the fragmentary collection of receipts and bills that did survive from the antebellum period, we know that records were kept, and photographs were taken. They were held as important for future reference; however, others records were undoubtedly lost, misplaced, or allowed to deteriorate amid New Orleans’ less-than-ideal conditions for archival preservation.\(^{38}\) Most assuredly, the women were simply too actively engaged in their work to produce published essays, reports, newspaper articles, poetry, or novels—the type of texts that typically survive the passage of time in public repositories.

Consequently, although it can be ascertained that Henriette Delille was a “woman of letters,” that is, a woman who was literate in the sense that she exchanged correspondence with her relatives, instructed schoolchildren, directed dramatic enactments, and so forth, neither she or the other co-founders left a body of written artifacts anything like the speech collection associated with Maria Stewart or the dictations of Sojourner Truth.\(^{39}\) Her “scattered fragments of brilliance,” to borrow a phrase by Patricia Hill Collins, include mere lines of text: a dictated constitution, business contracts, and three hastily drawn wills.\(^{40}\) A highlight of these is a short prayer or motto found in the lining of a prayer book and identified only in contemporary times: “I believe in God, I hope in God. I love. I wish to live and to die for God.”\(^{41}\) It is an evocation which points, at the very least, to the tenor of her commitment to religious service.

Yet even decades beyond Mother Henriette Delille’s death, the discourses of history were kept at bay. The congregation was slow to come to the table of recorded history, and

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\(^{39}\) Maria Stewart (1803-1879) was a free black activist and the first U.S. female to assume the podium as public lecturer. See Maria W. Stewart, \textit{America’s First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches}, ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987). Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), born Isabella Baumfree, was an escaped slave who testified against slavery and in support of women’s suffrage. See Nell Irvin Painter. \textit{Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol} (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

\(^{40}\) Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 2.

\(^{41}\) Davis, \textit{Henriette Delille}, 35.
history offered no invitation. The first attempt was made more than thirty years after the death of the principal foundress. In 1894, then Mother Superior Mary Austin Jones (1861-1909) assigned the role of historian to a member of the congregation. Inspired in part by the inadequate recognition offered to the women by Church ecclesiastics, the leader then allocated time for their most senior member to pen their first congregational history. Sister Mary Francis Bernard Deggs (1846-1896) rendered the contexts, developments, motivations, and activities of the order from the time of its founding until 1896. Her personal recollections—poetic and spirited, but sometimes historically imprecise—were recorded in a handwritten journal; the account offered limited details but did included her personal and very loyal recollections of the charter members—Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles—as well as her accounts of the lives and careers of the three subsequent mothers superior. However, the Deggs’ journal was never circulated outside of the select community of Holy Family members and devotees, and did not formally enter the historical record until it was published in the year 2001 under the title No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth century New Orleans.

Before that critical accomplishment, there had been a slow and gradual turn toward interest in the history of Holy Family black women religious. There are two principle reasons: first, research on the history of the Catholic Church increased, and second, the number of black

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42 Gould and Nolan speculated that the occasion of the jubilee celebration, or fiftieth anniversary of the congregation in 1892, the sermon offered by the male clergy was experienced as a slight. They wrote, “He spoke eloquently of the community’s fifty-year history, but said very little about the women themselves. Instead of focusing on the mother superiors and their roles in the growing success of the mission, [he] praised the clergy who directed them.” Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, No Cross, No Crown: The History of the Sisters of the Holy Family, ed. Virginia Meacham Gould & Charles E. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), xiii.

43 Deggs’ account limited her direct treatment of the antebellum era to approximately four pages, although she returned to the topic of the first years of the community sporadically in the course of the relating later narratives. The first six superiors were: Henriette Delille (1842-1862), Juliette Gaudin(1808-1877), Josephine Charles (1812-1885), Marie Magdalene Alpaugh (1849-1890), Marie Cecilia Capla (1851-1925), and Mary Austin Jones (1861-1909).

44 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, ix-xvi.
religious increased. New black priests, women religious and brothers, and others elected to meet the demand for advanced degrees through pursuing Black Catholic history as the topic of their theses and dissertations. In 1931 the Holy Family congregation produced the first published historical account of the founding of the order through the hands of one of its members. With the approval of a 1931 thesis, *Violets in the Garden of the King*, the congregation gained a substantive, carefully researched community history.\(^{45}\) The author, Sr. Mary Francis Borgia Hart (1909-1950), resuscitated the personal account given by Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs (1846-1896), and added previously unrecorded oral materials as well as material from various other archival sources.\(^{46}\) Not long after, the noted Catholic historian Roger Baudier published his seminal 1938 treatise, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, through which he made the Catholic Church’s first significant public acknowledgment of “Miss Harriet Delisle” and the formation of “a religious order for Negro women, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family.”\(^{47}\) He took a clearly favorable view of this development, having characterized it as a high point of clerical accomplishment and affirmation of the church’s history:

> One of the glories of Monseigneur Blanc’s episcopacy was the founding through his encouragement and support, but chiefly that of his Vicar-General, Father Rousselon, of a religious order for Negro women, the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family whose motherhouse now sits on 717 Orleans Street.

Baudier related that the society began without pretension, but eventually make a strong impression on the community and the Church. He continued,

> The Congregation began humbly, teaching catechism to the slaves and needle work and catechism to a few young girls, and caring for three or four old women. The work

\(^{45}\) Hart, *Violets in the King’s Garden*.

\(^{46}\) This work was but a small portion of a larger, more comprehensive treatment of the history of the order which remains to this date unpublished. See Sr. Mary Francis Borgia Hart’s unpublished version of *Violets in the King’s Garden: A History of Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans*, Parts 1 and 2.

increased and broadened steadily, providing a blessing for the members of the Negro race and providing opportunity for Negroes to dedicate themselves to the service of God in a Religious Congregation. The labors and advantages of this group have never been truly appreciated or evaluated, nevertheless, in its field; the Congregation has proven itself unmatched and a true blessing.\textsuperscript{48}

Despite such hospitable overtures, historical evaluation of this topic in the domain of religion remained relatively dormant over the next thirty-eight years.\textsuperscript{49}

The silence was broken only in the contemporary era, when in the 1970s, Sr. Audrey Marie Detiege (1927-1989), the order’s third congregational historian, collected prior work and produced the first publicly distributed monograph on the foundation of the order. Entitled

*Henriette Delille, Free Woman of Color: Foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family,*

Detiege’s text offered a fervent description of the historical and socio-cultural contexts which gave birth to the “infant” sisterhood; interestingly, it was she who first offered the interpretation that “the accomplishments of Miss Delille, in the era she lived, classify her as an early feminist, educator, and social worker.”\textsuperscript{50} While informative and persuasive, it proved to be of limited use to increasingly positivistic or essentialist historical research goals of church historians.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 397-8.
\textsuperscript{49} A marked exception is the work of Sister Mary Liberata Dadeaux, O.S.P. who recounts the founding of the Oblate order and the foundation of its first school. “The Influence of St. Francis Academy on Negro Catholic Education in the Nineteenth Century” (master’s thesis, Villanova College, 1944).
\textsuperscript{51} Sr. Audrey Marie Detiege’s work was limited by a lack of citation or bibliography—although she left volumes of copious notes in the archives. Still, some of the quotations in the text have yet to be identified. For a complete listing of works pertaining to the SHF, see Bibliography. See also treatments of the congregation in the following: Desdunes, *Our People and Our History,* 99; Michael J. McNally, “The Church, Black Catholic Women Religious in Antebellum Period,” *Negro History Bulletin,* 44 (1981):19-20; Grace E. King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1895), 351. Another work offered by a secular writer during this period arose from Ohio journalist Paul Gaston,: “Colored Sisters of New Orleans,” *Cincinnati Gazette,* 1867; Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
With the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of Black Catholic studies, inspired in part by the crescendo of race theorization and civil rights activism of the 1960s, leading black religious scholars formed a body of work which sought to explore the Black Catholic group identity, theology, and education.\textsuperscript{52} Scholars like Cyprian Davis, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and Jamie Phelps moved directly toward the vacuum of knowledge about the Black Catholic experience in the United States and across the world.\textsuperscript{53} In the area of antebellum history, in particular, they produced interdisciplinary work which focused on the role of lay black women and men, clergy, and women religious in the development of a vibrant black Catholic religious cultural ethos which persists in the present.\textsuperscript{54}

Preeminent among them is the work by Black Catholic monk and scholar Cyprian Davis, who in 1990 devoted a portion of his chapter on black women religious to the history of the genesis of the Sisters of the Holy Family.\textsuperscript{55} He is to be counted among the first and most important outside or non-member scholars to offer serious treatment of the subject of black women religious. With respect to the Sisters of the Holy Family, he identified the three co-founders and acknowledged the importance of their antebellum organization with respect to the history of all Black Catholics in the nation. In Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family, Davis found a narrative that was a key to understanding the Black Catholic experience in New Orleans and beyond. He recognized Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles as members of a select group which “helped to lay the faith foundation” for the whole

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Davis_1990} Davis, \textit{History of Black Catholics}, 255-59.
\bibitem{Phelps_1998} For treatment of the development of a Black Catholic cultural ethos see Jamie Phelps “Theology from an African American Catholic Perspective,” in \textit{Black and Catholic} (see note 39), 11-16; Davis, \textit{History of Black Catholics}.
\end{thebibliography}
of the Black Catholic community. “Without them” he wrote, “the black Catholic community
would not be what it is today.” For this reason, he challenged scholars to further research under
the premise that

a more detailed examination of the spirituality and the type of education of the black
religious sisterhoods during the nineteenth century will go a long way in understanding
the spiritual and cultural framework today. There is every reason to believe that more
careful research may reveal that the influence of black sisters within the community
was far greater than that of their white counterparts in their respective ethnic
communities.56

Following this call to action, a small group of scholars began to take up the difficult work of
piecing together the multiple oral accounts and the smattering of historical facts and written
narratives pertaining to the founding women of the Holy Family order. Notably, historian John
Alberts afforded great significance to the history of the order with respect to their roles as
sponsors of literacy. He took the view that a direct line of connection could be drawn between
antebellum women, black literacy, and the continued vibrancy of the black educational milieu
in New Orleans in the present.

Black Catholic education in New Orleans has been unique in many ways. As early as
1724, French-speaking Ursuline nuns opened their educational facilities to black
children in the city, and by 1841 the second black teaching order in the United States,
the Sisters of the Holy Family, took over the burden of that instruction. With the help of
other white orders these black nuns nurtured the largest literate black community in the
United States before the Civil War. From those origins emerged the only black Catholic
educational system in the United States which today extends from kindergarten through
university education. Xavier University remains the only black Catholic college in the
western hemisphere.57

Most recently, historian Cyprian Davis answered his own call and returned to the topic to
complete a biography of Henriette Delille entitled *Henriette Delille: Servant of the Slaves,
Witness to the Poor*. He produced a well-documented, scholarly account of Henriette Delille’s

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56 Ibid., 115.
57 John Bernard Alberts, “Black Catholic Schools: The Josephite Parishes of New Orleans During the Jim Crow
Era,” in *Education in Louisiana*, The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series, vol. 18, ed. Michael G. Wade
(Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1999), 326.
heritage, circumstances, and life history. He recognized Henriette Delille as the charismatic leader and visionary for a small group of black women who “in a world of ambiguous expectations . . . began consciously to live the religious life . . . in a world where black women were often little valued.” Davis did attribute the group’s success to Henriette’s “vision and single-mindedness of purpose,” a vision which bound the group and was effectively transferred across the generations, and beyond Louisiana, to the nation and the world.

**Situating Henriette Delille in the History of Literacy Education**

As it relates to education, the aforementioned patterns of historical and historiographical distortion and omission, silencing, and myth-making not only persist, but—in the case of the history of education—they *enfold*. The general selectivities of past historians of education have produced a tradition which emphasizes the knowledge of the conditions and accomplishments of white males and Anglo-Saxon Protestants missionaries, Northern philanthropists, and Federal government officials. Consequently, historians have frequently underplayed the myriad ways that local people of color—both the enslaved and free—self-organized for liberation through the pursuit of education. As revealed by an emerging body of historical studies, antebellum people of African descent successfully resisted race-based oppression by doing what Augustine once proscribed, “taking the gold out of Egypt,” that is,

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58 Davis, *Henriette Delille*, x.
by claiming and recasting American democratic and Christian ideals to serve their own purposes.\textsuperscript{61}

The first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a small but ardent stream of scholarship about the antebellum black educational experience. In 1919, when eminent educator and historian Carter G. Woodson first approached the topic of antebellum education, he discovered that “the accounts of the successful strivings of Negroes for enlightenment under most adverse circumstances read like beautiful romances of a people in an heroic age.”\textsuperscript{62} He found that education was a primary focus of blacks in America and described this era of black educational history in terms of a vast constellation of initiatives, successes, indignities, and hardships. Development in Louisiana, especially amongst free blacks, was central to his account of the history of education and literacy in the American experience. He wrote,

The Spanish and French missionaries [in Louisiana], the first to face this problem [of black education], set an example which influenced the education of the Negroes throughout America. Some of these early heralds of Catholicism manifested more interest in the Indians than in the Negroes, and advocated the enslavement of the Africans rather than that of the Red Men. But being anxious to see the Negroes enlightened and brought into the Church, they courageously directed their attention to the teaching of their slaves, provided for the instruction of the numerous mixed-breed offspring, and granted freedmen the educational privileges of the highest classes. Put to shame by this noble example of the Catholics, [because they had not educated their slaves] the English colonists had to find a way . . . [t]o meet this exigency.\textsuperscript{63}

Later twentieth century scholars, like Ira Berlin and a pioneer of black historical studies, John Blassingame, also alluded to the importance of attending to free black developments in

\textsuperscript{61} Augustine wrote: "Remember the Egyptians not only offered idols and terrible oppression, which the Israelite people hated and fled, but they owned vessels and ornament of gold and silver, and fine clothing besides, which the Israelites took for themselves in secret as they left Egypt, claiming it all for a better use." Augustine of Hippo, \textit{On Christian Doctrine}, trans. James J. O'Donnell, (Cyber Library Online: http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/augocd/ocdb2c35-40.html, (accessed Dec 2, 2004)).

\textsuperscript{62} Carter Godwin Woodson (1875-1950) was the son of an enslaved man; a professional educator, he obtained degrees from Harvard and the Sorbonne in Paris. \textit{The Education Of The Negro Prior To 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War} (1919; repr., Salem, New Hampshire, 1986), iii.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 3.
antebellum Louisiana, but evaded any specific mention of the existence of a black Catholic teaching order.\textsuperscript{64}

My recent review of contemporary scholarship in the history of antebellum education has produced a short list of brief, unimpressive passing references to free black women of New Orleans and only one serious treatment of the topic of New Orleans’ black women religious as educators. In 1982, with the article entitled: “Negro Nuns as Educators,” Theresa Rector broke new ground when she briefly sketched and analyzed the relevance of the history of the three surviving black female Catholic orders in America.\textsuperscript{65} In addition to the Sisters of the Holy Family, she reviewed the history of The Oblates Sisters of Providence, founded in 1829, and The Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, founded in 1916. Rector observed that each group of women began with a mission to found black educational institutions. This was accomplished during an era when American educational systems were most exclusionary towards blacks.

Black Roman Catholic nuns have been engaged in educating Black American youths since Pre-Civil War days. The three orders founded in the United States by Black women … have been consistent in their quest to provide quality Christian education.”\textsuperscript{66}

Moreover, The Sisters of the Holy Family were identified as the most significant of the three due to the size of its membership and the expansiveness of its educational undertakings, which included forty-eight institutions over its history, ranging from infant care to academies to nursing homes. To the success and endurance of the order she offered credit to Henriette Delille for establishing a teaching and educational legacy through the foundation of a distinctive black Catholic sisterhood.


\textsuperscript{65} Rector, “Negro Nuns as Educators,” 238-253.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 253.
Henriette Delille and the Holy Family Congregation garnered mention in a less focused, but important way in at least one scholarly treatment of the history of literacy education in the South. In 1991, slave literacy historian Janet Cornelius recognized the women of the religious order as members of a “key group responsible for schools for African Americans in the antebellum South.”⁶⁷ Free black women religious, she observed, “taught and financed those few schools and classes for black people which did operate in the antebellum South.”⁶⁸ Cornelius also noted that two of the top three cities for antebellum black education were Baltimore and New Orleans. Each of these sites was home to a Black Catholic women’s teaching order. She wrote,

> Education was a particular responsibility of the Catholic orders of black and colored women. …the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, founded in 1842, taught schools for black children.⁶⁹

Apart from this bare acknowledgement, I found no other scholarship which directly deals with the topic of black women religious as teachers, institution-builders, sponsors of literacy, or educators.

**Re-Imagining Literacy**

The manner in which we answer the question: *What is literacy?* influences the way we perceive and understand the history of literacy. Over the course of the last three decades of literacy studies research, the term *literacy* has been variously defined, leading to multiple points of view about its role in society—past and present. Literacy has been defined in a functional way, limited to script or written literacy. Most public and academic discourses about education routinely employ the term *literacy* in a strict and narrow manner, using the term to

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⁶⁸ Ibid.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
refer to the ability of an individual or group to encode and decode printed or scripted texts, as with reading, writing, and math. Others, especially of late, think of literacy in terms of the variety of disciplines that human engage in, like computer literacy, religious literacy, or music literacy, for example. More radically, literacy may be thought of as more than a set of skills, but as a way of thinking about language. Like Judith Langer who defines literacy “as the ability to think and reason like a literate person,” placing the focus not only on use of language but the “thinking that accompanies it.”

Much of the debate around the definition of literacy has involved the understanding that there is a distinct difference between oral and written communication. During the mid-1960s, pioneers of the field of literacy studies—Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and others—used what Deborah Brandt calls “strong-text” interpretations of literacy, to build the assertion that literacy was a neutral set of skills and possession of them had superior cognitive consequences for humans. Their scholarship converged around the notion that cultures that are purely oral and those that possess a written language differ in a fundamental way; their differences highlight the mnemonic, psychological, and social functions of reading and writing in human society. Ong discussed how writing created the ability to record thoughts and memories and brought into being such concepts as “study” and “literature.” Words captured in print, he argued, “encouraged human beings to think more of their interior conscious and

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72 Ong, Orality, 9-11.
unconscious resources as more and more thing-like, impersonal, and religiously neutral.”

Havelock concurred, in his seminal study of the emergence of Greek philosophy, he traced the foundation of human philosophy back to the first appearance of alphabetic literacy in Greek society. The introduction of writing systems there resulted in something more than the mere recording of oral traditions, he argued; it inspired the slow modification of thought and use of language that “adds the visual of the eye” to aural and oral, and then supplants it in the form of abstract signs, hence abstract thought. “The adjustment that it [the modification] caused was in part social, but the major effect was felt in the mind and the way the mind thinks as it speaks,” he wrote. Thus, when reading and writing were mastered on a broader scale, he and others was argued, the respective communities garnered fundamental psychological, social, and cultural changes which amounted to a civilizing effect.

Shirley Brice Heath maintains that this “dichotomous view” disguises the nature of language and its multiple forms and “makes it easy to interpret a picture which depicts societies existing along a continuum of development from an oral tradition to a literate one, with some societies having a restricted literacy, and others having reached a full development of literacy.” Most importantly, it retards investigation of the “social and cultural correlates of literacy,” the daily uses and experiences that occur which support and enhance literacy learning. Literacy, she asserted when thought of in this manner sets as its epitome the formal expository essay with its proscribed features proper syntax, grammar, work choice, and

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73 Ibid., 129.
74 Havelock, Preface to Plato, 100.
75 Ibid.
76 Havelock’s claims have Eurocentric overtones. “The linguistic symptoms of this radical shift away from oralism, which has ever since underlain all European consciousness, occurred in a proliferation of terms, for notions and thoughts and thinking, for knowledge and knowing, for understanding, investigating, research, and inquiry.” Ibid., 115.
78 Ibid.
organization, and so forth. Scholarship informed by this view has explicitly connected literacy skills, so defined, to an individual or social group’s intrinsic worth.

**Literacy as a Social Activity**

This study takes a different view; I engage a sociocultural perspective on literacy in keeping with a number of other studies of literacy practices that have been conducted since the “social turn” of the 1980s. The social theories of Lev Vygotsky, Michael Halliday, and Pierre Bourdieu, which became influential in the latter decades of the twentieth century, directed researchers and scholars toward a more complex view of literacy—as participation in contextualized social practices and not simply as a set of cognitive abilities. Much emphasis today is placed on the “situated” nature of literacy—how it is performed by particular social groups and how it is also located in time.

The notion of a discourse community, often attributed to theorist Patricia Bizzell, has been productive for thinking about social groups and the language they choose to employ. Bizzell observed that the social and cognitive elements of language often reflect the values, abilities, and modalities of expression associated with distinctive collectives or subgroups. She found that college students’ most basic challenges—which had previously been ascribed to cognitive or linguistic issues—were attributable to their lack of familiarity with the writing conventions and the particular cognitive strategies associated with academia. A theory of

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79 Ibid.
language framed by the notion of a discourse community, Bizzell pointed out, makes evident the fact that multiple sets of language conventions and values exist, and that they interrelate in conflicting, sometimes hegemonic ways. James Porter noted the manner in which discourse communities can act as regulators of language, as well as the meanings and values embedded in modes of discourse. Porter defined a discourse community thus:

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\text{a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated...[The community] shares assumptions about what objects are appropriate for examination and discussion, what operating functions are performed on those objects, what constitutes } \text{"evidence" and "validity," and what formal conventions are followed.}^{82}
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Because of this direct link between communication, knowledge, and group activity, Porter offered that one of the best ways to understand a community is through examining its discourse.\(^{83}\)

This notion of discourse community is related to another: community of practice, coined by Etienne Lave and Jean Wenger, who argued that beyond the context of schooling, social groups have the capacity to produce and distribute knowledge.\(^ {84}\) Through close or repeated social interactions among members, specialized social groups create rich contexts for learning though socially situated identities. The disparate members of a community of practice, like the members of religious order or labor union, are drawn together under the notion of a shared interest or goal; they share a specific repertoire of communal resources, like governing rules, speaking styles, and learning methods, and materials, and in this manner produce community knowledge through social interaction. This perspective on learning and knowledge asserts that we need to recognize learning to be an act of engagement in communal activity and

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83 Ibid., 43.
part of changing patterns that reflect the ever-changing needs of a social group; in this manner it becomes evident that learning is neither an individual pursuit but a collective experience; equally, literacy learning is not limited to the site of the school.

Also contributing to the notion of community, James Paul Gee made the case that the practices associated with language and literacy are integrally connected with other aspects of a group’s culture.\footnote{James Paul Gee, “What is Literacy?” \textit{Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry}, 2 (Fall 1987): 3; \textit{See also Gee, The Social Mind: Language, Ideology, and Social Practice} (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992).} He used the term \textit{identity kit} to refer to the interrelated cultural “ways” that are associated with a particular group—its distinctive ways of “saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing.”\footnote{Gee, “What is Literacy?” 22; Gee as cited in Lisa Delpit, \textit{Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom} (New York: New Press, 1995), 153.} Social identification with particular discourses, like that of being an American, or a woman, a college student, or woman religious, for instance, often inspire not only language choices (vocabulary, genres of speech, and language choice) but also suggest a particular style of dress, body movement, posture, attitude, spirit, and so forth. Gee asserted that there are two principle types of discourse: primary and secondary; the former represents the ways of saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing that are acquired unconsciously over time or learned through one’s primary environment, the family.\footnote{Ibid., 25.} The latter, secondary discourses, are those acquired or learned through social institutions like the school, the workplace, or through the media or public gatherings.\footnote{Gee, “What is Literacy?” 23.} Gee’s concept of secondary discourses is key to understanding the social divisiveness embedded in the concept of literacy. “Literacy,” he theorized, “is control of the secondary uses of language (i.e., uses of language associated with secondary discourses). Because of this, learners from dominant (white, male, and middle class) culture benefit from the fact that their primary discourses are more closely aligned with
secondary discourses; they experience a greater sense of ease in gaining “full and effortless” control over secondary discourses. At the same time marginalized persons (non-whites, females, and the lower classes) must sometimes expend greater energy to achieve fluency in the secondary discourses. Difference created by race, gender, or class, can give rise to differences in rates of acquisition and conflicts between disparate discourse communities. Consequently, discourses are relational, multi-modal, and infused with social, moral, and ideological meanings derived from one position in relation to the values, practices, and viewpoints of oppositionally situated discourses. This notion of community invites us to see how humans invoke a whole range of discursive behaviors and values to service the multiple communities that they sometimes inhabit.

Literacy researchers have examined a wide range of literacy practices associated with particular communities and contexts. Some studies have focused on practices associated with schooling and the acquisition of academic literacy, such as those by Arthur Applebee, Anne Haas Dyson, H. Iredell, Kris Gutierrez, and Judith Langer.89 Others, such as Shirley Brice Heath’s 1982 classic Ways with Words, focused on the practices associated with home and family. Her study contrasted the practices associated with three cultural groups living in the same Piedmont community. Heath found that community socialization patterns (such as use of space for play, leisure literacy practices, and non-colloquial language use) were defining factors in determining academic success in schooling. “The different ways children learned to use language were dependent on the ways in which each community structured their families,

defined the roles that community members would assume, and played out their conceptions of childhood that guided child socialization.  

Heath also intimated the need to approach literacy from a holistic perspective, one integrative of both inside- and outside-the-head approaches. Home and community language patterns, literacy practices, and cultural use of space, Heath argued, were made manifest in the relationships between the mainstream teachers and their students. Mainstream students whose language, behavior, and expectation were more in accordance with their teacher’s social expectations experienced a level of comfort with school settings. Non-mainstream students, on the other hand, experienced a series of discontinuities arising from their lack of experience with the culture of schooling. Difficulties with language use were compounded by the classroom’s arrangement “into a world of lines, time blocks, and limits on space usage [which] emphasize the structuring, lessoning, and boundedness of knowledge.”  

Deborah Brandt’s 2001 study, *Literacy in American Lives*, which included a cross-generational study of a single family, highlighted the manner in which literacy has been acquired and experienced among disparate American communities across the generations. She gathered life histories of literacy learning and use from more than 80 Americans; her work underscored the role that race, class, and the changing economy have played in creating unequal levels of access to literacy instruction to Americans. Using the analytical framework “sponsors of literacy,” she posited the notion that literacy learning has always required “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract.” She identified *sponsors of literacy* as those who can offer “permission, sanction, assistance, coercion” or can supply contact with other sources of

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91 Ibid., 347.
93 Ibid., 19.
literacy.\textsuperscript{94} Brandt’s study demonstrated that the rising set of standards by which we continuously redefine literacy, with its new emphasis on technological literacies, has furthered the use of literacy as an instrument of social control and preservation of power.

Other scholars have examined the relationships between oral and written practices within specific discourse communities, such as Guerra’s (1998) inquiry set within a Mexicano community in Chicago, and Boggs, Watson-Gegeo, and McMillen’s study of Hawaiian students.\textsuperscript{95} Whereas many researchers have investigated practices as they occur today, others have studied practices of past times. For example, Gwen Gorzelsky recently traced the histories of literacy practices and their relationship to social movements in the Pittsburgh region during the 1930’s as well as in Civil War-era England.\textsuperscript{96} Judy Kalman studied scribes and their clients in Mexico City, past as well as present.\textsuperscript{97} Two recently published books report historical inquiries of the literate practices of African Americans: Jacqueline Royster Jones and Elizabeth McHenry. Royster’s treatment followed the history of black women’s literacy from the colonial era through the nineteenth century and used essays as data sources; McHenry studied free Blacks’ involvement in literacy societies in the antebellum North.

Within the research on literacy practices, attention is often given to power structures. Influential here is the critical theory associated with Paolo Friere and his colleagues and also of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Jurgen Habermas, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Judy Kalman, \textit{Writing on the Plaza: Mediated Literacy Practice Among Scribes and Clients in Mexico City} (New York: Hampton Press, 1998).
Critical theory is a tradition of thought which seeks to create a more equal society by raising consciousness of the power structures which perpetuate ignorance, racism, sexism, and poverty. Friere drew upon critical theory to formulate a critical pedagogy, a way of teaching and learning that linked the development of literacy among oppressed peoples with their liberation from the social structures and power relationships that create their reality. Inspired by the struggles of illiterate Brazilian peasants, Friere challenged the “banking” concept of education, one that treated learners as empty objects, waiting to be filled with knowledge offered by a teacher. To Freire, this model pointed to the manner in which schools and other taken-for-granted social institutions reproduce oppressive ideologies and socio-political structures that silence and dehumanize persons. Education, he theorized, must be thought of as “a practice of freedom” where the role of the educator was to enter into dialogue with students, sharing knowledge, learning from each other, and working collaboratively to name and change their reality.

Language, he argued, was key to human liberation; literacy in all its diverse forms: oral, written, dramatic, or pictorial, could be used to create a voice and to teach script illiterates a way of decoding socio-political structures. “Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name, the world, to change it.” However, Friere was pragmatic: though knowledge and literacy came in varied forms that deserved equal respect; access to the forms used by oppressors was critical to the project of liberation.

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99 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 81.
100 Ibid., 88.
The concept of power structures has been studied by other educational scholars.\(^\text{101}\) Brian Street gave portrayal to the manner in which literacy is embedded in power structures. He challenged what he termed “the autonomous” model of literacy, the perception of literacy as a fixed, politically neutral set of skills. Reading and writing, like other human cultural enterprises, are embedded in social, political, religious, and economic contexts. Drawing upon his field research conducted in Iran, Street uncovered the manner in which literacy skills can become obscured or “hidden” within communities by their religious contexts, though they prove useful and enabling in secular practices. Literacy, he argued is inherently “ideological” with multiple forms and uses. Peter McLaren, in his ethnographic study of education rituals in a Canadian Catholic school, pointed to the manner in which rituals pervade traditional learning environments and how crucial a role they play in conserving the values and beliefs of the dominant society. He noted how teachers and students engage in sometimes conflicting sets of ritual performances designed to socialize, inculcate, or resist each other.\(^\text{102}\) Through gestures, use of “sacred” spaces, and the rich, sometimes contradictory overlay of educational and religious symbolism, teachers controlled student’s behavior and inculcated the value of self-control and obedience; students offered resistance through unofficial acts, like telling jokes. McLaren advocated a critical pedagogy that utilizes a wide repertoire of behaviors including “bodily engagement and spontaneous drama”\(^\text{103}\) to vivify and add meaning to student’s learning experiences in schools. Sociocultural perspectives on literacy demonstrate how some of the most crucial aspects of literacy learning arise from context. In acknowledging literacy as

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\(^{101}\) See also Norman Fairclough’s treatment of power structures in *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989). She wrote about the need to “increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation” (ibid., 1).


\(^{103}\) Ibid., 230.
being both cultural and ideological, dynamic and multiple, and we gain a perspective which
draws into view a wider range of actions and influences to serve our search to better understand
literacy in the present and the past.

**Literacy as Spatial Activity**

Recently, another element has been added to the study of literate community practices:
that of *space*. Kevin Leander and Margaret Sheehy, following critical spatial theorist Henri
Lefebvre, have argued that space plays a critical role in the development of social practices,
political processes, and community formations. Lefebvre, drawing upon the ideas of
Foucault, Borges, Nietzsche, Marx, Hegel, and others, put forth the theory that space was
neither an empty void nor an invisible medium in which all other things come to pass, but is
instead a critically determinative aspect of human lived experience. He wrote,

> Spatiality is not only a product but also a producer and reproducer of the relations of
> production and domination, an instrument of both allocative and authoritative power.
> Class struggle, as well as other social struggles are thus increasingly contained and
> defined in their spatiality and trapped in its “grid.”

Most contemporary research and analyses of human activity, Lefebvre maintained, are limited
in that they reduce theoretical explorations to two dimensions of analysis: the temporal
(historicality) and the mental (sociality). In doing so, they appeared to absolve from theoretical
consideration the myriad ways in which concrete material reality gives shape, contour, texture,
dimension, motion, and inertia to our worlds and the manner in which they shape our ideas
about the world. In fact, the homes in which we live, the halls where we gather, and the
concrete objects which enable our actions and inspire our thoughts, all unite to form a socio-

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104 Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991); See also treatment of
spatial theory by Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*

105 Edward W. Soja, “The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a transformative retheorization” in *Social Relations
spatial landscape which situate our ideas, identities, and actions. Moreover, Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space was neither inert nor static, but dynamic, the product of actively shifting socio-political pressures and geo-temporal realities. Equally, spatiality could be a process, a means by which pressures could be applied to bring about change and/or impose social control. Giving proper attendance to the material and social spatiality of human life, Lefebvre argued, would lead to a critical re-examination of our fundamental understandings about our ways of saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing. A more balanced approach, integrative of the spatial, the temporal, and social, would restore the contradictions and complexity of lived experience to our interpretive frameworks.

Kevin Leander and Margaret Sheehy have applied Lefebvre’s “spatial turn” to the field of literacy studies and demonstrated how a critical spatial perspective has the potential to “ignite a radical reconfiguration of literacy studies and educational theory.”¹⁰⁶ I find their approach particularly useful for contemplating the meaning and uses of literacy in the lives of black women religious, a history that transports us to a time and a place where the boundaries of literacy learning and sponsorship were poignant and “real” in a material way. Like Lefebvre, they recognized spatial analysis as a new critical interpretive perspective that reintegrates the spatial with the social and the historical as mutual constructions, arrangements that disrupt the either/or dualism born of Cartesian logic. In their research Sheehy and Leander argued that spatial analyses can engage a powerful set of critiques that dissolve the divisive foreground/background duality and permit us to rethink the conventional boundaries of literacy.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
For one, they argued that material settings and concrete objects need to be regarded as more than backdrop to the site of real literate activity, but instead as an important component of a complex, dynamic, and ongoing process of connecting people with language. “When we use words, we are always situating ourselves; when we read contexts, we are always reading words and discursive relations extending into other space-times,” they wrote.\footnote{Ibid.} Observably, pamphlets, books, and libraries act as points of connection to other persons in the world and alternate ideas about the nature of the world; less apparent is the manner in which they themselves represent ideas about how and why to be literate. Indeed, discourse practices gain meaning and use in accordance with the society, place, and time in which they are enacted. Homes, churches, school playgrounds, and offices not only play host to activities, they connect participants to ideas, histories, memories, genres, codes of behavior, and other persons, real or fictive.

A second important critique Sheehy and Leander offered is that conventional notions of literacy fail to address the manner in which literacy practices also produce social space. Sheehy and Leander maintain:

While the immediate material tools of literacy (e.g., pencils, computer screens, document designs) have received some research attention, little work has been done . . . on the boundaries of literacy shaped by walls, desks, and neighborhoods, and on the way in which material participants in the world—such as bodies—become sites for the writing of myriad texts.\footnote{Sheehy and Leander, “Introduction,” 3.}

The practices can themselves produce texts of many forms, levels of engagement, and modalities of expression. Through the printed or scripted word, as well as through embodied action or architectural arrangements, literate acts can produce the material and social spaces required for their continuance. Where particular literate practices are forbidden or discouraged
due to oppressive ideology, resistive practices—like antebellum blacks learning to read in a slave cabin or prisoners composing poetry in a prison cell—can transform context and create new practices. In such cases, literate practices transform the literate body into both a sight (spectacle) and site (location) of literacy.

Two recent treatments of race and the spatial analysis of literacy have had a particular influence on this study. Kevin Leader and George Kamberelis have discussed the manner in which race adds complexity to spatial contexts by both producing and negating spaces. Leander drew upon Lefebvre’s notions of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, to discuss how spaces can become racialized and how identities are developed not only through narrative, but also through geography. His analysis of selected discourse segments among teachers and students revealed to how a learning community experienced “the ‘sediment’ of ongoing spatial histories.” Race and other associated ideologies “saturated the words, bodies, texts, practices, and classroom of the participants and their [identity] positioning practices,” yielding at once spaces of oppression and spaces for critical critique. Similarly, Kamberelis took up Deleuze and Guattari’s spatial metaphor of the rhizome to analyze how spatial-historical literacy formations can produce critical transformations. One point of focus of his discussion was the pattern of literacy formations taken up by antebellum blacks, noting that “Historically, resistant literacy practices have always been central forces within rhizomic formations of African Americans in their efforts to intervene in reality.” Literate practices like storytelling, quilt-making, the use of double-coded language, escape networks, and the foundation of clandestine schools were all central to creating a response to deprivations, especially literacy.

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111 Ibid., 8; “Reading Spatial histories of Position in a Classroom Literacy Event,” in Leander and Sheehy, Spatializing Literacy, 115-42.
disenfranchisements. Kamberelis wrote, “African Americans used aural, visual, and written literacies both to elevate their levels of learning and personal understanding and to create spaces for themselves within an otherwise arborescent society—closed, repressive, and racially violent.” He argued that these subversive spatial productions, streamed together, represent “lines of flight from the lived experience of slavery (and from slavery as an institution).”

Another form of response Kamberelis analyzed was the manner in which blacks joined together as “pack multiplicities” to produce spaces for literate practices through a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Where literacy practices were permitted but used to further their oppression, such as religion classes and within white church congregations, blacks joined together to reclaim those spaces and transform them for their own use. Almost invariably, the spaces they created were used for the purpose of asserting their full humanity: the equality of their social and corporeal bodies to that of whites, through print literacy development.

In sum, social and social-spatial theories of literacy have overturned the restricted, utilitarian interpretation of the term literacy. Theorizing literacy in the life of Henriette Delille and other black women religious requires a change in the way we imagine literacy—present and past. A fitting exploration and analysis requires identifying and critiquing the motivations for privileging one understanding of literacy over another, treating with skepticism those academic traditions which designate one voice more thoughtful, more literate, or intellectual than another. The notion of literacy I forward here is that of literacy as a wide-ranging set of abilities put to the service of communication, contemplative thought, and collective socio-

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113 Ibid.
political action. Literacy, in this broader view, is both context-driven and changing and imbued with cultural meaning and ideology. What literacy meant to black women religious in the nineteenth century and how it was used is a direct reflection of the agency, constraints, and literate purposes espoused by these women, in this era, and positioned at this locality.

To reiterate briefly, then, it is my thesis that, contrary to general representations of antebellum-era black women as being illiterate, unknowing, passive victims of white oppression, and beings without a public voice or role, free women of color religious of New Orleans self-organized in the name of literacy and used religious literacy in a conscious way to bring about societal change. In the chapters to follow I will answer the following questions:

1. What were the critical actions and events in the life history of Henriette Delille and in the institutional history of the SHF? What historical-socio-political contexts situate this knowledge?

2. How might literacy be theorized in the lives of Henriette Delille and Sisters of the Holy Family?

3. What was the formative nature of their community of practice, especially with respect to print literacy education? How do these formations inform our understanding of the antebellum black women’s roles in society?

**Organization**

In the following chapters I present and analyze literacy in the life and life work of Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family. The second chapter, “Sociocultural and Historical Contexts for Free Black Female Literacy Activism in Antebellum Black New Orleans” I explicate the cultural, religious, social and political contexts which situate the actions, thoughts, and experiences of Henriette Delille and the charter congregation. Here, it is
my contention that, while Louisiana’s broader, pre-Civil war milieu was a site of extraordinary cultural, biological, and political intermixture, the very concept of mixture relies fundamentally on the concept of divisions and boundaries. I describe the bounded social spaces from which Henriette Delille emerged, maintaining that free black women were both empowered and disabled by Louisiana’s colonial paradigm. The third chapter, “Literacy as a Communal Act: The Formative Years of Black Monastic Sponsorship in Antebellum New Orleans,” traces the genesis of the SHF congregation as a provisional monastic community, the Sisters of the Presentation. This chapter discusses how Henriette Delille’s social formation was discursive; community identities, values, roles, and meanings gave shape to an intensely literate congregational culture. The fourth chapter, “Literacy as a Spatial Act: Producing Sites/Sights for Black Literacy in Antebellum New Orleans” focuses on the order’s period of foundation and then expansion, and its relevancy for appreciating the meaning and uses of literacy by members of the monastic community. In “Literacy as a Humanizing Act: Fulfilling the Vision/Mission Through Schooling,” the fifth chapter, I present Delille’s augmentation of her pattern of literacy advocacy to establishment of a convent school. The final and sixth chapter, “Convergences: Re-imagining Literacy,” presents the overall themes and concludes the discussion, emphasizing Henriette Delille’s living legacy.
Chapter Two  
Sociocultural and Historical Contexts for Free Black Female Literacy Activism in Antebellum Black New Orleans

Significant Women

Four words were rarely applied to blacks within the canons of Southern history: literate, pious, knowledgeable, and influential. More rare were the occasions when these descriptive terms were applied to antebellum women of color. Yet, within the city of New Orleans, these words might have been justifiably applied to not one antebellum woman of color, but many. In truth, the geo-social spaces from which Henriette Delille emerged were those ascribed to the largest, most active community of free black women in the South: most of whom were literate, many of whom were well-cultivated, and a few of whom were stunningly wealthy. By 1840, there were 13,976 free black women in the state of Louisiana, with a concentration of 10,788 situated in the city of New Orleans.¹ Although New Orleans’ free black male society has received much scholarly attention in this recent era, apart from Marie Laveau, the noted voodoo queen, individual women of this class and this location largely have failed to garner the same scholarly level of interest.² Indeed, scholarly interest in free black women as a group is especially sparse.³ Alternately referred to by historians as free women of color, knowledge about their thoughts, experiences, and achievements have largely eluded serious attention by

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¹ New Orleans was a regional population hub for free black females. A population survey of states in the immediate area: Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, enumerated a total of 2,247 free black women. Historical Census Browser (University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html (for calculating population statistics pertaining to the free black female population for the census year 1840; accessed July 09, 2005).
² Marie Laveau (1783-1881) was a free black woman who amassed great social power as a Voodoo shaman. Barbara Rosendale Duggal, “Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen Repossessed,” in Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color, ed. Sybil Kein, 157-78 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 162.
³ As noted in the previous chapter, limited treatment was first offered by Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes in 1911. See Desdunes, Our People, Our History.
mainstream scholarship. Perhaps this trend may be attributable in part to the lack of local writers who were also nineteenth century free women of color—a clear consequence of lives circumscribed by the cult of domesticity. Patricia Hill Collins observed: “Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined.” 4 Because of this, knowledge of the society and the day-to-day practices of these women have been expressed largely through the perspectives of outsiders.5

In nineteenth-century American literature and history those perspectives fell in line with a race and gender ideology which denied the reality of the black women’s social roles in the community. Under slavery and during the Reconstruction period, popular representations of free black women remained tied (in varying degrees) to the racist iconography surrounding the African woman. Dominant discourses constructed blacks as subhuman beings: having bestial qualities which demanded white supervision and control; these included a lack of intellect, moral discipline, or even the will to survive, and for women this almost always led to conflicting representations of her as being both hypersexual and wily, and incapable of feeling to the point of being un-maternal, incapable of being victims of rape.6 Mixed race blacks were defined as unnatural entities; it was asserted that they, like mules, were incapable of biological reproduction, personal discipline or intellectual development. Southern literature has

5 A small group of Afro-Latin Creole women became published authors, but not until the late nineteenth century. They included educator Louisa Lamotte (?-1907), Helen Marie Joseph d’Aquain Allain (1832-1925), Alice Moor Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935) and Nathalie Populus Mello (n.d.).
6 Hazel Carby asserted that stereotyping black women served to disguise or mystify actual social relationships among black women and white men. Further, she maintains that this imagery and its function persists in the present. She wrote, “It is not an exaggeration to state that the formation of stereotypes of black female sexuality has been reproduced unquestioningly in contemporary historiography even where other aspects of the institution of slavery have been under radical revision.” Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21-22.
successfully channeled a strong and enduring image of Louisiana’s mixed race women in particular. From the late antebellum era through to the present, the historical presence of free women of color appears in a reduced and often caricatured form through the literary trope of the tragic mulatto. It is the iconic figure of the bi-racial or multiracial person whose life experiences are deeply impacted by his or her social and biological position between “opposing” sides of the racial divide. Commonly, she is imagined as an object of curiosity, pity, or even disdain.

Yet all available accounts underscore the fact that free black women were not only integral to the cultivation of a generation of exceptional male black artists, civil rights activists, and Reconstruction-era legislators, but also achieved exceptional accomplishments of their own. Despite the multiple circumscriptions owing to their positions at the intersection of race, gender, and class oppressions, they amassed collective agency, that is, visibility and power. As shall be detailed in sections below, a portion of the group acquired literacy, capital wealth, property, and influence as a consequence of their close, sometimes intimate, connections with the dominant class. Many of these women directed their agency toward the preservation of their families and communities. Most notably, despite a general lack of access to New Orleans’ public school system and most private academies, at least 590 antebellum free black girls in the

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parish of Orleans attended school in 1850 and 79% of the free black women were deemed literate.⁸

Through the strength of their level of participation in the Roman Catholic Church, nineteenth century free black women also became known for their religious devotions. They were a formidable presence in New Orleans’ Catholic chapels and churches. As far back as the eighteenth century, visitors to New Orleans’ urban churches remarked upon the fact that the church pews were filled chiefly with black women.⁹ “The people [attending Catholic mass], of whom ¾ [sic] at least were colored, & [sic] of those a very large majority were women,” one traveler observed in 1819, but observation likely applied also through the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ They were dominant figures in the central concerns of the Roman Catholic Church: approximately 90 percent of the baptisms of the city’s slaves and free people of color that occurred in 1842 were sponsored by women of African descent.¹¹ In fact, by mid-century black women and their families owned approximately half the pews in some of the city’s churches.¹² In these and other respects, the appearance of Henriette Delille as a pious black women and advocate for literacy was not exceptional, but rather indicative of the position and interests of free black women in antebellum society.

⁸ Historical Census Browser (University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html (for calculating education and literacy statistics pertaining to the free black female population for the census year 1850; accessed July 9, 2005).
⁹ While the enslaved were strong among attendees, I speculate that the composition of daily and weekly services were dominated by free black women. Because their overwhelming numbers, enslaved persons were commonly restricted to attending mass once a month, holy days of obligation, and special occasions, like baptisms, weddings, and funerals.
However, theirs was an intricately mapped, perilous world. The limited and difficult choices that they encountered on the path to self-realization as women, mothers, sisters, daughters of the church, and citizens—hence to personhood—would have been familiar to free black females in colonial French and Spanish slave regimes in St. Augustine, Natchitoches, Opelousas, Baltimore, Mobile, and Port-au-Prince.\(^\text{13}\) Most, but not all, stood apart in either appearance and/or attitude as bicultural or even tri-cultural women, a group composed of mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons, the measured descendents of French and Spanish colonizers and their African and Native American concubines.\(^\text{14}\) Basic survival for women of the free black class depended, in part, on an ability to care for their family while forging a better future in the awkward spaces between white privilege and chattel slavery. For example, as a group, free black women could own property and testify in court against a white person; however, an insult to a white person was a crime that resulted in a penalty of imprisonment.\(^\text{15}\)

Further, the romantic pursuits of free women of color were especially complicated by limited options. The free black class suffered from a low percentage of marriageable free black men. Across the slave states free black women outnumbered free black men by varying amounts, but in Orleans parish in 1830, there were 807 men between the ages of 24-35 compared with 1,498 women of the same age.\(^\text{16}\) To compound the complications, women of


\(^\text{14}\) Each of the following descriptive terms refers to the measure of African pedigree. The term *mulatto* technically referred to a person with one black and one white parent, *quadroon*, represented a person with one quarter black heritage, and *octoroon*, signified a person with one eighth, and so forth. For clarity and deep treatment of the nomenclature and identity politics of race in Louisiana, see Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

\(^\text{15}\) M. M. Robinson, *Digest of the Penal Law of the State of Louisiana*, (New Orleans: privately printed, 1842), 144.

\(^\text{16}\) Historical Census Browser (University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/ collections/stats/histcensus/index.html (for calculating population statistics pertaining to Louisiana and Maryland statistics for the census years 1830; accessed July 09, 2005).
color were barred by law from marrying white men and enslaved persons, although rarely such forbidden marriages did occur. Beginning in the eighteenth century, matriarchs of the community responded in an organized fashion: they arranged formal subscription dances for their daughters and nieces. There, at the Bal de Cordon Bleu, marriageable free black girls of every shade exhibited their assets (beauty, manners, ability to dance, and ability to converse in the discourses of the day) for the purposes of contracting plaçage agreements, extra-legal marriages with wealthy white males. Joan M. Martin explained:

Designed to facilitate the survival as a race, the Bal de Cordon Bleu was an elegant affair similar to a debutante ball. It was at these balls that the proud quadroons and other Creoles of color were reduced to presenting their daughters to wealthy white European men for the purpose of finding them a life partner. The affairs took place under tightly controlled circumstances with every modicum of decorum observed.  

Unions formed during these affairs were intended to last a lifetime, and many apparently did; some couples sought and obtained church sanction of these unions; however, many others evolved into problematic entanglements—“second families”—when the white “spouses” took a legitimate white wife.

Further still, the possibility of becoming a chattel slave was a fixed image in a free black woman’s imagination. A sympathetic foreign traveler, the German Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, observed that free black women remained subject to the whim of whites and in particular, as objects of scorn of white women:

Their status is nevertheless always very depressed. They must not ride in the street in coaches . . They must never sit opposite a white lady, nor may they enter a room

17 The Bal de Cordon Bleu, Martin writes, was not to be mistaken with the notorious quadroon balls, which were cheaper, looser, less reputable, versions of the same idea. Joan M. Martin, “Placage and the Louisiana Gens de Couleur Libre: How Race Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color,” in Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color, ed. Sybil Kein, 57-70 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 65.
without express permission. The whites have the right to have these unfortunates whipped like slaves for infractions for which there are two witnesses.\(^{18}\)

Free black women and men endured a constant sense of threat about their freedom. They knew that they could be remanded to the state of chattel slavery in response to the whim of powerful whites at any time. Numerous laws offered judges the latitude to remand an erring free black to a term of enslavement. Free black persons also were required to remain vigilant due to the context of widespread activity by illicit slave pirates.\(^{19}\) Their freedom came at the expense of walking softly and carefully through a complex geo-social landscape. In this light, the state of affairs of free black women was clear: *les femmes de couleur libre* were not slaves, but neither were they truly free. In the words of Kimberly Hanger, “Their was an intricate, ambiguous place.”\(^{20}\) Indeed, central to understanding Henriette Delille and her vision is depiction of the genesis of the intricate and ambiguous geo-social spaces occupied by free black women during the antebellum period.

Henriette Delille’s emergence during the 1830s as a leader and sponsor of black literacy was the culmination of multiple complex routes to freedom, consciousness, literacy, and agency powerfully brought forth by free and bonded black women and their allies for generations. In the sections to follow, I discuss three major forces which converged to produce their heightened level of activism for literacy: the social inertia of Louisiana’s uniquely large and vigorous free black class, the development of female piety and religious educative

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\(^{19}\) “Louisiana's slave system placed all free people of color at risk for being kidnapped and sold as slaves. At any moment their freedom could be snatched away, perhaps forever.” Judith Kelleher Schafer. *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 116.

imperatives in Louisiana’s Catholic Church, and free black Catholic women’s access to, and agency for, education in the nineteenth century. Assimilated, these three lines show how Henriette Delille’s vision for literacy was supported by a convergence of social-spatial contingencies and potentialities.

**Immiscible Bodies: Les Gens de Couleur**

An understanding of Henriette Delille and her vision requires knowledge of the coupling of Latin colonial slave codes with African vibrancy which aided in creating an entire class of unbonded blacks with unique freedoms and long-term access to literacy. The social and material inertia of this community emanated from a complex arrangement of interpersonal, intellectual, economic, and political vigor in which its members engaged. As a result, self-conservancy and the quest for equality served to shape and inform Henriette Delille’s worldview, values, and attitudes towards literacy. New Orleans, the bustling port city of her birth and context of her life’s work, was the location of the largest, most literate black population in the South. Prior even to the antebellum period, a sparse few had the benefit not only of acquiring rudimentary script literacy, but also had access to advanced literacy development through formal schooling, global travel, and direct exposure to the revolutionary idea of their equality with whites. Jean Houzeau, a contemporary, wrote in 1872:

> Before the suppression of slavery, there were twenty thousand persons of African descent in Louisiana who were free. For most of them this status had been inherited from three or four generations. The French settlers had been more generous than the American. Many of these free persons of color lived in financial ease. Even though almost all liberal professions and public offices were closed to them, they were able to engage in commerce and agriculture. A few had acquired fortunes. Hence, since schools at all levels were without exception closed to colored children, who were never to find themselves on an equal footing with white children, the rich and well-to-do families sent the young people of African blood to the schools of Paris and London, where many distinguished themselves. These educated men, whose intelligence had been developed not only by study but by travel and knowledge of foreign countries as well, shuddered at the thought of themselves being rejected and scorned. Having been
exposed to the liberal institutions of France and England, and having enjoyed civil equality, they chafed under the galling and iniquitous yoke of [inferior status under] the Code Noir. 21

Over time, each subsequent generation of free blacks followed suit by exercising a clear appetite for literacy learning and development, reflecting the perception that literacy education was the key to conserving or even elevating their status. New Orleans soon became home to what David Rankin ascertained to be “the most sophisticated and exclusive free colored community in the antebellum South.” 22 Records featured by the U.S. census bear witness to the exceptionality of Henriette Delille’s community of origin. A few short years after Thomas Jefferson signed the Louisiana Purchase in 1805, New Orleans’ free black community celebrated a fifteen-fold increase in number. 23 From an initial count of ninety-nine souls in 1769, the population grew to 1,566. 24 By 1840 the free black population reached 15,072, a twenty-five fold increase statistic that shadowed over the enumeration in neighboring free black counties such as Mobile, Alabama, with 787 free blacks, and Adams, Mississippi, with a mere 283 free black persons. 25 Remarkably, census accounts depict a highly literate community. In 1850—the first year in which the U.S. Census Bureau measured free black

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23 The Louisiana Purchase transferred Louisiana from France to the United States. It was signed in Paris by Robert Livingston, James Monroe, and Barbé Marbois on April 30, 1803.
25 Historical Census Browser (University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/ collections/stats/histcensus/index.html (for calculating population statistics pertaining to Louisiana and Maryland statistics for the census years 1850 and 1860; accessed July 09, 2005);
literacy—over 77 percent of the free black persons in Orleans Parish free black residents were assessed as being literate (see table 2.1). The sole numerically comparable free black community, located in Baltimore County, Maryland achieved roughly a 65 percent literacy rate. Further, David Rankin’s study of literacy among the male reconstruction leaders of New Orleans positively identified only two of 201 members who were illiterate during the Civil war period, noting that “even the ex-slaves among their number were literate.”

Beyond the limited litmus test of whether they could read and write, the highly literate status of free blacks of New Orleans was verified in other ways. Census statistics indicated that this group was engaged to an extraordinary degree in trades requiring a formal education: at least twenty percent were engaged on a daily basis in occupations such as bookkeepers, apothecaries, doctors, lawyers, merchants, printers, music instructors, students, and school teachers. The U.S. Census of 1850 paused to note that, whereas one in fifty-five free black New Yorkers were employed in trades requiring an education, one in eleven black New Orleanians were similarly engaged. The question, What set free blacks of Louisiana, particularly New Orleans, apart? demands an answer. The main difference, argued Ira Berlin, was “the eighty year head start under relatively favorable conditions. . . .” While the seaboardslave states had but shallow roots in the colonial years, Louisiana freemen had secured their

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26 For a fuller description of the literary achievements of Louisiana’s free black community during the antebellum period, see Charles Barthelemy Rousseve, The Negro in Louisiana: Aspects of His History and His Literature (New Orleans: Xavier University Press, 1937). In 1850, literacy rates for Belgium, France, and Great Britain were respectively, 53, 58, and 62 percent. Even decades later, national literacy rates did not reach the level of free blacks in antebellum New Orleans. The French achieved 78 percent in 1890 and Great Britain achieved 83 percent in 1880. Italy and Spain did not achieve 80 percent literacy rates until the mid-twentieth century, and Portugal not until 1980. Gabriel Tortella, “Patterns of Economic Retardation and Recovery in South Western Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” The Economic History Review, 47, (1994): 11.


### Table 2.1 Literacy-Related Statistics for Free Blacks in Orleans Parish, the State of Louisiana, and the County of Baltimore, Maryland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Data 1850&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Orleans Parish</th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
<th>Baltimore County, MD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Free Blacks of School Age (5-14)</td>
<td>2,328</td>
<td>6,165</td>
<td>4,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Blacks Attending School</td>
<td>1,008</td>
<td>1,219</td>
<td>1,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Free Black Population</td>
<td>9,961</td>
<td>17,462</td>
<td>29,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Blacks Over the Age of Twenty</td>
<td>6,144</td>
<td>9,052</td>
<td>15,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate Free Blacks Over the Age of Twenty</td>
<td>2,279</td>
<td>3,389</td>
<td>9,318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Rate&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>64.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Historical Census Browser (University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center), http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/ collections/stats/histcensus/index.html (for calculating population statistics pertaining to Louisiana and Maryland statistics for the census years 1850 and 1860; accessed September 9, 2005); U.S. Bureau of the Census, Seventh Census; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Eighth Census.

<sup>a</sup>Census statistics regarding the size of the free black community and free black rates of literacy are not totally reliable and likely represent an undercount. Innumerable free blacks did not necessarily identify themselves as being black to census takers, thus were counted among whites or foreigners. Further, according to slave literacy historian Janet Cornelius, freed women’s literacy was not fully interrogated and freed slaves may have not been willing to admit the fullness of their abilities due to residual fears about persecution from their former masters. Janet Cornelius, *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 7-10.

<sup>b</sup>Rate calculated in accordance with census reporting methods; the percent of free black literates was determined by dividing number of literates by the total number of free blacks in the population. Alternate literacy rates exclude persons over the age of twenty, but by this measure exclude school-aged literates and literate young adults.
place in the social order of the Gulf region.”

From the strength of an early foundation, Louisiana’s free black women and men established what I term *social inertia*, an interpersonal, intellectual, economic, and political pattern of vigor which is analogous to the notion of inertia engaged in the mechanical sciences. Social inertia allowed Louisiana free people of color to work collectively to resist negative changes in their status, while promoting forward advance. It was a tendency, even a social property or characteristic, which enveloped the lives of free women of color and gave direction to a young Henriette Delille.

**Ethnogenesis**

From an inauspicious beginning in 1699 on the shores of Biloxi, Mississippi, the “Island of Louisiana,” became an island of paradox. Upon landing, French colonizers and settlers brought ashore Cartesian proclivities for ordering thought and society through rigid systems of classification. Inspired by seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, leading thinkers, politicians, and religious advocates explained the nature of humanity, the world and the cosmos in terms of opposing binaries: mind versus body, male versus female, white versus black, good versus bad, Christian versus pagan, and so forth. In French, then Spanish Louisiana, as with English colonies along the eastern seabord, these notions were welcomed as gifts of control, security, and a sense of authority—prized attributes for a worldview fraught with strange and chaotic imaginings of the world that lay beyond the boundaries of Europe. New arrivals were taught to view themselves as a group distinct from

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31 French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) and his ideas were promoted through the following works: *Discours de la méthode (Discourse on Method) in Essais philosophiques* (Philosophical Essays), 1637; *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (Meditations on First Philosophy, 1641; revised 1642) and *Principia Philosophiae* (The Principles of Philosophy, 1644). Rene Descartes, *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
and superior to brown-skinned, so-deemed *ethnic* peoples of the world; consequently, whites were established as the norm while all others were relegated to a category signifying *other* (than fully human). In this manner, the notion of race and racial apartheid came into being. Through propagation, it was hoped, European peoples—once kept apart by world geography—would continue to remain separate and uncontaminated by the bloodlines of Africans.

However, the firm template of European colonization failed to reproduce clean, clear lines of demarcation on the soft, yielding terrain of the Mississippi Delta. The French (1699-1740) and Spanish (1740-1803) colonial periods gave rise to a racially and culturally mixed, or *creolized* milieu composed largely of African and Latin Catholic components. In Louisiana, particularly within the capital of New Orleans, Native American, African, and European persons interacted and intermixed on the rich, alluvial plain in a manner that contradicted Western racial ideology. The doctrines and philosophies which had been so effective in conserving rigid notions of race in Anglo American colonial cities along the Eastern seaboard failed, to the discomfort of ruling politicians. The development fostered the emergence of a middle space, a legal category and social caste for unbonded blacks, a group whose biological and cultural ties to both Africa and Latin society positioned them to become at once lightning rods and cultural mediators between white colonizers and enslaved persons of color.

Scholars of the history of slave regimes have long debated the premises of this unique development. Notably, Frank Tannenbaum and Stanley Elkins studied the contrasts between America’s differing regimes and derived an analysis with an *idealist* perspective. They insisted that the formal institutions of the colonial society (laws, organizations, and traditions) exerted the greatest influence on the nature of the slave society and race relations between free blacks
and whites with regimes. Recent historical analysis by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall approached the matter differently, assuming a perspective which integrated social context and material conditions of colonial dynamics. Rather than focusing purely on Latin colonial systems of governance and official institutions, Hall argued for a construct of the development of race relations to represent the powerful forces presented by the colonized groups and their environs. Hall asserted that Native Americans and African persons not only built and sustained the colony through labor, but also shaped the formation of an Afro-Latin Catholic cultural milieu. Through quantitative analysis of ship records, census documents, and first-hand colonial reports, Hall pointed to the fact that social, religious, and political laws fell subject to geographic, biological, and demographic realities. French colonists and settlers apparently existed in a tangible state of dependency with Native American tribes and then later, with Africans. The reach of the law, she observed, had limits.

In French Louisiana, there was a long period of chaos and violence. These conditions selected the most plastic, open, flexible elements from among distinct cultures of red, white, and black peoples who met and mingled. Almost constant warfare and frequent famine subjected acquired beliefs and standards of behavior to enormous stress. The shift from French to Spanish and then to American rule did not allow for a stable model of behavior and belief that could be enforced by the larger social structure.

Cultural amalgamation first began when, during times of famine, early colonial officials sent their starving soldiers and settlers to cohabitate with Native American nations in their local villages. The process was enhanced when colonial men formed relationships with indigenous

34 The term Latin is used here to refer to colonial cultural discourses in the French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian traditions, with connoting also Vatican or Roman Catholic socio-linguistic tendencies.
35 Hall, Africans, xiv.
36 Ibid., 12.
women. White women, it turned out, were in short supply among the early colonists, and those who did arrive from France suffered high mortality rates. “In order to populate the colony,” wrote Father Henri Roulleaux de La Vente, in 1714, it will be necessary “to permit marriages between Frenchmen and Catholic Indian women.”

When the population of Native American persons declined due to escapes and high mortality rates, Africans were imported to the Louisiana colony by John Law and the Company of the Indies in vast numbers. A second stage of the process of cultural and genetic creolization then began when men, women, and children of the Senegalese/Gambian region of West Africa were kidnapped, enslaved, and transported to the Louisiana territory. Soon after, Hall asserted, the challenging frontier environment of the colony of Louisiana permitted Louisiana to become “thoroughly Africanized.” Creoles, those European and African descendents who could claim to be born in the New World, émigrés and newly arrived African slaves closely intermingled and created a rich new culture. Through this process West African cultural literacies, like Bambara language, orature, music, the Yoruba religion, rice agriculture, and metal-smithing, for example, became incorporated in the chiefly French colonial milieu.

The fullness of the intermixture Hall described is evidenced by the creation of an Afro-French Creole language. Spoken only by slaves at first, the language quickly became the linguistic choice among the free, upper class whites included. For many, the language of their African wet-nurses, playmates, and maids was the only language they knew through their early years of childhood. Religion was affected analogously; during this early period African religious culture (beliefs, vocabulary, cosmology, wisdom traditions, and sacred orature)

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38 Hall, Africans, 5.
39 Ibid, 12.
melted into Roman Catholicism. Scholars noted that Voodoo, a repository of the points of
syncretism between the ancient Yoruba ideological and magical systems and Roman
Catholicism, became a part of popular religious discourses, if not practices. Laurie Wilkie
wrote: “Through time, the African God and the Catholic saint became interchangeable and
recognized the same” by persons of color and many whites. Africans were frequently called
upon by whites to make their gris gris charms and to employ African healing arts (which were
integrative of religious beliefs) in their service.

There were several features of West African culture that aided its potency and
resilience across the Middle Passage and through eighteenth century patterns of
colonialization. For one, Africans had strength in number. By the time the first systematic
census was taken in 1747, people of African descent, bond or free, represented a clear majority
within Louisiana’s colonial population: 4,730 blacks lived in subjugation to a mere 3,200
whites. Second, the character and composition of the black community represented another
social force. French enslavers were politically restricted to the Louisianan French colonial
concession, that is, their designated territory for procuring Africans. During the eighteenth
century, those persons who were enslaved by Louisiana officials and traffickers were limited to
the Senegambian region of West Africa. Within this territory lived diverse cultural groups
belonging to the Mande peoples, a group of tribes bound not only by geographical space, but
also by common ancestry, world-view, and systems of belief. The restriction of enslavement to
them, asserted Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, was ultimately beneficial to the formation of group
cohension and cultural resilience, even vibrancy.

41 Hall, Africans, 163.
42 Ibid., 9.
Almost all the black slaves brought to Louisiana under French rule came directly from Africa within a twelve-year period and quickly became a substantial majority of the population. . . . The high mortality in the African slave trade in Louisiana ... did not result in fragmentation and demoralization but instead facilitated the emergence of a particularly coherent, functional, well-integrated autonomous, and self-confident slave community.43

Remarkably, the historical record also shows that Africans taken from this area were exposed to script and had the potential to be readers and writers. Members of the Mandinga nation, the dominant group in the area, had newly converted to Islam, thus were compelled by religious principles to teach Arabic to adherents, by means of religious scribes. The result became a rudimentary system of public education. According to an early eighteenth-century account by Father Labat (paraphrased by Hall),

They [the Mandigas] were polite, fine, witty, and clairvoyant. Almost all of them could read and write. They had public schools where Marabout [Islamic holy men] taught the children to read and write the Arab language, and they used Arabic characters to write the Mandinga language. These schools were in session only for several hours before dawn. The Marabout made their living by teaching the children.44

Although the Mandiga acquired a written tradition, the larger component of Africans imported to Louisiana were from the Bambara nation. The Mandinga released their subordinates, the Bambara into the hands of European slavers first. The latter neither read nor wrote script, but were literate in other ways. The collective wisdom of the Bambara was preserved through extensive orature: narratives of the tribal courts, songs for hunting, an encyclopedia of proverbs, and a remarkable beast fable tradition.45 The Bre’er Rabbit stories made famous by Joel Chandler Harris were, in fact, Anglicized recordings of Senegambian orature.

43 Ibid., 159-60.
44 Ibid., 38.
45 The Louisiana folktales of the Senegambian were collected and presented as Br’er Rabbit tales by Joel Chandler Harris. Hall, Africans, 194.
Bambara literacy extended to critical eighteenth-century technologies. Contrary to popular historical accounts, the people of West Africa who were trafficked to the colony were not randomly herded onto ships, as commonly depicted, but instead were chosen. In opposition to the notion of the slave as a tabula rasa, or empty slate, West Africans were selected for slavery because of their particular attitudes, knowledge, talents, and acquired skills. Hall maintained that slave traffickers were cognizant of the location of knowledgeable and skilled African tribespersons living within their concession. For example, many men were taken from regions known for excellence in smithing metal. Their handiwork later became the trademark French Quarter ironwork. Others groups were identified as having knowledge of the art/technology of weaving cotton into cloth, preparing healing medicines, navigation and boat building. Prime were those taken from regions who retained agricultural knowledge—a technology or literacy that was vital to the survival of the colony. Hall pointed to the fact that all of the major crops of eighteenth-century Louisiana—indigo, cotton, and rice—had been farmed indigenously in this region of West Africa.

West African culture was preserved in Louisiana in a number of ways. For one, Louisiana’s colonial Latin slave culture did not strip newly enslaved Africans of their culture in the same manner as did Anglo slave regimes. It was common in Latin domains for slave traffickers and owners to permit the enslaved to use their African names, retain identification

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46 Innumerable Louisiana historians, both early and contemporary, failed to attribute to Africans their contribution to Louisiana’s culture. I offer two relevant examples. In 1940, historian John S. Kendall reproduced the general perception that Africans bore no intrinsic value to Louisiana. He described the selection of slaves in terms of a “a project of rounding up of Negroes, like cattle,” referred to dead African slaves as “empty bottles,” and insisted blacks gained functional value only when properly trained as laborers and domestic, vocations he claimed they were “best fitted to fill.” He concluded as follows: “People bought slaves for the same reason they nowadays buy stocks and bonds—as an investment. Widows and minors were particularly fond of putting their money into this kind of property.” John S. Kendall, “New Orleans’ Peculiar Institution,” The Louisiana Historical Quarterly 23, no. 3, (July 1940): 5-10. In another example, Alcée Fortier, wrote Hall, “went to great lengths to trace [Afro-Creole] folktales to medieval France.” Hall, Africans, 193. Alcée Fortier, “Bits of Louisiana Folklore,” Transactions of the Modern Language Association, III (1887): 100-168.

according to their nations or tribes, speak in their native languages, propagate African folklore, and continue to worship in a manner consistent with African religions. The power of this attitude of cultural permissiveness is attested to by the fact that New Orleans’ officials maintained Bambara interpreters in their slave courts well into the nineteenth century. In this manner the colonial slave regime aided in preserving West African ways of knowing, believing, acting, and being literate.

Material and social culture notwithstanding, the vibrancy and resilience of West African culture—with its strengths, depths, and range of modalities of expression—were also preserved by adherence to French, then Spanish colonial laws known as black codes. In Latin colonial domains, these were the Spanish Las Siete Partidas, written in 1281 by Alfonso X el Sabio and French King Louis XVI’s Le Code Noir, written in 1685, and later revised for Louisiana in 1724. The colonial slave system codified by these documents was undeniably harsh and degrading: it authorized the institution of human bondage and ordered that blacks never think themselves equal to whites. However, many scholars have argued that they had also liberal or positive aspects, as compared to Anglo slave regimes. For example, colonial-era slaves were entitled by law to humane treatment, proper nourishment, and clothing. The black codes afforded them access to a special slave court to file complaints of cruelty or neglect by their masters. Every slave was guaranteed the right to religious instruction and the right to

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48 Recent scholarship has begun to refute colonialist tendencies in historic and contemporary representations of African ethnic identity. For a fuller, more critical treatment of the notions of cultural identity with regard to the Bambara of West Africa and the general notion of an African tribal identity, see Jean-Loup Amselle, Mestizo Logics Anthropology of Identity in Africa and Elsewhere, trans. Claudia Royal (California: Stanford University Press, 1997).

49 France, Regulations, Edicts, Declarations and Decrees concerning the Commerce, Administration of Justice, and Policing of Louisiana and the French Colonies in America Together with the Black Code, Olivia Blanchard, (trans.), Louisiana Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University), 373. The Spanish Code, Las Siete Partidas of 1681 introduced a number of positive rules or rights for the enslaved, including coartación, the right to self-purchase. The Louisiana Supreme Court continued to use elements of the Spanish code well into the twentieth century— as late as 1924. See Hanger, Bounded Lives, Bounded Places, 25.
observe the Holy Sabbath. This meant they could not be pressed to labor on Sundays and had permission to attend church regularly, on religious holidays, and for special rites, such as baptisms. Remarkably, the code ordered that male slave owners marry enslaved women whom they impregnated. (With the revision to the code in 1720, this article of the law was removed). Black codes also enabled some Africans to maintain a traditional family social structure. Apart from the slave trafficking patterns engaged in by Anglophone slave colonies, Louisiana’s black codes forbade breaking apart family units, husband from wife, or children from parents—at least until the enslaved child reached the age of 14. However, exceptions could be filed in court. Thus, in the early slave colonial regime it was not uncommon for entire nuclear families to live together on the same plantation. In some cases, extended kinship networks were maintained whereby the youngest members had steady contact with parents and even elders (usually female).

Two other articles of the colonial black codes stand apart in that they survived the transition to American governance. Both Louisiana’s colonial and state law honored Le Code Noir in the manner in which the code created a separate and distinct legal classification for blacks who had been freed, les gens de couleur libre. Under French, Spanish, and later American governance, legal codes made allowance for manumission, the act of awarding freedom to an enslaved person, and together with the Underground Railroad, this route was used to lead thousands of black persons out of slavery. Liberty was commonly awarded to slaves who demonstrated loyalty to the owner by saving a family member’s life or decades of good service. Others earned recognition for valour in battle. However in Louisiana, due to a high prevalence of racial mixing, bloodlines were a leading factor in the creation of the largest group of educated free blacks in the Lower Southern states. As mentioned above, intimate
relations between Europeans and Africans—planned, coerced or/and romantic—were actively pursued to sustain the French colony. These métissage relationships motivated white men to seek avenues to liberty for their Native American and African lovers and mixed race progeny. Rarely did these relationships lead to marriage. However, in such cases, the free women of color joined white women as equals in their ability to lawfully obtain and control great wealth and property. Jennifer M. Spear wrote,

> Inheritance and marriage in French Louisiana were governed by the metropolitan Coutume de Paris, a codification of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century laws that limited the rights and prerogatives of married women yet granted widows a great deal of discretion over their husbands’ property, especially when compared to their counterparts in the British North American colonies. Under the Coutume, a widow was entitled to receive half of her husband's estates, and, if there were no children, all of the property acquired during the marriage went to her collateral heirs, rather than her husband's.51

When the métissage relationship was not legitimized though civil or sacramental vows, which was more often the case, the bi-racial, or tri-racial children began life as free blacks or chattel slaves, depending on the status of the mother. This development followed accordance with Article thirteen of the 1685 Code Noir which decreed that “the children, boys and girls, will follow the status of the mothers, and be free as she is . . . and if the mother [is a] slave, the children are also slaves.”52 However, a clear pattern was established in Louisiana whereby the steady stream of mixed-race or, in the vernacular of the day, mulatto slave children who were produced through métissage relationships were lawfully or de facto emancipated by their

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50 The European population dwindled due to desertion from the colony and high mortality rates for white women, (the early colonies were largely devoid of French white women). In 1714 Father Henri Roulleaux de La Vente wrote, "In order to populate the colony [we need] to permit marriages between Frenchmen and Catholic Indian women." La Vente, Mémoire sur la conduite des François dans la Louisiane, 1713 or 1714, Archives des Colonies, Correspondance Général, Paris (microfilm copies at The Historic New Orleans Collection), C13a, 3:390 Archives des Colonies, (microfilm copies at The Historic New Orleans Collection), quoted in Spear, “Colonial Intimacies”: 75.

51 Spear, “Colonial Intimacies,”¶ 22.

52 France, Regulations, 374.
“natural” white fathers. In numerous cases both the mother and children were thereafter bequeathed large sums of money and property. Following these and numerous other routes to liberty, the free black population grew and gained a place in society, in part due to its acquisition of inherited wealth, land, and property—including slaves—through familial ties with white colonists.

The French version of the Le Code Noir created multiple ways for slaves to be freed who were not directly engaged in métissage relationships. Some routes to liberty required a slave’s initiative, labor, or acts of ingenuity. Slaves who fought in the name of the colony in wars against Native American tribes, the British, or against insurgent slaves were frequently offered freedom in return for loyal service. Liberty or franchise could also be obtained by decree of law or through purchase of one’s market price. That avenue was more exploitable than similar laws in other slave regimes because the enslaved in Louisiana had the unique right to be hired out and earn income; this coupled with their right to buy their own freedom led to thousands of black persons gaining manumission papers. Once freed, the seventeenth and eighteenth century edicts of the King of France awarded them “franchise” and assured them that they now possessed

The same rights, privileges, and immunities enjoyed by free-born persons, so that the merit of an acquired freedom might produce in them, for their persons as well as for their possessions, the same benefits that the happiness of nature freedom gives to our other subjects.

These rights did include the right to purchase a slave and then sponsor her or his enfranchisement. As more enslaved men and women became free, many discovered creative ways to raise money to purchase the freedom of their family members, love interests, and extended

53 Spear, “Colonial Intimacies,” ¶ 82.
54 France, Regulations, Edicts, Declarations and Decrees, 375.
Louisiana blacks did so in appreciable numbers and the females among them excelled in this accomplishment. Historian Kimberly Hanger found that during the Spanish period, the period of greatest activity with regard to seeking manumission, free black women demonstrated the greatest agency. “Within almost every avenue to freedom females outnumbered males roughly two to one.” This pattern of activity led to not only a strong presence for free black women, but also a matriarchal social structure for many black families living in freedom. Louisiana’s antebellum black codes not only permitted but furthered the existence of the class, but ensured its growth by allowing enslaved persons not only to continue to contract for their freedom but also to sue in court for their freedom. The consistency on the part of Louisiana colonial and state officials in honoring these two articles created a steady stream of Africans and mixed-race Afro-Europeans that had the right to remain in the state. In this manner black codes aided in creating a growing class of blacks who had the ability to act, think, believe, worship, create knowledge, and be literate outside the surveillance and control of a white master.

However, typical of Louisiana, the lines of demarcation between groups blurred; the free and unfree black castes mixed. Free black families and extended kinship groups were composed of members living both as bond and free. Some les gens du couleur libre went to work in the fields on plantations beside their enslaved spouses, siblings, or relatives. Sometimes, entire family groups moved from slave to free status instantly, or within a short

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55 Louisiana freed black women frequently became street vendors, most notably confectioners and brewers of coffee. Mary Gehman wrote that the public coffee house tradition in New Orleans, in whose legacy lies Café de Monde, was begun by a freed woman of color in the 1800s. Eventually, she wrote, “dozens of small, portable coffee stands were erected, “each managed by a free woman of color.” Mary Gehman, *Women and New Orleans: A History* (New Orleans: Margaret Media, 1988), 56.
time, while others were freed over decades, or even across generations. With cohesive family units existing across the spread of both bonded and free groups, the ethnic Bambaran ways of acting, speaking, knowing, thinking, believing, relating to one another, and being literate, were preserved and promulgated throughout the black community. A black community was created which was permeated with a gumbo of traditions, languages, beliefs, and literacy practices.

**Race and Literacy**

Close examination of the edicts which comprise French King Louis XVI’s *Le Code Noir* pertaining to slaves and education suggests that many Louisiana colonials and governmental officials who were loyal to the institution of slavery also demonstrated a willingness to break across boundaries and rechalk the lines of literacy. Revealed are not only links between literacy, race, gender, and freedom, but also sex and burial traditions. Foremost, the Edict of 1685 (as well as 1724) mandated religious education of the enslaved.

> All the slaves who will be in our islands shall be baptized and instructed in the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion. We order the inhabitants who will buy newly arrived negroes to notify the governor and intendant of the said islands within eight days, at the latest, under penalty of an arbitrary fine; necessary order shall be given to have them instructed and baptized at the proper time.\(^{59}\)

The code insisted that a dignified burial would only be afforded to the converted, thus spurring the motivation for enslaved persons to join the faith. Otherwise, it was written, “those who die without baptism shall be buried at night in some field near the place of their demise.”\(^{60}\)

Religious literacy instruction offered during this era was likely conducted by Catholic priests and women religious working in the French colonies.\(^{61}\) Religious instruction in these catechism settings first included rudimentary instruction in reading. Interpreted in this manner, *Le Code*


\(^{61}\) Indeed, these laws demonstrate a strong element of coercion in Catholic proselytizing; Africans’ belief in the importance of an honorable and respectful burial undoubtedly became a motivating factor for submission to Catholic conversion.
Noir may actually have served as a pro-literacy force. As later discussions will demonstrate, this edict was appropriated by free blacks and white women religious to ameliorate the conditions of slavery and abate the sense of absolute control brought by the more anxious, less liberal slave regime which came into being during the American period.

Second, links between literacy, race, and liberty are straightforwardly expressed in *Le Code Noir*. The fifty-first article of the 1724 code declared that “slaves who have been named by their masters [to serve as] tutors for their children, be held and recognized as enfranchised, as we hold and recognize them”\(^62\) Later edicts testify to a troubling pattern whereby slaveholders aggressively sought out education for certain of their slaves (presumed here to be blood relations) by sending them abroad for, ostensibly, religious education. From the point of view of colonial officials in France, a problem arose when slaveowners allowed their slaves to remain abroad for extended periods of time, or even permanently, thereby depleting the total population of slaves. An edict issued from Versailles in 1738 expressly discouraged this development and warned of its possible consequences. It was written, “Several planters wished to send some of their slaves to France, to be confirmed and instructed in the exercises of religion. . . . [we fear] that most of the negroes form habits and a spirit of independence which might bring troublesome results.”\(^63\) A series of laws were written to discourage the practice by setting limits on the duration of slaves’ educational travel, but no law was written to forbid the general practice of sending enslaved persons outside the colony for the purposes of education. This limited response may have been due to the inability to police the slaveholder’s practices in this regard; nonetheless, the colonial law points to a pattern of discontinuity or slippage in the colonial paradigm toward black education for some enslaved persons.

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Looking through the lens of history, one hundred years hence, it is safe to say the lawmakers’ concerns had some merit; educated blacks returned to the colony and brought with them habits of thoughts and action and a yearning for greater equality back at home. The early colonial practice of white slaveholders educating blacks persisted through the transfer of power to the United States and through the installation of an Anglo-Protestant American government. The free black population took up literacy values extolled by the white community and in their turn set advanced expectations for their progeny and relations. Many free blacks traveled to France where they acquired a full classical, liberal education and experienced—some for the first time—equal treatment. Unsurprisingly, they found great appeal in French revolutionary ideals still evident in post-revolutionary France. Steven Ochs observed that free blacks were able to locate among French discourses exactly what was missing from the Anglo-Louisiana political and religious landscape: change-oriented ideals and political leaders at the highest echelons willing to take an active, aggressive position on the issues of slavery and race:

The French cultural link nurtured the identification of the Afro-Creole elite of New Orleans with the intellectual and political currents associated with both the 1789 and 1848 revolutions in France. . . . [They] embraced romanticism, radical republicanism, abolitionism, egalitarianism . . . The ferment associated with the 1848 revolution led to the abolition of slavery and the granting of universal suffrage to former slaves throughout the French empire in 1850. Louis Napoleon continued to maintain very severe laws against slavery and the slave trade after he came to power in 1852, some French Catholic bishops also publicly embraced emancipation. In 1853, the provincial council of Bordeaux, for example, condemned slavery. The most prominent opponent of human bondage, Bishop Felix-Antoine-Philibert Duperanloup (1802-1878), headed the diocese of Orleans.  

A number of free black New Orleanians returned—many did not—and worked diligently to introduce and promulgate the French romantic ideas, literary genres, political thought, and

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forms of political protest they encountered in France.⁶⁵ Among those who departed overseas and saw fit to return were Armand Lanusse, the editor and contributing poet for the first black literary journal in the United States, *L’Album Literature des Jeunes Gens Amateurs de Litterature*. As was true for famed sculptor Eugène Warbourg, and writers Camille Thierry, Adolphe Duhart, and Pierre Dalcour.⁶⁶ A noted female who traveled abroad and returned, however briefly, was Louisa R. Lamotte, the editor of a French literacy journal, *Revue*, and winner of the *Palmes Académiques* in 1881.⁶⁷

It is unknown how many free blacks traveled abroad for their education; however, they most certainly represented a limited portion of the free black population. The parents of free black children who could not afford to send their children abroad to France or who were dismayed to send their children on a risky journey overseas opted instead to enroll them in local schools and then send them to colleges in the North. This was the case with P.M. Williams, who attended Dartmouth, and J. Willis Menard, who studied in Ohio at Iberia College.⁶⁸ An example par excellence of this pattern of aggressively and meritoriously seeking advanced literacy development beyond the boundaries of Louisiana was Louis Charles Roudanzez. The child of a Frenchman and Aimée Potens, a free woman of color, he studied locally during his early years for undergraduate work, but went on to pursue two advanced degrees, one medical degree from the *Faculté de Médecine de Paris*, in 1853, and another from

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⁶⁶ Armand Lanusse (1812-1867) was a dedicated educator as well. He was a founding member of the benevolence societies which gave rise to the *Institute Catholique* or Widow Couvent School and the Association of the Holy Family, which established a school for orphans. Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 100.

⁶⁷ Louisa R. Lamotte earned recognition for educational accomplishments as head of a woman’s college in Abbeville, France. Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, 100.

Dartmouth College in 1857. He established a profitable, if not radical, enterprise of operating a medical practice open to both whites and blacks, and the Holy Family sisters were counted among his patients and objects of his philanthropy. In 1862 he joined his brother Jean-Baptiste in founding the first free black newspapers for blacks in the South, the short-lived L’Union, and two years later a more enduring version, La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orleans. Each publishing enterprise conveyed a sense of the revolutionary spirit Roudanez had no doubt absorbed from his experiences in France. He was said to have attended to the barricades in the 1848 French Revolution, and his French medical school teachers included radical intellectual “luminaries” such as Phillippe Ricord and Jean Baptiste Bouillaud. Illustrative of the radicalism embraced by many émigrés and French-educated free blacks in the free black population, L’Union commenced by claiming the Declaration of Independence “as the basis of our platform,” and called for unification of the black community under the banner of the struggle for universal equality. “‘Let all friends of Progress unite!’ the paper trumpeted in its inaugural editorial,” wrote David Rankin.

Once home, free blacks who gained access to alternate points of view through education outside the bounds of Louisiana joined with local figures and formed themselves into tight, sometimes insulated, circles of association to safely cultivate their political identity and promulgate their unique blend of American, Haitian, and French revolutionary ideas. Some separated themselves from other free blacks, as with members of the Société d’ Economie, which held (as Rodolphe Desunes wrote) “tendencies toward exclusiveness” away from lower

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69 Charles Roudanez was born in St. James Parish in 1823 and died in New Orleans in 1890. Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 27. See also Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 133.
70 Bell, Revolution, 2; Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 19-28.
71 Houzeau, My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune, 27.
72 Ibid., 20.
class free blacks and the enslaved class as a whole. Leading artists and craftsmen, including Victor Séjour, became members of an alternate group that did not honor such distinctions, Société des Artisans. Members these groups and other groups held literary salons in their homes, where they read each other’s work, cultivated new talent, and composed collective statements of protest for submission to editorial pages of newspapers. Equipped with experience and inspiration, and with access to a global view, free blacks planned for revolution at home to address “the unfulfilled promise of the age of democratic revolution.”

In 1847, the well-versed, well-traveled, and much-accomplished leaders of the free black class, such as Lanusse, Roudanez, and LaCroix, came together and proclaimed the centrality of literacy in their vision for a changed society. Lanusse pointed to the value of education as a form of basic human protection, “a shield against the spiteful and calumnious arrows shot at us.” Indeed, from their early days as children in free black enclaves within and around the Vieux Carré, they had intimate knowledge of the manner in which ordinary free blacks struggled to find safe spaces for black education. Numerous small schools came into being, but suffered from the effects of suspicion. Public officials remained in a state of vigilance regarding black education, fearing the formation of a hostile, incendiary atmosphere among slaves inspired by literate blacks. Thus, although they paid property taxes to support New Orleans’ nascent public school system and paid tithes that supported local Catholic parochial institutions, they were officially barred from most all public and private schools. Because of this, free black women and men suffered the hardship of having to make private arrangements to educate the youth of their community.

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73 Desdunes, Our People and Our History, 29.
74 The Artisans group was racially inclusive, having whites amongst its ranks. Bell, Revolution, 90.
75 Ibid, 6.
76 Ibid.
In 1847, a self-appointed leadership class was formed by Armand Lanusse, Etienne Cordeviolle, Charles Roudanez, and Emilien Brulé, and others; interestingly, they came together to form a governing body for the community under the auspices of a private black school board, the Société Catholique pour l’Instruction des Orphelins dans l’Indigence (Catholic Society for the Instruction of Indigent Orphans) which Steven Ochs observed, “provided free people of color with a venue for exercising leadership and some form of the elective franchise, both of which were denied them by the larger society,” François LaCroix led Armand Lanusse and others in the task of executing a trust for education established by a free woman of color philanthropist named Marie Bernard Couvent—a bequest that had been left buried since its original inception in 1832. The association bought property, assembled a staff, and thereby initiated the l’Institute Catholique des Orphelins dans l’Indigence, commonly referred to as the Widow Couvent school. The Institute Catholique became the premier institute of learning for black New Orleanians for decades. It was staffed by leading black intellectuals, mathematicians, and literary artists, establishing a reputation which earned it state appropriations—a first for a black-run school. A sketch of the type of school they chose to establish, as offered by Steven Ochs, demonstrates the egalitarian educational model upon which Afro-French Creoles operated and aspired.

The board of directors of the Institute established policy, hired the principal and teachers, and ruled on the admission of the students. . . The co-institutional school had separate floors for boys and girls and conducted classes in both English and French. The course of instruction lasted six years and included mathematics (arithmetic, algebra, and geometry), rhetoric, French and English grammar, and composition, geography, history, logic, basic accounting and personal hygiene. Each class was supposed to begin and end with a prayer. . . The Institute’s approximately 200 students, who sat at long tables on crude benches, included not only orphans who attended for

free, but also children of Afro-Creoles who paid tuition according to their means. In 1859, 138 paid 50 cents per month; 86 paid 20 cents.⁷⁸

Notably, many of the organizers of the Société Catholique and its school—the teachers, financial supporters, and advocates of the community—were contemporaneously involved with aiding Henriette Delille. The year of the incorporation of Société Catholique, 1847, was also the year of the incorporation of Association de la Saint Famille, the lay support association dedicated to the causes and works pursued by the nascent Sisters of the Holy Family. Celie LaCroix, spouse of the president of the Société Catholique, was a prominent member of the Association de la Saint Famille and eventually came to serve as its president. The repeated and multilevel connections between the groups indicate a free black leadership class that was thoroughly entwined and had formed consensus on the idea of assuming control over their own collective destiny.

**Gender and Piety**

When Henriette Delille took her vows in St. Augustine Church sometime in 1852, she likely was the first of her ilk the people of New Orleans had yet ever seen: a professed black Catholic sister, a Negro nun, a free woman of color Mother Superior. What made this development so alluring for some, and so disquieting for others—and so very important to the story of literacy in antebellum Louisiana—were the ways in which Henriette Delille’s reception of vows and sanction as a Catholic sister had trespassed social barriers as old as medieval relics and as crucial and revered as sacred texts. She was, after all, multiracial; she was the product of miscegenation and a natural daughter, that is, the product of an illicit union.

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⁷⁸ Notably, although it bore approbation of the Catholic Church, the Widow Couvent School was clearly not a Catholic school in the traditional sense. It was not governed by the Church, did not have a chapel, and it did not feature instruction by religious. In this regard it should not be regarded as a Catholic parochial school, simply a Catholic-sponsored school. Ochs, *A Black Patriot and a White Priest*, 55.
She the descendent of a slave and the acknowledged daughter of French Creole man. Further, she was a member of the quadroon class, a group popularly maligned as being associated with the institution of prostitution, concubinage, and its related manifestation, *plaçage*. In a dramatic reversal, this woman came to signify the icon of Catholic nun: purity, chastity, virtue, and obedience. In the context of women’s tradition of piety in Louisiana, this meant that she was legitimized to emanate the ethos and agency of a white nun: a woman sanctioned to: (a) inculcate the newest converts to the Catholic faith, (b) organize for the social welfare of her surrounding community, and most importantly, (c) build and operate schools and instruct the enslaved.

The tradition of piety ascribed to women by Roman Catholicism comprised the second primary force which set the context for developing the female literacy agency and activism in antebellum New Orleans. The early establishment of French Catholic teaching orders made it possible for Louisiana women to be counted among the first women of North America to gain access to a formal education indigenously. Enslaved and free black women were among them. Inspired by their founder, St. Angela Merici, the women of the Company of St. Ursula had established a long and impressive reputation in New Orleans for their dedication to bringing to Louisiana in 1727 the cause of educating women and girls. Commonly referred to as the Ursulines, the French congregation centered their ministry on the notion of preparing young women to become stewards of the faith in their homes. Literate and spiritual mothers, St. Angela argued, could do a better job of raising their children in the values and practices of the
faith, and thereby resist the (in their view) detrimental changes brought by the Protestant
Reformation. Congregation historian Sister Jane Frances Heaney wrote,

Angela envisioned not only the formation of strong, individual Christians, but also the
long term reformation of society. Her goal was to train young women in mind, heart,
and will to reform the home, the fundamental unit of society. Development of Christian
values and morals in the home would eventually have an effect on society in general.

In addition to the three traditional vows of religious women, i.e., obedience, chastity and
charity, Angela called for a new, fourth vow: to teach. The religious rules in her order would
uniquely reflect their mission to instruct. Heaney continued,

No one was exempt from teaching, with other charitable work vague and unspecified.
The rule required that the members of the company not only teach, but also be
examples of what they taught; that the pupils not only learn correct doctrine, but also
live their lives according to it.

In August of 1727, twelve Ursuline sisters made the arduous, 5-month, 14-day journey to the
New World to bring the Ursuline vision for women’s education and women’s role in
transforming society to New Orleans. They began almost immediately. Just 103 days later, on
Friday, November 17, they received their first boarding students in a provisional convent,
thereby establishing the first educational institution for women in the United States, the
Ursuline Convent School.

The Ursulines established themselves in the framework of New Orleans society in
numerous other ways; they operated a hospital and established humanitarian services not yet

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79 The Protestant Reformation was a religious movement which brought about religious schism in the Christian
Empire, thereby separating Catholic and Protestant into opposing camps. The beginning of the revolt is famously
marked by the event of Martin Luther affixing his theological theses to the doors of the church at Wittenberg on
Paulist Press, 2005), 178.
80 Sister Jane Frances Heaney, A Century of Pioneering: A History of the Ursuline Nuns in New Orleans (New
Orleans: The Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans, 1993), 6. The French Ursulines were originally recruited by
Louisiana’s French colonial officials for the purpose of operating a hospital. It was solely through their insistence
that their mission to educate girls was retained as a top priority.
81 Ibid.
otherwise available in the new colony.\textsuperscript{82} Over the subsequent decades they founded orphanages and asylums for the insane and the destitute. They ran one of the largest plantations in the area and were one of the largest slaveholders in the city. They also sponsored a lay support organization, The Children of Mary, whose scores of members extended their reach outside the cloister walls. However, it was through their vision for a spiritual motherhood that the Ursulines made their greatest impact on the city. Emily Clark theorized that it was their efforts that were “largely responsible for impressive literacy of New Orleans women in the early 1760s.”\textsuperscript{83} Under their exclusive watch, Clark reported, literacy rates for women in the colony, once stygian, pulled up equal to males, and even exceeded their rates. In a study of the early literacy patterns, Clark evaluated signature rates on marriage documents during the French period. While in 1731 only 32.5 percent of the women were able to sign their names, compared with 47.5 percent of the men, in 1760 72 percent could do so, compared with 70 percent of the males.\textsuperscript{84} She wrote,

> Female literacy lagged behind male literacy in France, and this phenomenon is evident in the literacy of French women in Louisiana. Of the brides born in France who married in Louisiana between 1760 and 1762, only forty-two percent were literate. Young women born in Louisiana were much more likely to sign their names to their marriage record, however. In other words, girls who were born and grew up in New Orleans were nearly twice as likely to be literate as French girls who came to Louisiana and married there.\textsuperscript{85}

Clark attributed credit for this development to the Ursuline school.\textsuperscript{86} Through their intervention there occurred a pattern converse to national trends: New Orleans became was “a city where

\textsuperscript{82} Emily Clark, “A New World Community: The New Orleans Ursulines and Colonial Society 1727-1803” (doctoral diss., Tulane University, 1998).
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 244.
\textsuperscript{84} As signature rates are unavailable for the Spanish period, and government census literacy rates for women are not reported until the 1850s, the research could not be carried out longitudinally. Ibid., 243, table 19.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 243.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 244.
white women were just as likely to be literate as men." In this manner a critical social precedent was set for the primacy of women’s literacy in early Louisiana.

Led by their superior, Mother St. Augustin, the Ursulines set another important precedent. Inspired by the Roman Catholic principle of universalism, the religious equivalent of egalitarianism, French Ursuline nuns pursued the goal of building a racially diverse church congregation. Counted among their first students were Native American and African girls. In many ways this development was unsurprising; the historical record reflects that the Catholic Church of Louisiana long espoused a relatively open system of church patronage. Dating from the beginning of the colonial period, French and then Spanish bishops had maintained racially integrated worship services, and had given priority to the conversion of blacks and Native Americans. Under both French and Spanish colonial regimes, Catholicism had been the state religion, thus colonial civil laws as expressed through *Le Code Noir* mandated the conservation and propagation of the Catholic faith. Unlike non-whites in other slave states, therefore, Louisiana’s enslaved population were afforded the right to religious education. Precepts of this law gave them the right to attend mass regularly, to participate in sacramental rites, i.e., the baptism of their children, and afforded them a proper burial—an uncommon measure of religious liberty and involvement for a North American slave society.

Most importantly, close adherents to the Roman Catholic ideal of universalism insisted on maintaining a right to equal treatment in the context of congregational activities. French and Spanish clergy—contrary to their American counterparts—insisted on creating a space where the enslaved and free worshipped together as equals. In the rarified space of the cathedral, church, or chapel, white patrons were expected to queue for communion in even stride with

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87 Ibid, 246.
blacks, regardless of status. During this time most Christian denominations operating in Louisiana either ignored concerns for the conversion of the souls of the enslaved, held separate services, or outright excluded blacks. In contrast, the Ursuline nuns carried this spirit of religious equalitarianism further than any other group. As detailed above, the nuns opted for racial inclusion within their convent school and lay societies, and executed a successful plan to proselytize extant and newly arrived blacks. The women religious and their deputized lay agents (e.g., Children of Mary) made the most of the laws affording them unparalleled access to the enslaved. This open door permitted opportunity for black women not only to be drawn into the fold, but were allowed them to become evangelizing agents in their own communities.

Recent historical work traces the depths of black Catholicity in Louisiana to the ethnohistory of the proselytes themselves. Emily Clark and Virginia Gould have argued that the story of the success of Christian missionaries like the Ursulines should be read in the context of the history and culture of Louisiana’s unique ethnic milieu. As Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s seminal work *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* suggested, ethnic, social, and political developments during the French and Spanish colonial periods were steered as much by the white colonizers as by the Natives and Africans who were being colonized. In the case of religious historical developments, as Clark and Gould point out, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that most of the captives brought to Louisiana shared a common culture and that ancestral religion shared many elements with French Catholicism. As noted above, the African presence in Louisiana was strongly influenced by the importation of large numbers of persons from the Bambara nation. The ancient spiritual traditions they brought with them from

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88 For treatment of the early Catholic missionary work amongst blacks and Indians, consult Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana.*
89 Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana.*
the Senegambian region of West Africa were founded upon belief in a higher being and were enacted through ancestor worship, dramatic rituals, music, dance, and art. Religious practice was integrated into all aspects of life. Each of these elements translated seamlessly into the adoration of Catholic saints, the ritual of the Mass, and Catholicism’s rich tradition of sacred music, icons, and art. Within the safety of established black congregations, black Louisianians uncovered the relevancy of Africa to narratives of Christianity and the role of Africa and Africans in founding the church. Cyprian Davis writes:

In one way or another, Africa became part of the self-understanding of American blacks throughout the nineteenth century. The black Catholic community in America was no exception. It sought its roots in the religious experience of Africa and its self-definition in the African saints of the early church. American blacks, both Protestant and Catholic, found their roots in the black Africans who appeared in the pages of Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New, and most particularly in the many references to Ethiopia in the Psalms and the Prophets.  

Additionally, Black Catholics distinguished their connection to Africa and the black race by choosing to invoke the names of African-born saints, like St. Augustine, St. Monica, St. Benedict the Moor, St. Cyprian, St. Cyril, St. Perpetua, and St. Felicity; they also embraced the identities of saints known to have aided the enslaved, like St. Peter Claver, and incorporated long-held Bambara beliefs. Thus, strangely, even as blacks in Louisiana were subjugated by the Louisiana church’s unchallenged alliance with the institution of slavery, measured opportunities for Afro-centric religious expression were to be found behind the more global Roman Catholic shield.

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90 Davis, History of Black Catholics, 1.
91 For fuller treatment of black Louisiana’s amalgamation of African and European religious tropes, see Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 43-55; Wilkie, Creating Freedom; Simpson, Black Religions.
92 Not all free or enslaved Africans became Roman Catholic or even Christian; African faith systems, including Yoruba, persisted during the antebellum period and were practiced, if surreptitiously; evidence may be found in descriptions of Congo Square, where, for a time, blacks were permitted to practice traditional African and Afro-Caribbean rituals and traditions. Innumerable blacks converted to the Protestantism, most notably Methodism and Episcopalianism. Moreover, free blacks expressed resistance to the Church’s moral delinquencies on matters of
This form of religious expression was particularly empowering to women, who converted to the church in greater numbers than men. This was attributable in part to the reluctance on the part of some slaveowners to honor the Code Noir and thereby release young males from their duties to attend religious instruction classes, and demographics whereby women outnumbered and outlived males. This, combined with extant pressures against allowing black males into the ranks of the clergy, carried over into the Black Catholic community to create an opening for the development of black Catholic female agency.

However, the white nuns’ success among women of color is not adequately explained by lack of access to black males. Emily Clark and Virginia Gould have theorized that this pattern may be traced to the fact that West African culture, like Catholicism, revered a maternal figure and empowered women as educators. They theorize that the feminine spirituality and female agency that was a part of Bambara tradition may have easily “harmonized with the mother-centered approach of the Ursulines and the Children of Mary.”

Undoubtedly, the unusual level of racial inclusion and integration in church rites, worship services, and at the Ursuline Convent School enjoined a willingness to move deeper into the European faith system. The success of these efforts may be measured by the fact that not only did thousands of blacks convert, they also cultivated a deep, blended version of Afro-French Catholic religious culture, one which survives to the present.

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94 In his report to the Holy See, given in 1800, John Carroll estimated that 20 percent of all American Catholics were black. In the contemporary era, the Black Catholic sector represents one of the fastest-growing segments of the Roman Catholic Church, numbering 143 million (mostly Africans) in 1980; Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 35.
After the annexation of Louisiana into the United States in 1803, Roman Catholic universalist practices continued, so that by 1861 Catholic congregations had approximately the same number of blacks as whites, and a majority of these were black females.\textsuperscript{95} Far into the American period, liberal French and Spanish Catholic religious, as well as zealous members of the Catholic laity, would draw upon universalist ideology and colonial-era religious mandates/rights to black instruction as the premise for intervening in the lives of otherwise inaccessible enslaved persons. During the 1830s and 40s, this radical pattern of Catholic ministry amongst Louisiana blacks, combined with surges of new free Black Catholic immigrants from Catholic Caribbean islands like Cuba and Haiti, combined to create one of the oldest and most cohesive black Catholic communities in the Northern Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{96}

By the mid-century, when the city of New Orleans was the state’s seat of political and religious power, historian Robert C. Reinders determined that “The Roman Catholic Church was the largest in New Orleans with about 65,000 Catholics gathered in twenty churches.”\textsuperscript{97} At that same time he conservatively estimated that at that time there were as many as fifteen thousand black patrons.\textsuperscript{98} However, such numbers speak little of the actual level of participation or depth of engagement. Church records and historical testimony indicate that during an era when church seating was secured by actually purchasing the pews, free blacks owned more than half of the pews in major churches in New Orleans. Given the fact that one

\textsuperscript{95} Alberts, “Origins of Black Catholic Parishes.”
\textsuperscript{96} The successful slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, known as the Haitian revolution, began in 1791 and lasted 13 years, ending in the declaration of an independent black nation in 1804. Barbara Rosendale Duggal wrote: “New Orleans became the site of the largest concentration of these émigrés in North America, owing, at least in part, to the laws and attitudes regarding free blacks, which were considerably more lenient than in any other slave state. Duggal, “Marie Laveau,” 162.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
third of church pews were set aside for the enslaved, and females of all groups outnumbered males, it becomes clear that Catholic worship services offered a striking and appealing contrast to social norms honored just outside the church or chapel doors. Clearly, Catholicism offered what no other social institution could: a relatively safe public place for black women to exercise a pious presence and wield influence. 99

**The Educational Agency of Free Black Women in New Orleans**

Henriette Delille was part of a distinctive generation. As presented in the introduction, she was born into a female community that was remarkably successful in overcoming obstacles to acquire knowledge and to gain access to literacy, and entrance to formal schools. Widespread reporting of the city’s famed *quadroon balls* made conspicuous the women’s heightened level of poise, cultivation, and confidence. Travelers to the city, like the German Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, often remarked upon what they observed to be a high level of cultivation in its free black women. “Many of these girls are much more carefully educated than the whites, behave with more polish and more politeness.” 100 Indeed, in the decades that elapsed between Henriette Delille’s childhood and ascension to adulthood, between about 1812 to 1837, antebellum free black girls experienced increased access to the dominant literacies of the age: reading, writing, and numeracy. Early colonial-era access to instruction came by means that were alternate to black-run schooling: through out-of-state and overseas education, through the Ursuline convent, and private tutoring at home. These means of instruction established the basis for a pattern of literacy advocacy that expanded during the early antebellum era. In the context of deprivations and prohibitions, reading and writing rushed to the forefront of a wide-ranging repertoire of competencies, displaying language black women

sought out and chose to sponsor in others. Ideals of republican motherhood, the notion that a woman’s role was to create and nurture a virtuous male citizenry for the state, blended synchronously with the Ursulines’ call for literate, spiritual mothers as sponsors of the faith; together, they produced an atmosphere receptive to a women’s literacy development.

To each of these was added the local development of what historians call the *Golden Age* for the free black community in New Orleans.¹⁰¹ According to population analyses performed by Paul Lachance, New Orleans’ free black population grew dramatically during this period. After receiving a sudden infusion of 3,102 free black Haitian refugees from Cuba in the year 1810, the city’s free black population rose to 4,950.¹⁰² By 1830, this population represented 25.1 percent of the city’s total population.¹⁰³ Through inheritance and entrepreneurial activity, many reached the middle class and even the upper echelons of wealth during this period. “After the Louisiana Purchase,” reported Caryn Cossé Bell, “free blacks benefited from the boom conditions associated with westward expansion. In 1836 in New Orleans, 855 free persons of color paid taxes on $2,462,470 worth of property (almost $3,000 worth of property per owner).”¹⁰⁴ Relatedly, the special quality of this period is accompanied by a gain in spatial clout. Free blacks acquired large blocks of real estate in and around the Vieux Carré. At the opening of this era, New Orleans’ Creole faubourgs, or suburbs, came into being (see figure 2.1). In 1812, the plantation acreage surrounding the Tremé plantation was parceled out and

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¹⁰³ Ibid.
¹⁰⁴ Bell, *Revolution*, 81. Paul LaChance expresses a tempered viewpoint, arguing that free blacks of New Orleans were privileged only in comparison to blacks in other Southern communities—not whites. He does maintain that free women of color were assessed as possessing a higher value of assets than free men of color through out most of the antebellum period. Paul LaChance, “The Limits of Privilege: Where Free Persons of Colour Stood in the Hierarchy of Wealth in Antebellum New Orleans,” in *The African Experience in Louisiana*, vol. 11, part A of Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, ed. Charles Vincent (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1999), 439.
sold in small plots of land to many free black men and women, thereby creating a district with substantial enclaves of free blacks, also outside the Vieux Carré. The new district joined the previously established Marigny district, which had opened as recently as 1807, and in this manner free blacks of New Orleans became an integral part of the geo-social landscape of the city.

Figure 2.1 New Orleans' View Carré and the Creole Faubourgs circa 1850s

105 These two districts remained places of welcome and safety for free black communities well into the 20th century and are commonly identified as sites of the emergence of the genre of Afro-Creole music which later became known as jazz.
Free Black Women’s Literacy

Literacy was vital to this generation of *femmes de couleur libre*, and literacy education represented a fundamental concern. Whether they had been born enslaved, or were a generation or more removed from slavery, literacy practices were central to their identities: as unbound blacks, as women, as mothers and aunts to school-aged children, or as relatives (or even owners) of enslaved persons. For one, their unique location between the cultural worlds of Africa and Europe provided an opportunity for free black women to play a central role in preserving traditional cultural knowledge, beliefs, and social practices from Africa and incorporating them into Creole society according to the wants and needs of their respective families and the broader Creole community.

Discourse synthesis between the two groups may be evidenced in Creole folk-music and orature. Charles Rousseve’s 1937 review of the history of black literature in Louisiana asserted that the Afro-Creole tradition of song and dance was the appropriate starting point of a review of black cultural contributions to Louisiana. He appraised that the “specimens of folk art emanating from the unlettered Creole slaves constitute[d] the earliest literary contribution of the Negro in Louisiana, and probably the earliest literary contribution of the general population of the state.”106 The musical styles, themes, and genres of music were a fusion of French, Spanish, Native American and African influences.107 Dance songs, song of tribute, and love songs of this tradition carried lyrics which expressed the sorrow, joy, angst and anger of black womanhood—bonded and free alike. An exemplar of this genre characteristic is the dance song, “Caroline.” Its lyrics express the rapid pace of life for young black women of the

107 Ibid., 59.
era and describe a group haunted by the possibility of abandonment. The dance song reads as follows: “Love on Saturday, marriage on Sunday/ Monday morning a child in the arms/ No roof, no clothes/ Nothing, a child in the arms.”\textsuperscript{108}

In addition to composing and transmitting folk music and lyrics, free black women synthesized, then transmitted, a culture that pulsed with African American spirituals, adapted prayer litanies, and a canon of Creole proverbs, worship practices, and beliefs—many of which became integrated into the broader Catholic culture.\textsuperscript{109} Mackie Blanton and Gayle Nolan pointed out that “Catholic women of all ethnic and racial backgrounds were for many decades the ones who handed down (and thus interpreted) Catholic faith and practice in Louisiana.”\textsuperscript{110} That religious culture was universally described as deep, vivid, and spirited. In their brief study of religious practices during the nineteenth century, Blanton and Nolan noted that Afro-Latin Creoles were known to perform unique religious folk hymns known as \textit{cantiques}, which had their roots in eleventh-century French religious practices. Other practices and beliefs had African overtones. Blanton and Nolan noted that

Beliefs from [African] folklore and legends mingled with Christian tenets and Catholic practice to produce semi-superstitious practices rooted in faith and reverence for the Savior. For example, sewing on Friday was sure to be bad luck. Sewing a christening gown on Friday brought even worse luck with it; the infant wearing the gown would die.

A blessed candle, lit, could be used as a kind of divining rod to locate the missing body of someone who has drowned in the bayou. The candle pointed to the fateful location. Carefully placed articles such as blessed palms or blessed candles were also believed to ward off storms.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{110} Blanton and Nolan, “Creole Lenten Devotions,” 536.
\textsuperscript{111} Blanton and Nolan, “Creole Lenten Devotions,” 536-7.
Other unique practices included the blessing of books with ashes, ways of gauging the status of an infant’s soul in terms of its reaction to baptisms, and using holy water around the perimeter of a house to keep away storms. These expressions of religious mixtures underscore the point that cultural blending occurred in all realms and in plain view during the antebellum era. Along similar lines, Afro-Creole women were openly recognized as repositories of knowledge regarding medicines and healing techniques that were most certainly gleaned from their African forebears. Desdunes recalled that “innumerable doctors appreciated and used their experience. The men of science often deferred to the judgment of these noble women and followed their advice in cases known to be critical,”112 Taken together, these beliefs, practices, and bodies of knowledge illustrate the wide range of literacies available to (and often fostered by) the Afro-Creole woman.

The issues surrounding the black population’s access to print literacy instruction were poignantly crucial to New Orleans’ free black women and their families. Blacks’ ability to learn, to feel, make moral judgments, to self-organize and think independently stood at the heart of broader debates about blacks’ social and civic potential, their future in America. The nineteenth century had overseen the convergence of multiple lines of discourse which sought to justify colonialism, slavery, and a race-based social order. Religious and political leaders had argued long that Africans and Caucasians were fundamentally different from one another and, as a result, the institution of African slavery was not only a social necessity but a Christian obligation.113 By the mid-century mark, science began to establish itself as an equal besides religion and politics as a venue through which to articulate and propagate white supremacist

112 Ibid.
113 The dark skin of Africans marked them to be the descendents of Ham, a group cursed and ordered enslaved by the Old Testament. See Leviticus, 25:44-46, *Holy Bible.*
ideas. Flawed social statistics and questionable research methodologies using the newly emerged medical technologies like the stethoscope and the spirometer (a device used to measure oxygen in the lungs) affirmed the long-held view that Africans were a degenerated form of humanity. These ideas are typified by the words of E. N. Elliott:

That the negro is now an inferior species, or at least variety of human race, is well established, and we must think, be admitted by all. That by himself he has never emerged from barbarism, and even when partly civilized under the control of the white man, he speedily returns to the same state, if emancipated, are now indubitable truths.\textsuperscript{114}

In a cyclical fashion, race had been used to justify dehumanizing treatment of blacks, then descriptions of enslaved and freed person’s degraded or barbarous condition (malnourished, uninstructed, demoralized, traumatized, and recalcitrant) were used to rationalize the extension of their oppression.

The discourse of scientific racism raged close to home for free black women of New Orleans. Samuel Cartwright, a prominent local physician, was a key figure in the scientific racism movement. His work—which served as the appendix the publication of the Dred Scott Decision—claimed that the concept of race could be affirmed on an anatomical basis. Blacks were inferior; even education and religion could not change their status. Cartwright confidently asserted that race went further than skin deep: blacks possessed a darker shade of blood, flesh, and membranes.\textsuperscript{115} Of critical concern—and point of fascination for all others—was his observation that blacks consumed less oxygen that whites. Cartwright argued that this was the critical difference which lead to a deficiency in the aeration of the blood, one which gave rise to “hebetude of mind and body . . . thus making it a mercy and a blessing to negroes to have

\textsuperscript{114} E. N. Elliott, ed. \textit{Cotton is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on this important subject} (Augusta, Ga., Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860), xiii.

\textsuperscript{115} Cartwright, “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology,” 705.
authority set over them, to provide and take care of them.” Asphyxia made blacks dull thinkers, limited in their understanding of the world and their desire to act beyond a master’s will. He wrote,

The negro requires government in every thing, the most minute. . . . [T]he black man requires government even in his meat and drink, his clothing, and hours of repose. Unless the government of one man to prescribe rules of conduct to guide him, he will eat too much meat and not enough bread and vegetables; he will not dress to suit the season, or the kind of labor he is engaged in, nor retire to rest in due time to get sufficient sleep, but sit up and doze by the fire nearly all night. Nor will the women undress the children and put them regularly to bed. Nature is no law unto them. They let their children suffer and die, or unmercifully abuse them, unless the white man or woman prescribe rules in the nursery for them to go by.117

Further, blacks were thus subject to moral vices, from gluttony to alcoholism to licentiousness. Cartwright’s biological determinism was extended in a pointed manner to free blacks. Mixed race or “hybrid” blacks represented a serious form of human degeneration; like the mule, which is the product of the horse and donkey, they were unnatural product, thus less able to perpetuate themselves.118 Even if educated, he assured, they could never escape their place at the bottom of the social order, given their predetermined biological limitations. Freedom induced in blacks a peculiar pathology; blacks simply did not have the fortitude or intellect to survive outside their assigned place under white control.

The northern physicians and people have noticed the symptoms [dysaethesia aethiopica], but not the disease from which they spring. They ignorantly attribute the symptoms to the debasing influence of slavery on the mind without considering that those who have never been in slavery, or their fathers before them, are the most afflicted, and the latest from the slave-holding South the least. The disease is the natural offspring of negro liberty--the liberty to be idle, to wallow in filth, and to indulge in improper food and drinks.119

116 Ibid., 701.
117 Ibid., 727-28.
118 Ibid., 712.
119 Cartwright’s famed tract, “Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” which was published in the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal in 1851, asserted that enslaved blacks who appeared dissatisfied with their condition and treatment actually suffered from a condition called “drapetomania,” a disease which caused them to try to escape, or “dysaethesia aethiopica” a disorder which caused them to manifest lesions and become at once
Cartwright’s views demonstrate the conundrum that nineteenth century free black women and their allies faced. The illiterate and debased and diseased condition of blacks, whatever the true cause, was being used to support their oppression.

Literacy and the ability to self-organize for it were a benchmark of humanity. Possession of mainstream literacy carried the potential to act as a conduit to psychic wholeness, freedom, knowledge, self-respect, and communal regeneration. Both champions and enemies of the peculiar institution were cognizant of the fact that the impetus to escape could be inspired by knowledge of a world beyond the master’s domain: news of rampant slave rebellions, successful escapes, abolitionist ideas, and alternate worldviews of race and democracy. In this sense, black women’s practices and pursuits were most certainly experienced as a spirit of resistance, even rebellion, and part of a larger pattern of resistance to the notion they were less than fully human, or less than fully women.

Indeed, the pursuit of literacy was equally critical to free black women because of gender issues. Virginia Gould noted that the tripartite class system position placed free black women in the position of having to appease white standards of womanhood, even as they struggled to combat its most deleterious effects on their daily lives. She wrote:

They were viewed by whites to be tainted by their ties to slavery and thus deemed to be incompatible with the ideals associated with white women. Yet despite their inability to meet the ideals of the ruling class, free women of color, by necessity, shaped their lives in response to those ideals. If they had not at least partially accepted such mores, free women of color would have brought disdain and degradation upon themselves and their families. For even though white men idealized the value of white women by assigning them an identity to them that was denied to women of color, they also expected free women of color to at least aspire to the ideal.  

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The ruling class harbored standards which marked free black women as sexually available bodies, yet at the same time white men were judged to be immune from charges of sexual assault against them. In so threatening a position, free black women aggressively sought out discourses that might serve as to protect them, conserve their status, and uplift the families and communities.

As free black women acquired the ability to read and write, they moved smoothly and quickly into the literacy practices associated with the increasingly print-oriented nineteenth century women’s culture of literacy. Similar to white women’s practices, they read books, newspapers, magazines, sheet music, and pamphlets, and traded the materials they acquired from one another and from school. Free man of color Richard M. Johnson wrote home on one occasion, requesting a book from his sister’s collection: “Ma, I wish you to tell sis to send me my book called Poetry and Prose of europe[sic] and America and lend me some of her books to read.”

Free women of color were writers as well; these literate women chronicled their lives and the events which transpired in their communities through journals. Letter writing represented a vital form of communication for them. Their letters, (including that of Henriette Delille’s niece, and that of the women of Ann Battles Johnson’s family) indicate that letter writing was a serious domestic occupation. Reading and writing, Virginia Meacham Gould explained, was seen by these women as a way of connecting to distant relatives, to share news, information, and ideas; that personal contact “knit the family together in a familiar day to day fashion.” Catherine Johnson’s diary indicates that sometimes an entire day was spent in writing letters. One Saturday night she wrote, “Mr. Wicker [a visitor to the home] has been

121 Richard Johnson, to Ann Battles Johnson, Natchez, 23, July 1859, in Gould, Chained to the Rock of Adversity, 79.
122 Gould, Chained to the Rock of Adversity, xix.
here nearly all day but we had our letters to write to day[sic].”\textsuperscript{123} The women wrote and received letters almost weekly, their communications framed by fervent apologies or stern scoldings for lapses in communication. Framing the letters were innumerable statements typical of that expressed in Emma Hoggart’s letter: “You must really excuse me for not writing to you wont blame me in the least. For the first week I didn’t write to you because I was very busy at the time finishing a dress.”\textsuperscript{124} Similarly, Henriette Delille’s niece expressed concern for a breach in communication: “It has been a long time since you have given me news about yourself with one of your letters filled with good and wise counsels to draw me from my long silence.”\textsuperscript{125} The obligation to maintain steady streams of correspondences between siblings and cousins suggests a literacy used to facilitate familial bonds across distances.

**Literacy Education for Free Black Women**

In their pursuit of the ability to read, write and compute, free black girls, together with their male counterparts, benefited from their community’s increased visibility, strength, and stability accompanying conditions during the *Golden Age*. The changes of the early antebellum period inspired a growing number of schools and a pattern of vocal protests against educational exclusions. We have some knowledge of this pattern, in part because this was the era when the aforementioned cohort of free black writers, artists, doctors, and political leaders of the 1850s and 1860s tenaciously acquired primary and secondary-level preparation within the city of New Orleans. The Creole enclaves in the Vieux Carré and Creole faubourgs became the setting for small, home-based schools where family members instructed youth of the community, or

\textsuperscript{123} Catherine Johnson, journal entry, Natchez, 11, March 1865, in Gould, *Chained to the Rock of Adversity*, 79.
where hired instructors were brought to prepare students for advanced studies beyond the borders of the city. Some of these initiatives progressed to become officially recognized schools. A series of advertisements in the local papers indicated the rumblings of an antebellum network of private schools. In January of 1813, for example, a free man of color, G. Dorefeuille, by means of the local paper, the *Louisiana Courier* announced the first recorded black school.\(^{126}\) Dorefeuille’s call for students included a critique which likely reflected the growing resentment of the pattern of disenfranchisement and stress inflicted when black persons attempted to educate their children.

> I intend to establish a school for the education of children. Such an institution is entirely lacking in this portion of the country, and the enlightened persons who heretofore were desirous of having their children educated—I refer to the prudent colored persons—were obliged to send them to the North. On them I depend for support. Eighteen or twenty pupils have been already promised, the school will be open Monday.\(^{127}\)

While it is not known whether the unnamed school succeeded, the advertisement indicates a vision of schooling which offered no apparent distinction as to gender. About a decade later, shortstory writer Michel Seligny reportedly established St. Barbe Academy, a private institution for wealthy girls and boys in the heart of the Vieux Carré.\(^{128}\) Among his students was the prodigal Victor Séjour, as well as writer and teacher Nathalie Populus Mello.\(^{129}\) Little more is known of the hints of many other schools mentioned in the writings of the day.

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\(^{127}\) Ibid.


\(^{129}\) Juan Victor Séjour Marcou et Ferrand (1817-1874) became a distinguished poet and dramatist. He traveled to France to present his work and was soon admitted to literary circles in Paris. His most noted works included *Les Volontiers de 1814* (1862), about the participation of free blacks in the Battle of New Orleans, *Richard III* (1852), and a poem included in free black publication, *Les Cenelles*, called “Le Retour de Napoléon,” Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana*, 81-91.
Unfortunately, because of racial hostilities expressed by some whites, most educational initiatives remained in private hands and were conducted in a discreet manner.

However, scattered evidence of a heightened pursuit of literacy for free black children may be found along other routes to literacy. Since their arrival in the Louisiana colony in the seventeenth century, free black women and men had maintained sporadic access to an accessible alternative—apprenticeships. During the French colonial and American periods, laws were written which permitted young girls and boys to sign contracts to work under a tutor; the goal being to master a trade. Prominent trades pursued through these means were carpentry, tailoring, bricklaying, and architecture, with sewing and bookkeeping apprenticeships available for girls. According to the laws written by the legislature of the Territory of Orleans, apprentices were lawfully entitled to be instructed in all necessary forms of knowledge and skills required by their trade. In fact, provisions of the code stipulated literacy instruction. Section six of the Louisiana apprentice code read:

> Be it further enacted, that in every case where any person shall be bound in any place, where there shall be a school established, either as an apprentice or servant, who shall be under the age of twenty one years, there shall be as clause in their indentures binding the master or mistress, to teach or cause to be taught the said apprentice or servant to read and write, as also to instruct him in the fundamental principles of arithmetic.\(^{130}\)

The system was also used to educate slaves; Madame Marie Ann Hoffman, the owner of an unnamed illiterate African slave, petitioned the courts in 1740, complaining that instructor M. Dupare had *not* suitably taught her slave to read and write.\(^{131}\) A study by Paul Lachance found that while free blacks had had this system available to them since the colonial era, they were especially active in using the apprentice system during the antebellum period. He found that


“during the whole period from 1809 to 1843, 475 of male apprentices were white, and 505 were free persons of color.” 132 Although apprenticeships could be administered in a manner that was tantamount to slavery, free blacks sought it as a valuable opportunity for education.

During the early to mid-nineteenth century era, Catholic schooling options increased. As noted above, free girls of color were the first to gain the security of being educated in Church-protected institutions. A select few were admitted to the Ursuline academy well until the 1820s. It was during this era that Catholic nuns initiated St. Claude School on the grounds of the College of Orleans; it was the first Catholic parochial school for filles de couleur. This development was seen as a problem. In 1844, the imbalance elicited a statement of protest that was embedded in an advertisement for a new academy. “The families often complain of not having schools where their sons may be raised in the principles of religious,” wrote M. Peter in The Catholic Propagatuer, the leading Catholic newspaper. 133 The complaint indicated that from the perspective of the community, there was a disparity in favor of girls’ education that shortchanged the opportunities for free black males.

Within these equitable school offerings, in homes, private schools, and convent schools, free black girls were not necessarily offered an equal curriculum. Traditionally, they were offered a limited range of courses with lowered expectations for their intellectual development. Those among them who had formerly been slaves, may have suffered the effects of having been prohibited from learning to read or write. However, or as a result, literacy became a vital aspect and central concern of free black women’s lives. By the nineteenth century, “free Negro women had approximately the same educational opportunities as that of their White sisters. It

was not considered important that young ladies of either race should be trained beyond the fundamentals,” one historian observed. While this may not be fully accurate, it is true that free black women shared in the expanded opportunities and shifting limitations typical of the times.

For generations, colonial women’s aspirations to be literate were limited by circumscription to the traditional domestic sphere: wifely duties, physical and moral nurturance of children, and care of the home. What lay beyond, it was so deemed, was that which belonged to men. Girls were refused admittance to the classical Latin grammar schools that their brothers and male cousins attended in preparation for college. Instead, the girls were shepherded into abbreviated programs in preparation for their roles as wives and mothers. A half-century after the American revolution, leaders began to rethink their commitment, and converged on the idea that women needed to be able to manage their husband’s affairs and properly prepare the young men who would one day be citizens and leaders of the nation.

Jean Ferguson Carr noted:

The nineteenth century was an age of growing access to literacy for U.S. girls. Earlier exclusions from formal schooling, publishing and public forums gave way to many opportunities, institutional programs, and venues both inside and outside of school. An eighteenth century constriction of female education to “decorative arts” or practical domestic skills exploded into a wider array of literacy instruction. Girls were taught to compose letters, journals, and essays; to read, take notes, and keep commonplace books; to declaim and recite poetry; to spell and parse sentences. They took part in reading circles and library groups, attended lectures, and listened to sermons; they memorized poetry, recited dramatic speeches, and played numerous word games.

In this manner, to the traditional domestic curriculum core for girls composed of sewing, dancing, manners, hygiene, music was added. The nineteenth century curriculum was

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expanded to embrace disciplines of study once reserved for males. The literacy of a free female became newly viewed as central to proper formation of a republican motherhood, hence her citizen-sons. She was then called upon to acquire the knowledge she was expected to transmit to her young sons: knowledge of the world as portrayed through the disciplines of geography, astronomy, and history. In addition, it was thought to be prudent for her to acquire the skills required for management of the home as with “casting accounts” or bookkeeping.

**Literacy Agency**

*Les femmes de couleur libre* applied their socio-cognitive skills, influence, and class agency towards sponsoring literacy learning in the black community. Poignantly, a distinguishing feature of free black liberty was precisely that which was denied to the enslaved class: the ability to create private space on the public landscape. Their spatial agency, the ability to create and control space, allowed for the creation of sponsorship sites where access could be denied to others (say their detractors) and which could be utilized to support their own interests. Free blacks used their spatial agency (bound up in property rights, rights of association, religious liberty, and social connections) to foster the spread of literacy through use of their homes, neighborhoods, and places of worship, and to initiate the concept of a black-run schoolhouse.

Free black women used the spaces which earlier had been already allocated to them by social and religious tradition, spaces in which to sponsor literacy learning and development in their families and the larger community. Foremost, they made use of their homes as sites of learning, offering primary education to their children, those belonging to their relatives, and other community members. In addition, free black women used the sacred spaces of the Church as sites of literacy sponsorship. Under the auspices of clerics and women religious,
through lay associations and benevolence organizations, they collected students in chapels and churches to perform catechesis, the program of preparation for initiation into the Roman Catholic faith system. Mornings, or weeknights, or after mass on Sundays, enslaved and free blacks were instructed in the rudiments of the Catholic faith. During religious instruction, students listened to readings, memorized prayers, and orated selections from specially prepared, officially sanctioned catechism texts.\(^{137}\)

Free black women were behind the initiatives which led to the first black-run schools. They had long been denied the benefits of what a brick-and-mortar institution could offer: a dedicated space to converge people, ideas, collect books, and shield, if temporarily, the world outside which sought to thwart the development of their children. Widow Marie Justin Camaire Bernard Couvent, for example, an African-born woman and former slave who was once deprived of the opportunity to learn to read or write, acted in 1832 to establish the first black Catholic school in New Orleans. She established a trust to establish black schooling for girls and boys, the poor and the wealthy. In 1847, after bureaucratic delay, those funds and her guiding principles: to educate black boys and girls, were used to launch the aforementioned Institutue Catholique or Widow Couvent School.\(^{138}\) Another example is Felicie Cailloux, a scholar whom Roldophe Desdunes described as an “exceedingly intelligent, highly respected and devout woman.” She was one of the first principals of the Institute Catholique, and served as a female member of an elite teaching staff comprised of leading figures of the day and acted

\(^{137}\) For a full review of the range and types of texts used during the antebellum period and analysis of their content see Addie Lorraine Walker, “Religious Education for the Regeneration of a People: The Religious Education of African-American Catholics in the Nineteenth Century.” (doctoral diss., Boston College, 1996), 122-141.

in a leadership capacity as one of its first principals.\textsuperscript{139} The two women instructors who worked under Cailloux included women known only as Madame Adolphe Duhart and Madame Joseph Bazanac. “Interestingly,” Steven Ochs pointed out, “the male and female teachers of the same rank received the same salary.”\textsuperscript{140} Their efforts were directed toward enslaved persons as well. Caryn Cossé Bell wrote:

> In some instances, members of the city’s intelligentsia conducted clandestine “schools” for slaves. Instructors moved their meeting places to different locations every few weeks to escape detection by city authorities. The classes met at night in a room or concealed alleyways, with students entering and departing either alone or in pairs to avoid attracting attention.\textsuperscript{141}

It was also the case that sometimes free blacks’ efforts for the enslaved were thwarted, as when fear of reprisal outweighed the will to resist the imposition of ignorance. On one occasion, when an instructor of the school staff brought a slave (with his master’s permission) into the school, free black parents withdrew their students in protest. In this way one can gain a sense that schooling venues may have been attempted continuously; free blacks learned that to retain them they had to maintain a sense of vigilance about the racial intricacies of the milieu.

**Summary**

The social spaces from which Henriette Delille emerged were privileged, but also full of tension and uncertainty. The vibrancy of the African peoples and their culture, combined with a Latin milieu consisting of a relatively relaxed attitude toward race and the education of blacks, and thus created a black population that had access to traditional Western literacies, as well as a range of African literacies and knowledge. Many became free, creating a large population of black persons who were born free. During the nineteenth century this group

\textsuperscript{139} Desdunes, *Our People, Our History*, 104.
\textsuperscript{140} Ochs,
\textsuperscript{141} Bell, *Revolution*, 127.
gained cohesion and forged a distinctive African and Latin Black Catholic presence in the city by acting, being, thinking and being literate in a way that encompassed both elements of African and Latin Catholic culture and worldview. Within this group, there arose a well-versed, tightly-knit, industrious, and meritorious class of free blacks, that was dominated in many ways and on multiple counts by its female members. Finding themselves positioned just outside the grasp of the peculiar institution, disenfranchised, yet also within the constraints of the female cult of domesticity, the free black women of New Orleans experienced the struggle for dignity and self protection and resisted in numerous ways. They came to appreciate the role that Western literacies might play in their quest to be recognized as full human beings, as women and as citizens. They amassed personal and collective agency and pursued literacy through family practices, out-state education, and by establishing some of the first black-run Louisiana schools. In light of these developments, the meanings, the modalities, and the motivations for literacy and education in the nineteenth century were shaped at the dawn of the Louisiana colony’s earliest foundations. In the next chapter I illustrate and analyze how the social inertia and female agency of free black women were successfully channeled into building an Afro-Latin Creole women’s monastic tradition, a tradition which would serve as a platform for extending their literate practices formally and perpetually.
Chapter Three
Literacy as a Communal Act: Acculturation and Ritual in Black Monastic Practice in Antebellum New Orleans

The First Formations

On November 21, 1836, after the conclusion of the celebration of the Mass, the pews of St. Mary Chapel on Condé Street cleared of patrons, but for a dozen or more French Creole women. They were female relatives, friends, and longtime acquaintances of Henriette Delille, chiefly free women of color. All gathered in the front of the church, then fell still when Henriette rose to speak. She held aloft a small brown book and offered its contents to them. Across its unlined pages lay the script for a new Catholic congregation. Beneath the heading *Regles et Règlements pour la congregation des Soeurs de la présentation de la B. V. Marie sous l’invocation de Marie V. S. P.*, Henriette had inscribed a statement of purpose, guiding principles, organizational rules, a set of terms for membership, and ceremonial rituals for the new group.¹ Now, she needed only to persuade a few other souls to join. They, she would have argued, would have the opportunity to join and further the unbroken line of implacable Catholic heroines that reached back to the Mother of Christ, women who sought out and achieved the rich spiritual yield that was the product of carrying out the Word of God in a very tangible way. They might discover the sense of peace and hope that came through the millennium-old tradition of Catholic women coming together to worship and serve God. These included the great daughters of the Church: Teresa of Avila, Angela de Merici, and Pauline

¹ The full appellation of the association, translated, reads as follows: The Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Under the Invocation of Mary V. S. P.; Henriette Delille, “*Regles et Règlements,*” 1836, ledger book, ASHF.
Jaricot, as well as the recent American phenomenon, Mother Elizabeth Seton.² Like these notable women, they would earn graces from God to facilitate their personal sanctification through acts of charity and mercy. These included: donating money to a shared treasury, caring for the poor and uneducated, acquiring and distributing religious texts, donating time each week to instruct newly arrived freedmen and African slaves in the faith. They would pray in unison for the afflicted, those who had strayed from the faith, and those poor souls whom they would never reach. However, unlike all other women’s congregations that had arrived previously in the city of New Orleans, theirs was new; it was to be a sisterhood open to all, but especially allocated for the fulfillment of the spiritual aspirations of women of color.

Six months prior, Henriette Delille had arrived at a statement of personal philosophy, one which indicated both the attitude and will of aspiring religious. On the inside cover of a French prayer text, she wrote: “I believe in God, I hope in God. I love. I wish to live and to die for God.”³ The declaration was as true to the definition of the Christian monastic ideal as that which had been expressed by its innovator, Saint Anthony the Great, who in the year 285 defined himself as one who “lives in the presence of God alone [monos].”⁴ Twenty-four years-

² Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), was a Spanish mystic and prioress who founded several religious houses and wrote bestselling spiritual tracks on Christian doctrine, most notably, her autobiography. Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774-1821) was the first native-born American to be canonized by the Catholic Church. She founded a community of women, The Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph, which devoted itself to building schools, most notably, the first Catholic free school in 1814. Interestingly, she had five children and raised them while launching her order. Interestingly, Rev. Louis William Dubourg (1766-1833), Bishop of New Orleans, then Bishop of Maryland, was instrumental in launching Seton’s career. Angela de Merici (1474-1540) was the Italian-born foundress of the Ursulines. Lyon-based Pauline Jaricot (1799-1862) was the foundress and point of inspiration for two critical religious literacy organizations: the Association for the Propagation of the Faith and Association of the Living Rosary. The two religious movements she founded were delivered from Lyon, France, to America through Rev. Louis William Dubourg and Father Etienne Rousselon, respectively. The French version of the writings of each of these women is found in the Holy Family book collection.


old and unmarried, Henriette Delille had deemed herself ready to take on a way of life that would allow her to live out her ideals and develop them further.

Across Christendom, the quest for a life lived in a state of perfect union with God was most popularly pursued by the Catholic faithful, not through eremitical living, as with hermits, but through seeking a state of communion with other devout persons. A religious congregation was seen by many as the prime social arrangement where a pious individual could explore a direct and continuous dialogue with God. By the 1830s, devout French Catholic women of similar disposition had the choice to join in a Post-Revolutionary upswing of French Catholic piety. Tens of thousands of new female orders were founded and, unlike those founded during the Ancien Regime, like the Ursulines, they were characterized by a heightened level of commitment to apostolicism or community activism. Members of apostolic groups spent their lives demonstrating individual piety by working in a collective that was as much dedicated to personal spiritual development as it was in making the world outside the space of their communes a better reflection of Christian ideals. The apostolic congregations extolled Christ’s teachings regarding compassion for human suffering, love, and the equality of all souls; teaching congregations promoted the right and duty of all Christians to propagate knowledge of a merciful and loving God that was revealed through the Holy Bible and other sacred texts.

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5 Though significantly fewer in number, Protestant sisterhoods existed in the nineteenth century. The first founded in the United States was the Sisterhood of the Church of the Holy Communion in New York by William Augustus Muhlenberg (1796-1877).
Henriette Delille’s script for a new Catholic congregation charted a path to both the monastic way of life and the apostolic teaching tradition onto the local scene. The vision supplied that day, reflected in *Regles et Règlements*, was that of a women's collective focused on fostering personal development amongst its members and sense of duty to aid the development of the needy in the community. The women were to consecrate themselves to an interdependent mode of living centered on communal prayer, collective action, and communal interactions with sacred texts, oral and written. They would assemble at least once a month in the chapel to participate in an elegant, interactive event that was, like other expressions of Catholic culture, multi-modal and rich in literate practices. Henriette Delille deemed the need for “*Exercises religieuse,*” a series of activities involving group worship that consisted largely of acts of prayer performed through verse and song. Rituals were highlighted by a formal lecture presumably given by a priest. However, provision was made for the membership to receive lectures from a member. “The exercises will begin by the Song of Songs and then they will sing . . . and if there is no instruction, one of the lecturices will give a pious reading.”

Under the motto “one heart and one soul,” the women were to pool their resources and work to support each other to the grave. Funds were to be collected through a monthly subscription and annual consecration fees. Notably, aid was to be applied in a manner integrative of body, mind, and soul.

[The congregation] will take care that a Sister lacks nothing neither help of the doctor nor remedies prescribed by him; it will furnish her a nurse and will procure for her especially spiritual help, the administration of the sacraments, pious readings, and other charitable consolation.

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7 Henriette Delille, “*Regles et Règlements,*” 1836, ledger book, ASHF. English translation available, translator unknown, ASHF.
8 Delille, “*Regles et Règlements,*” 3.
9 Ibid., 2.
Further, in the event of a member’s death, they were to provide for her burial and make arrangements to take in any children left behind—for those whom no support had been provided. Their point of reference, object of pledge, and steering guide for a harmonious and lasting community would be “the simple obligations of the rule.”

Through the text Henriette Delille asserted that the women’s lives beyond the occasion for monthly religious exercises in the church was equally important. The rules and regulations were to shape the women’s daily practices. Specifically, each woman was advised to maintain herself as a representative of Christian piety in her daily conduct. If a member were to mar the reputation of the organization with the eruption of a personal scandal, she would face the admonition of the group’s elected “Superior.” If she failed to improve, it was written, she faced the ritual act of erasure from “de Catalogue de la Congrégation.” Critically, the vision Henriette Delille offered was explicitly apostolic: released from the above-mentioned concerns, members were to dedicate their time to performing regular act of mercy. In particular, their time, energy, and resources were to be directed toward “(1) caring for the sick, (2) providing aid to the poor, and (3) instructing the ignorant.” As the statement of purpose in Regles et Règlements suggested, above all other acts, instruction was to be their chief objective. “The Sisters according to their knowledge will teach the principal mysteries of religion and the most important points of Christian morality.” Their students were to be children and older women excluded from other existing routes to religious instruction. As instruction of this nature was provided through Catholic parochial schools, convents, and other private whites-only Catholic

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10 Ibid., 1.
12 Ibid., 1.
13 Ibid., 2.
educational enterprises, and it was most likely that the uninstructed persons that the women called themselves to the task of teaching enslaved and freed blacks.

Henriette Delille’s vision for the community dedicated them to an unimaginable goal: the transformation of society through the intervention of pious women of color. The intervention she planned would be communal: they would unite and compose a social space fitted for their interests and goals; they would forge a group identity through shared worship, community activism, and literacy advocacy—including instruction of the enslaved. Through the protections offered by communal identity, the voice and power created by collective agency, they would, it was hoped, wield influence on the broader social environs. In this manner, she hopefully assured, they would “bring back by kindness and prudence strayed persons in order to procure the Glory of Lord and the salvation of the neighbor.”14 As the non-specifics, strayed persons and neighbors might suggest, Henriette Delille charged them with acting to restore a more moral, God-fearing social order and a sense of community, writ large.

Yet, what Henriette offered that day was only a provisional call to sanctified living. In the context of an American milieu foreclosed to the idea of holy black woman, she had to produce, through careful planning, an interim space in which to begin to form a more structured monastic arrangement. Most notably, members of the collective were joined to one another by pledge, not the public profession of sacred vows, like a vow of chastity, obedience, or poverty, as was common for Catholic women religious. The women were to remain in their homes, living amongst their family members, assembling only on occasion. Regles et Règlements glaringly omitted the requirement that the women should live together or operate from a space dedicated for their sole use. More than likely, such a requirement would have

14 Delille, “Regles et Règlements,” 2.
demanded more recognition than the New Orleans Catholic church and its congregants could afford the black collective. Henriette Delille would have been cognizant of the early history of the Ursulines, who themselves had sought a serious refiguring of the role of the Catholic nun. They had likewise commenced their mission as only a small band of women from the community. Their founder, Angela de Merici, composed a set of flexible, innovative rules that offered her charter members a way in which they could retain the mark of piety but “continue to live with their families... [while retaining the congregation] as a source of spiritual and intellectual development.” In a similar way, Regles et Règlements represented the first known steps Henriette took toward forming the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

With the presentation of Regles et Règlements, it would seem that Henriette Delille had hoped to secure a company of free black women who were willing to work together to realize her vision of a provisionally monastic community. Who among them felt the call? Who amongst them was willing to relinquish the time, energy, and money to commence? Who amongst them would be willing to raise the lamp of attention on the weakest places on the social fabric of society? According to Regles et Règlements, at least twenty-nine women did agree and began that day to lay the critical groundwork for a perpetual community of holy black women educators. 

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The event of the founding of the Sisters of the Presentation marks the commencement of the founding period in the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, (1836-1842). It was during this time period that the socio-cultural foundations for a

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15 Heaney, A Century of Pioneering, 6.
16 The rules indicate the assignment of members into ten different council assignments, ranging from a single Director to twelve “Councillors” to eight “Zealatrices” or zealots. Delille, “Regles et Règlements,” 1.
distinctively Black and female type of Catholic monastic order was laid down. The most salient of the themes of this formative period were *community* and *communality*, specifically notions of interdependence and a feminine spirit of togetherness. The process of formation evidenced in part in *Regles et Règlements*, and supported by written and oral tradition, presents us with a choice opportunity to render and then consider the dimension that notions of community and communality may have played in developing and supporting their literacy values and practices.

In the sections to follow, I approach the foundation of Sisters of the Presentation in terms of being spatial work in service of the formation of a particular Afro-Latin Creole *community of practice*—a group of persons with their own ways of producing and sharing knowledge. I begin by tracing the lineage of this development to show how free black women’s first attempts at monastic formation may be viewed as the synthesis of two distinctive female communal traditions—one of which may be traced to West Africa and the other to Southern Europe. I conclude with a discussion of how the new hybrid tradition speaks to ways that Henriette Delille conceived of literacy as a community act.

**Two Communities of Practice**

Contextualized approaches to literacy and its history suggest that ways of thinking about literacy, enacting literate behaviors, and fostering literacy in others, are shaped and informed by the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. In this respect, a clearer or more authentic rendering of literacy in the lives of nineteenth century black women requires critical acknowledgement of the social arrangements and cultural values and practices that did precede it. What Henriette Delille imagined and brought to realization in the Sisters of the Holy Family emerged from that which she had already witnessed/experienced: free black women’s agency, the agency of Catholic women religious, and monasticism’s ability to
conserve space for the Afro-Latin community’s activities, values, and goals. In the case of Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family, the most crucial structure for analysis is the formal social arrangement through which they chose to live and be literate: apostolic Black Catholic *coenobitic* monasticism.\(^{17}\)

*As Regles et Règlements* makes apparent, the meanings and uses of Holy Family literacy were deeply embedded in prevalent notions of community and communality. Toward that effect, the socio-cultural environment of early to mid-nineteenth century New Orleans provided at least two sources of influence. Most evidently, one source was the Roman Catholic female monastic tradition. As was stated and elaborated upon in an earlier chapter the antebellum New Orleans diocese was home to four orders of women religious, the most important of whom were the women of the Company of St. Ursula, or the Ursulines.\(^{18}\) The diocese was also home to a strong contingency of male religious connected to Lyon, depicted by Sarah Curtis as a “hub of congregational activity.”\(^{19}\) Most notably, these included Antoine Blanc, the bishop of New Orleans and Étienne Rousselon, the man who would become the religious order’s clerical spiritual advisor.\(^{20}\) The other prime source of inspiration for their mode of living was decidedly African and Creole: the resistant, sometimes radical, spirit of unity and social cohesion rising from the free and freed black community.\(^{21}\) Review of these

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\(^{17}\) Coenobitic monasticism is the technical term for group monasticism, where women and men carry out permanent vows to God while living in a convent or monastery. This differs significantly from eremitical, or solitary monasticism, the mode of living commonly associated with hermits. John McKay, Bennet D. Hill and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin Company, 1991), 205.

\(^{18}\) The Sisters of Charity, Sisters of Mount Carmel, and Sisters of the Sacred Heart were the remaining three orders present in Louisiana the early nineteenth century.

\(^{19}\) Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 21

\(^{20}\) Fr. Étienne Rousselon (1800-1866) was given the title vicar general of the diocese. Antoine Blanc was bishop of New Orleans from 1835 to 1850 and archbishop from 1850 to 1860. Baudier, *The Catholic Church*, 326-332.

two sources of influence will demonstrate how Henriette Delille and the charter women were able to draw upon the wealth of each to author a mandate for literacy and to conceptualize a sponsoring institution that could be sustained by religious values, communal bonds, and communal/community practices within a dangerously challenging milieu for black literacy activism. In this sense, the history of literacy amongst antebellum black women religious becomes a genesis narrative—the birth of a close community of literate women and an institution devoted to black literacy sponsorship. Each stage of the development is inextricably bound to the implied assertion that black women were full human beings who bore the same spiritual, social, and intellectual potential as their white counterparts. The plot of the narrative was tangled by the intricacies of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion; its completion rested on a radical theory of the role that black women could play in society: they could be leaders and change agents for the whole of society. Its ultimate fulfillment would be found in the achievement of an ordered, officially sanctioned, self-propagating institution. As such, a tracing of the communal roots of this phenomenon will underscore the most important themes belonging to Henriette Delille’s vision of literacy sponsorship: leadership, piety, fervency, justice-seeking, matrilineality (female leadership and power), woman-centeredness, interdependence, solemnity, holism, flexibility, racial pride, and resistance to oppression.

**Roman Catholic Coenobitic Monasticism**

On many counts, it is unsurprising that a free black woman living in nineteenth century New Orleans might aspire to trace her future on the ancient template of Roman Catholic monasticism. The black community was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, and unlike the Catholic experience elsewhere, its females were the first to establish a working relationship with the religious hierarchy. Scholarship by Emily Clark and Virginia Gould recently
demonstrated how a complex play of gender and race and local demography made it possible for black females to convert in large numbers and then quickly establish themselves as ministers in their community.

During the colonial era, Clark and Gould contend, French clergy and the religious women of Louisiana maintained a deep interest in the conversion of blacks to the Catholic belief system. An analysis of selected sacramental records during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found evidence that proselytizing efforts by Catholic missionaries, especially those sponsored by the Ursulines and the Children of Mary, converted a disproportionate number of black female converts.22

Although enslaved men were baptized in increasing numbers, women of African descent continued to dominate in overall baptismal participation for the colonial population as a whole throughout the eighteenth century, usually in numbers disproportionate to their representation in the general population. In five of six sample periods (1731–1733, 1763, 1778, 1795, 1804–1805), females of African descent constituted the largest cohort of baptisands. While males of African descent consistently represent the second-largest group among the ranks of the baptized, they were often significantly outpaced by females, most notably in 1733, 1763, and 1804.23

Moreover, the typical face of the Louisiana Catholic congregant became that of the African. Clark and Gould continue, “Whites of both sexes never constituted more than 35 percent of the New Orleanians who joined the church.” Clark and Gould offer a series of possible explanations, each of which underscores the severity of the effects of slavery on black families and helps us to understand how Africans and their descendents became motivated to associate with a faith system that, in most all other respects, continued to espouse racist ideals and support slavery. Among the most important of these are those explanations which implicate gender and spatiality in the creation of religious community. A prime reason for the unequal

representation of black females in the faith, the Clark and Gould contend, is the fact that the
Ursulines and the Children of Mary taught only females, and the Louisiana church failed to
develop an appreciable male equivalent to serve the black male population. Males had little or
no access to teachers, services, or models of male piety.

Equally important, Clark and Gould observed that the division of labor assignments
according to gender favored female conversion. More males than females were sent to work in
the fields while women tended to dominate domestic roles. This state of affairs placed female
slaves within the sphere of French Catholic households and family culture, as well as under
public surveillance by way of visitors. Further, mistresses of a plantation household were
particularly motivated to support a pious expression in their homes, owing to black women’s
intimately close relationship to their family members and implicit knowledge of the
widespread pattern of sexual impropriety between masters and slaves. For some of the same
reasons, plantation culture isolated black men and boys to the world beyond the main house.
“This [arrangement] placed them beyond the surveillance of French masters and reduced their
exposure to French cultural norms, especially on the larger plantations,” they wrote.24 Thus, it
would seem that the black women’s rise in representation spoke as much about their personal
agency as the induced state of isolation experienced by black males. Clark and Gould
concluded: “In the end, fewer positive incentives and an ineffective evangelizing force
probably combined to retard the progress of Catholic conversion among adult male slaves.”25

In the context of this vacuum, black women assumed roles as evangelizers, and the
sponsors of religious literacy amongst new converts. Upon gaining freedom and economic

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24 Ibid., 422-3.
25 Ibid., 423.
independence freed black women continued their work in propagating the faith, tithed dutifully in the church, and, like Widow Marie Bernard Couvent, donated substantially to church causes in their wills. These developments elevated the position of a core group of elite black women in the eyes of the male clergy and others who were devoted to the same cause. Some, like Henriette Delille’s ancestors, were drawn into close and enduring relationships with liberal clergy and women religious. A precipitous decline in the numbers of white women religious after the Louisiana Purchase, coupled with the pressures imposed by a rise in Anglo-Protestant influences, pushed ecclesiastics to break boundaries and yield ministerial roles formerly reserved for the clergy and women religious to free black women. For example, records show that they ministered to incoming slaves and freedmen and stood in the place of clergy and religious women during sacred rites and duties (sponsoring baptisms, witnessing marriages, and instructing in religion). Clark and Gould noted,

By 1842, nearly 90 percent of the city’s slaves and free people of color were sponsored by women of African descent. Free women of African descent all but replaced white women in the records and, in an unprecedented move, they replaced them as ministers to their community.

In this manner, race and gender barriers were softened or outright subverted to forge “a distinctive partnership between women of color and the Catholic Church in the city [of New Orleans].” It was a level of involvement and interaction which undoubtedly afforded women of color a high level of familiarity with the social and cultural tools (e.g., values, protocols, religious rules, leadership skills) necessary to imagine life as a woman religious.

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 438.
28 Ibid., 410.
This was particularly true for free black women living in Creole neighborhoods or faubourgs. Nineteenth century residents of Faubourgs Marigny and Tremé lived in Creole cottages and townhouses located either within sight or steps of the former Ursuline convent on Chartres Street. The convent complex with its cloistered convent building and outlying structures must have figured as a prominent presence in their social imaginations. The families likely paced their days in accordance with its looming clock tower, and some may have even worshipped or received religious instruction in its chapel. Along with Henriette Delille, any other Sisters of the Presentation who were thirty or older at the time of the composition of *Regles et Règlements* would have had a clear memory of a time when Ursulines nuns still dwelled there. Emily Clark remarked that then “[b]oundaries of race and class did not block the entrance to the convent door.” Before the Ursulines moved to a new convent in 1823, it was an ordinary experience to them to witness the women of the Company of St. Ursula receiving free girls of color within the walls of their convent. Some were day scholars of the convent school; others, less affluent or enslaved, entered an outlying building to attend evening classes.

In truth, the ties of connection between blacks and the Ursulines were far more intricate. Many of the Creoles of color who lived in Faubourg Marigny were descendents of those who had designed or built the convent or had been owned by the order as chattel slaves. Women residing in the nineteenth century community likely had either lived in the Ursuline convent as boarding school students, or had acquaintances or ancestors who had. For example,

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the son of the convent’s architect, Narcisse Broutin, was a prominent and well-respected French engineer who never married, but lived with a free black woman and recognized their mixed-race children as his sole heirs.\textsuperscript{31} In addition, it was Henriette Delille’s great-great-great grandfather, Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil, a prominent planter and building contractor for the colony during the eighteenth century, who was commissioned to build the Ursuline convent on Chartres Street in 1745. The enslaved Africans who once worked once for him were reportedly well trained and possibly able to read, write, and compute in accordance with their trades.\textsuperscript{32} These same individuals, some of whom may have been his own progeny, became free black artisans. They took up residence on the surrounding lands of the former Marigny plantation and formed the basis of the free black community.\textsuperscript{33} Because the Ursuline effect was so pervasive, exceeding the limits of the cloister walls, it is likely that the people living all around their convent shared some level of knowledge about their traditions and practices.

Through their classes for girls and unconverted women and a lay confraternity, the Ursulines of the 1730s and 1740s provided mechanisms that knit every segment of New Orleans’ female population into a community of faith with the convent at its center. They mounted a broad apostolate from the outset and managed . . . to draw the full range of the town’s feminine society into their project.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Samuel Wilson’s seminal treatment of the history of nineteenth-century architecture in New Orleans is replete with information relevant to the study of New Orleans’ social history. Wilson identifies by name and kinship group many of the original builders and residents of the homes in the Faubourgs of New Orleans. Wilson, \textit{The Creole Faubourgs} (see note 29).
\textsuperscript{33} Dubreuil was known for his manner of apprenticing his black staff, giving them autonomy over their work. Governor Bienville once wrote: “Sieur Dubreuil has trained his negroes in all kinds of trades, he employs only very few French workmen.” Samuel Wilson writes, “It is interesting to note that Dubreuil in his extensive building operations used Negro artisans extensively. . . . Some of these Negro workmen were probably the ancestors of the many Negro craftsmen who eventually were to settle in the Faubourg Marigny.” Wilson, \textit{The Creole Faubourgs}, 3.
\textsuperscript{34} Clark, “A New World,” 70.
Literacy had played a prominent part in strengthening their bond, collecting their web of supports and securing for them a place in the city. In the thirty years subsequent to their arrival to the Louisiana colony in 1722, the Ursulines oversaw a dramatic rise in white women’s literacy rate, a development Emily Clark attributed to the Ursuline school. Converse to national trends, New Orleans became was “a city where white women were just as likely to be literate as men.” This state of affairs no doubt presented to Henriette Delille the image of how women could self-govern, shape the social landscape of their neighborhoods and wield influence throughout a city.

Yet, Henriette Delille’s turn toward Catholic coenobitic monasticism may also have been influenced by community knowledge, that is the accumulation of knowledge and experience gleaned from relations and friends who had experienced the coenobitic monastic ways of acting, believing, thinking, interacting, and being literate. Nineteenth century religious women, by tradition, brought students, aides, servants, and lay confraternity members within their enclosure and led them into the flow of communal life, thereby allowing the sisters to complete their work while fulfilling their hourly duties, like chapel prayer. Coburn and Smith affirm: “Many adolescent girls and young women followed a daily schedule that paralleled or mirrored much of convent life, and thus they interacted daily with sisters in all religious and social activities of the schools.” In New Orleans, the Ursulines drew indigenous women and Africans into their lives in various capacities. The order owned three plantations,

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35 Ibid., 244.
36 Ibid., 246.
37 Putting together separately published genealogies of Henriette Delille and early Ursuline boarding school students, it is apparent that Henriette Delille’s white cousins were students of the school. Claude Joseph Dubreuil, Henriette Delille’s ancestor, had one descendent and two grand nieces who attended the school. See “Ursuline boarding students related to confraternity members: Carriere and Dubreuil families,” Clark, “A New World,” 89. See also “Genealogy of Henriette Delille,” Davis, Henriette Delille, 99.
38 Coburn and Smith, Spirited Lives, 9.
vast real estate holdings, from which they drew rent and had slaves in their main complex, carrying out basic chores. According to Emily Clark, well into the nineteenth century the Ursuline nuns continued their early colonial period policy of admitting as boarders “the legitimate daughters of quadroons and white men.” Among those free women of color whose names were recorded and identified as colored convent boarding students was an unnamed Osage woman (1729), Victoire Rouby (1798-1799), Louise Touton (1800-1801), and Sophie Brunet (1801). The Ursuline sisters also welcomed women of color as full members of their lay confraternity, The Children of Mary. Also, free black women may have had exposure to monastic practices amongst other orders. Henriette Delille’s contemporary, Rodolphe Desdunes, contends that boarders who could pass for white women were taken up as members of other religious houses. It was his recollection that “a number of our girls, reared in the convents, became associates and members of the Order of the Sisters of Charity.”

Thus, by association or direct participation, free black women had direct access to spirit of faith, organizational structure, and sense of community cultivated in a French female religious house. What type of community culture did they witness or perhaps encounter directly? In the early nineteenth century the women would have had the opportunity to witness a female culture incomparably educated, composed, and engaged in the public sphere. One which stood apart from black Protestant women’s traditions or other nineteenth century

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39 Clark, “A New World,” 93.
40 Ibid., 95-96. Victoire Rouby is my ancestor. Emily Clark contends that after the 1830s the convent became increasingly inclined toward a harsher model of race than was previously embraced, due to an influx of Iberian nuns from Cuba, who took over the leadership of the order and infused a heightened sense of race in the order’s mission and corporate vision.
41 Ibid., 77. Three women of color, identified without surnames (according to prevailing recording conventions reserved for free people of color) by Clark: Marie Thérèse, Marthe, and Magdelaine. The full name of the confraternity reads: Congrégation des Dames Enfant de Marie. Ibid., 73.
42 Rodolphe Desdunes (1849-1928) was a New Orleanian Creole of color historian and contemporary of Henriette Delille. Desdunes, Our People, Our History, 98.
women’s groups in terms of the committed manner in which Catholic women religious carried out daily acts affirming their faith and the value of female association, both matrilineal (woman-led), and women-centered (positioning girls and women as the direct object of ministry).\textsuperscript{43} Carol Coburn and Martha Smith studied nineteenth century women’s religious communities in general and observed that the lifestyle emulated the model of a family. The religious community was a highly distinctive and inclusive environment that permitted multiple generations to live and work together with woman-only space and tradition. In this communal setting, meals, lodging, celebration, deaths, privileges, and deprivations were shared by all. Some sisters spent fifty or sixty years in a religious community that provided a familial atmosphere in which nuns functioned as mothers, teachers, mentors, friends, confidants, and role models of religious life.\textsuperscript{44}

In addition to being matrilineal, women-centered, and familial, Coburn and Smith identify three other key qualities which facilitated harmony and success in religious culture; (a) ethnic and class diversity, (b) the perception of their education and vocational work as lifelong pursuits, and (c) the spirit of dedication engendered by perpetual vows.\textsuperscript{45}

Though not always thought of in this manner, the culture within a Catholic monastic community was, relatively speaking, diverse. In order to fulfill their missions and survive as a commune, the female religious communities required their members to “set aside their own ethnic and class prejudices and focus on their identities as religious women.”\textsuperscript{46} Once a homogenous French order, the Ursulines of New Orleans had been pressed to adapt to their new circumstances in the New World; low on recruits or replacements, they actively carried out the precepts of Catholic universalism. Extensive research conducted by Emily Clark in this regard demonstrated that the Ursulines of the early colonial period maintained an

\textsuperscript{43} For treatment of Northern women’s involvement in fostering literacy through social organizations, see McHenry, Forgotten Readers.

\textsuperscript{44} Coburn and Smith, Spirited Lives, 7.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 8.
unprecedented high level of diversity in their various endeavors, a pattern which resonated far beyond the convent walls and the colonial period. A survey of Ursuline convent records from 1727 to the beginning of the American period in 1803, identified social arrangements that were both traditional and radical. While the membership of the order was not known to be racially diverse, it was composed of a mixture of women: lower class women, *converse* nuns, and their elite counterparts, *choir* nuns, French nationals, and Creole and Spanish women. At least one was identified as a woman with Native American heritage. Despite all these ethnic and class-based differences and what they meant in their own time, women within the community were brought into unity: they were equally pressed to share a living space, austere living conditions, one identity, one mission, and the authority of a single elected superior. The membership of their associated confraternity, The Children of Mary, was more appreciably diverse, suggesting a broader vision simmering among their traditions. Clark demonstrated how the membership of the confraternity included three women of color, at least one of whom was identified as an enslaved woman.47 In this social arrangement, wealthy women were placed alongside the spouses of merchants, carpenters, and goldsmiths, as well as “a widow struggling to make ends meet.”48 In this manner the women of the society were brought to experience Catholic universalism first hand and in collective, no doubt with the hope that they would carry the message of its moral and social benefits out into the broader community.

As was briefly sketched above, the Ursuline convent school also contributed to the ethnic, racial, and socio-economic mixture experienced within the walls of the convent. The student body included the daughters of men of diverse means, while some were orphans,
Others emerged from luxurious homes with scores of slaves and important family connections, like the four daughters of Vincent Rillieux. A number of other students emerged from Anglo-Protestant homes, like Henriette Cowperthwait, the daughter of a Quaker. Clark concluded:

A convent education in New Orleans was not restricted to the daughters of a New World aristocracy of elite landowners. Rich planters’ daughters shared the attic dormitory at the convent with the daughters of men who worked with their own hands and stood behind tills. And when day boarders joined them in class and at noonday meals in rooms reserved apart from the day students and the orphans, they sat down together with free girls of color.

Free black boarding students and confraternity members, servants, and slaves were participant-witnesses to an alternative social model wrought by strong and active women. Clark and Gould wrote, “The Ursuline student records paint a portrait of old loyalties sustained and new ties forged, creating a community within the enclosure that contested developments taking place beyond the convent walls.” While this by no means occurred in a perfect or perfunctory manner, Coburn and Smith insist this pattern of diversity in membership and mission distinguishes Catholic religious communities from dominant Anglo-Protestant women’s traditions.

After diversity, the second core characteristic of Catholic monastic culture that free black women were cognizant of was the women religious’ belief and expectation that teaching and learning were lifelong pursuits. By its very nature, the social organization depended on the ability of its members to cultivate a wide range of literacies and knowledge bases and to do so with the depth to be ready to instruct others. This understanding demanded an attitude of openness and a flexible approach to living. Coburn and Smith wrote:

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49 Ibid., 102.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 106.
52 Ibid., 95.
In every stage of a nun’s community life, as postulant novice, and professed sisters, education played a significant role. Postulants and novices had a rigorous schedule that included studies in spirituality, religious exercises, church history, . . . music, vocational training, theology, the study of the vows (poverty, chastity, obedience) . . . and . . . formal classes in teacher training.

Professed sisters continued their spiritual exercises and began on-the-job training for teaching, nursing, or child care. Each young sister [novice] had mentors who guided her in her work setting. The wide variety of schools, hospitals, and other social institutions provided ongoing, oftentimes intense educational experiences. 

Communal values of this order no doubt impacted their approach to literacy learning. Interdependence demanded that women use their cognitive powers and social skills to acquire a variety of literacies and engendered the expectation that all members be open to learning whatever discipline, art, or technical skills for which they were capable, thereby promoting a broad conceptualization of literacy and its use/meaning as a form of group self-preservation.

The third key quality accentuates all the prior ones, underscoring the uniqueness of the Catholic tradition to the American experience: the profession of vows. The vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity defined the Catholic religious. All who came into contact with the women would have been cognizant of this tradition. It both shaped their lives in the community and, in the view of Coburn and Smith, was used “to justify, create, and control space for their public endeavors.” The vow of poverty was both a denouncement of the concept of personal property and the profession of dependence on the community to supply her basic needs. This vow, along with its concomitant pattern of fasting, kept the women close to the experiences of the hungry and the poor, who were usually also illiterate; public knowledge of the vow of poverty cleared them of suspicion from using money for personal vanity or personal gain, an action which earned them the trust and respect among church congregants and male clerics. A

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 9.
solemn vow of obedience to the leader of the order was probably the most palpably experienced of the three vows, in terms of vocational duties. The superior had the power to instantaneously assign and reassign women from one course to another, from one aspect of the ministry to another. It was considered a part of their religious experience to submit to sudden or frequent changes in assignments. Sisters were regularly circulated within the convent and amongst institutions where they served, like hospitals or orphanages; sometimes this was done to promote harmony and intellectual vigor, and other times to discipline or challenge them. This vow also served a positive purpose for the collective in relation to the outside world.

The sisters’ vow of “holy obedience” to their female superior provided a buffer to patriarchal authority, permitting them to resist pressure from male clerics, who utilized gender and hierarchical privileges to manipulate the sisters. This was an effective method even when the demands were inconsequential or for domestic services.\(^{55}\)

The vow of chastity, the solemn vow to abstain from sex, worked to serve the interest of a religious community in a parallel way. The de-gendering effect of the vow helped to underscore the personal sacrifice of the women and aided their ability to act in public without suspicion or the taint of an improper motivation for their actions.

Seemingly, the sisters had the best of both worlds: gender afforded them the special courtesy given to most nineteenth century white women, even as their vow of chastity effectively shielded them from most male sexual advances or unwanted attention.\(^{56}\)

The core qualities of a Catholic religious order: female-centered culture and tradition, diversity, life-long learning, and vows, write Coburn and Smith, “created an unprecedented female power base,” one whose importance would not have escaped the attention of elite Catholic free black women in New Orleans.\(^{57}\) Thus, notwithstanding the physical walls of separation between Ursulines and free blacks and strict racial boundaries for membership,

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 10.
knowledge of the laws, traditions, educational expectations, and community attitudes required for Catholic monastic life were probably wholly accessible to a free black woman of the nineteenth century. The bounds of safety and separation, impetus and spirit of togetherness would have been particularly appealing to her.

However, there is no evidence to suggest that Henriette Delille desired to become an Ursuline nun. The vision of a female monastic community articulated by her in *Regles et Règlements* was a major departure from the Ursuline model in a major respect—it did not explicitly exclude anyone according to race or income. The Ursuline order had persisted in keeping its doors closed to free black women and appeared, by the 1830s, to have withdrawn its stake in the black community and the increasingly black Creole Faubourgs. Following the 1823 transfer to a new convent further south of the city, the Ursulines’ direct geo-social links to the black community were severed. This, sadly, may have been part of the plan. It would appear that the women abandoned their black ministry completely due to internal convent politics which had hardened along racial lines; the new leaders of Iberian descent and Cuban connections shied from the Ursulines’ prior work with blacks.\(^{58}\) We know, however, that at least one voice from the old tradition prevailed. The departing Ursulines stipulated that the new convent owners should continue their ministry at that location: “Every Sunday and feast day an instruction or catechism will be given to the negresses of the country to replace that being given now on those days.”\(^{59}\) Thus, after the last Ursuline nun had packed away her possessions and departed for the new site south of the city, at least one among their ranks remained. Sr. Ste.

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 6.  
\(^{58}\) Clark, “A New World,” 86.  
\(^{59}\) Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face,” n 69, 441.
Marthé Fontiere, a Hospitalière sister trained in Bordeaux, assumed responsibility for that mandate and continued their legacy of work among free people of color and the enslaved.

Sr. Ste. Marthé Fontiere not only met the obligations expressed in the contract, but attempted to build a radical new monastic tradition as well. When she first arrived, Sr. Ste. Marthé quite literally made herself at home amongst the Ursulines, but maintained a distinguishing distance apart. The annals of the Ursulines attest: “[Sr. Ste. Marthé] stayed here several years dressed like us, working in the school with much zeal. In 1823, she left to establish the house known under the name of St. Claude, intended for the instruction of young girls of color.”

Neither an Ursuline nor a longtime resident of the New Orleans, Gould and Clark observed, Sr. Ste. Marthé had been the product of post-revolutionary activist movement which brought a collection of new orders and clerics to New Orleans. Spiritually revitalized, they were part of a new wave of women religious who campaigned to apply universalistic principles at a heightened level. Once released from the grips of the Ursulines, Sr. Ste. Marthé Fontiere pursued a plan of her own—one which passed over social hurdles that the Ursulines seemed either unable or unwilling to cross. For the next eight years, Sr. Ste. Marthé operated a secondary school for colored girls, tutored enslaved women and girls in religion, and trained young women to teach.

Most importantly, Sr. Ste. Marthé Fontiere proved unafraid to bring the spirit of universalism to female monasticism. Records show that she attempted to found an interracial religious order, enlisting one white and one black postulant, the latter identified by name as Juliette Gaudin, Henriette Delille’s closest friend and future sister (in religious life). In 1826, in

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60 Ibid., n 68.
a letter addressed to Bishop Rosati of the Diocese of St. Louis, she begged for proper financial support for her struggling school and announced, in an understated manner, the reception of a radical new prospect for a Catholic sisterhood.

It is with the greatest pain that I inform you that our establishment which until now had gone very well is threatened with ruin perhaps pleasing to the Divine Providence to test me in this manner, I shall hold on until the end even though I foresee that my expenses will go higher than my income. If that is it, I beg you to see if it is possible to suspend my rent and if the classes go up again, I shall return payment immediately otherwise I fear of being obliged to abandon . . . . I have two postulants, one white and the other colored. I do not wish to abandon them. These two excellent subjects who are ready to do everything that one will wish; I was on the point of building but I had everything stopped.62

As such, the Hospitaliére sister was poised to create what the Ursulines could not or would fully realize: “an enduring space for the emergence of a sense of collective identity,” one that was spared the indignities of segregation or racial exclusions.63 Though the new collective was not realized, because Fontiere rather abruptly returned to France, her attempt signaled a season of change.

Outside of the Ursuline tradition, women’s monasticism became increasingly prevalent in nineteenth-century New Orleans. Undoubtedly, the new religious orders that arrived exerted a direct influence on the monastic vision that Henriette Delille set down in Regles et Règlements. Emily Clark and Virginia Gould asserted that a wave of freshly inspired religious women arrived in the early nineteenth century, including the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of Charity, and the Sisters of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. “Each of these female missionaries,” they wrote “came from a different section of France, with a different

61 The St. Claude School changed hands numerous times and was staffed intermittently by Ursulines and the Sisters of Mount Carmel. The school was later purchased by Marie Aliquot, whose biological sister was an Ursuline nun who chose to remain and teach in the school.
62 Sr. Marthé nee Fontiere to Bishop Rosati, 5 July 1826 (italics added). ASHF.
63 Clark, “A New World,” 86.
background, a different walk of life.” Their varied missionary calls and proclivities “provided Delille and her colleagues with a contemporary French model of women ministering to the sick, the needy, and the poor, and instructing the uninstructed.” Importantly, as missionaries, the women offered an alternative to the Ursuline vision, which had become increasingly blinded by matters of race. In these and other ways, a variety of Catholic female monastic approaches to conducting an apostolic religious life and the implementation of Catholic universalism were present and available to Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, Marie Aliquot and the other charter members of the Sisters of the Presentation.

In drawing up the model offered by Roman Catholic coenobitic monasticism, Henriette Delille and the charter members of the Sisters of the Holy Family drew upon a literacy tradition that was ancient, empowering, protective, active, familial, and, importantly, was familiar to them. Women’s monastic tradition in nineteenth-century Louisiana incorporated reading writing, singing, and pious lectures as part of a regular pattern of interaction to support group identity and survival. Literacy was broadly conceived, incorporating whatever tasks were necessary for group survival from reciting prayers to teaching reading to nursing the sick. Literacy acts were a unifying factor in a context designed to be diverse; deep personal commitment to changing roles within the group demanded flexibility and a lifetime commitment to literacy learning. Finally, literacy was a focal point around which women religious could safely gather around so as to shield them from overt sexualization as they moved into public spaces to advocate for a better world.

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64 Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face," 453.
65 Ibid., 459.
The Afro-Latin (Creole) Cultural Traditions

While it is clear that the future Henriette Delille charted for herself and her associates was traced on the ancient template of Roman Catholic coenobitic monasticism, what is only just beginning to be understood or appreciated are those communal values and practices which arose from New Orleans’ Afro-Latin culture. As the pages to follow shall elucidate, the charter women were not *tabula rasa*, or blank slates on which the Catholic female monastic tradition was scored. The women wrote themselves into the world using ways of being, knowing, believing, thinking and acting that reflected both West African culture and the African experience in Roman Catholic colonial contexts. In general terms, these featured a strong sense of kinship, a profound religiosity wholly integrative of the sacred and secular, an aesthetic for balance and flexibility, and a profound reverence for ancient wisdom, social structures, and practices. It is reasonable to believe, that as the Holy Family women progressed through the various stages of their goal to establish a black communal society, they did retain and invoke those African and Afro-Latin communal values.

Recent historical scholarship by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Emily Clark, Virginia Gould, and Cyprian Davis suggested that a well-maintained line of connection existed between West Africa and Louisiana, thereby affording free black women of New Orleans distinct African cultural models for their roles as sponsors of literacy. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s research on the colonial-era developments in the Louisiana slave colony demonstrated the numerical and cultural strength of Bambara African culture in early Louisiana. With regard to community formation, I would like to highlight aspects of those colonial era developments that speak specifically to spiritual communal values and practices. Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson aptly described the Bambara in New Orleans as
“a community in exile, with traditions and customs already in place. Their particular ways of acting, thinking, believing, relating to one another, and being literate were rooted in ancient traditions transferred from generation to generation through language, orature, religious symbolism and ritualized cultural interactions.

A dispersed people in the wake of the fall of the Mali Empire, cultural values of the Bambara peoples of the eighteenth and nineteenth century reflected the need to balance cultural conservancy against the need to adapt readily to a changing geo-political environment. For these and other reasons, Bambaran values were inextricably wound around notions of spirituality, family, fictive or real, and community survival.

In Bambaran society, the family is the central spiritual grouping. Souls are recycled, so to speak, within the family. When a family member dies, the next born inherits his or her soul. And out of this belief comes an interpretation of power that is very different from the “manifest destiny” that guided American imperialism. In other words, the enslaved Africans in Louisiana care little or nothing about who owned the land or controlled the territory. Their kingdom traveled with them.

Logically, a portable culture highly valued its literacy traditions, the means by which their particular ways of acting, knowing, believing and thinking were transported across lands and generations. Bambaran orature—the body of oral history, beast tales, and proverbs were amassed over the centuries—was highly valued; it served as a means of maintaining the cultural group’s identity in the face of displacement by war, famine, or the cultural imposition brought by invading Muslim forces. For example, the very air in which one spoke was charged with importance and mystic energy. Gwendolyn Mildo Hall wrote that in Bambaran society, daily speech and listening acts had a ritual quality.

67 Hine and Thompson, A Shining Thread of Hope, 55.
Perception and speech have transcendent significance. The bearer of false news and bad words is heard and judged by Faro and Téliko [dieties]. Amiable and constructive words profit the one to whom they are addressed. Téliko [female diety] changes the air sent by the speaker into favorable nymama (spiritual power), and the person to whom good words are addressed should open the eyes wide and look at the person in order to receive them, and close the eyes so as not to lose the ear’s effect. But bad words and insults injure both the hearer and the speaker.68

As evidenced above, Bambaran religion was complex and rich and wholly integrated in one’s way of acting, speaking, thinking, and relating to one another; it offered a complete cosmology, equipped with deities, a creation myth, ethical rules, subdeities, spiritual aesthetics, and a profound symbolic library. Crucially, the religious philosophy expressed through these elements and aspects of Bambara religion matched or aligned with many elements of Roman Catholicism, among them the idea of a priesthood, and the desire for an informed, involved congregation, one fully prepared to share the meaning of rituals and cognizant of spiritual hierarchy and proclivities of the dieties.69

Profound knowledge is the preserve of the few. But knowledge of the mythology upon which the ethical foundation of the culture is built is universal. Knowledge of, and capacity to perform, religious rites and rituals is universal. Religious knowledge and power is in the hands of many. This knowledge is easily transportable.70

Another matching aspect of the two ancient religious traditions was the expectation for religious expressions that were tactile and ethereal, recurring and multimodal. Like the Catholic rituals, Bamabaraban worship was enacted through ancestor worship, dramatic rituals, music, dance, and art. Religious practices were integrated into all aspects of life. Along the varied points of encounter forced upon them by slave trafficking, the Middle Passage, slavery, and proselytization in slave quarters by Christian missionaries, many of these African values and practices translated seamlessly into the adoration of Catholic saints, the ritual of the Mass,

68 Hall, Africans, 50.
69 Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana.
and Catholicism’s rich tradition of sacred music, icons, and art. Well into the nineteenth century, these West African cultural traditions and religious attitudes found safe abode within the safety of established black Catholic families, kinship groups, and church associations.

In “The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans 1727-1852,” Emily Clark and Virginia Gould elucidated the intercultural dynamics or “religious creolization” process specific to Louisiana’s Black Catholic experience. An examination of church records, genealogical pedigrees, and early church history shed light on some of the intricacies of the process by which women of color (slave and free) established a place for themselves within the Roman Catholic community. Fortuitously, the focal point of their work was the life and heritage of Henriette Delille. Their impressively detailed exploration examined what can be known about the founder’s life and that of her female black ancestors. Their work aids in drawing a direct line of connection between the monastic model expressed in *Regles et Règlements* and communal values evoked by West African and Black Catholic religious culture.

The creolization process was facilitated through the formation of extended families with branches that flowed across the lines of race and class. Henriette Delille’s early ministry, Clark and Gould wrote, “expressed itself in catechizing and godparenting,” over a dozen new black Catholics. Godparentage involved establishing a fictive kinship relationship with the sponsoree. During the baptism ritual, the godparent of an infant was expected to act as their voice in the enactment of a sacrament initially offered only to adults. The rite declared the sponsor to be a *spiritual* parent, one who would support the sponsoree’s instruction in the faith

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70 Hall, Africans, 49.
72 Ibid., 409.
and offer moral guidance throughout their life. Catholic religious culture also asked that the godparent provide materially for their godchildren in the case of the loss of their biological parents—should no other form of support become available. In the nineteenth century, these roles were taken quite seriously and bonds between sponsors and sponsors were often meaningful and lifelong. Within the paradigm of slavery, however, the role of godparent of the enslaved had been traditionally reserved for slave masters, religious women, or other church-approved representatives of the faith. However a decline in the number of clerics and women religious, coupled with a rise in the number of aspiring converts, pressed Church officials to extend the range of approved persons to include free black women.

Church records indicate that across the generations, Henriette Delille’s family members took part in the process of creolization that brought Africans into contact with the Roman Catholic belief system. The pattern of public advocacy reflects the broader development of an Afro-Latin variety of Roman Catholicism in New Orleans. Clark and Gould describe its development in terms of four stages.

First, West African women, perhaps predisposed by their particular religious and social traditions and responding to a unique female ministry in colonial New Orleans, were drawn into the orbit of Catholic ritual in the 1730s and 1740s. In this initial phase, enslaved females of all ages, though a minority in the general slave population, constituted the majority of slave baptisands. In the next generation, a hiatus in the slave trade to Louisiana forestalled the revitalization of African religious retention, and males came to dominate most adult group baptisms. During the second half of the eighteenth century, people of African descent increasingly assumed ritual responsibility for induction into Catholicism by becoming godparents, marking a third phase in religious creolization. The final phase was characterized by the expansion and formalization of the leadership role of black women in religious instruction and [acts of] benevolence.  

A review of sacramental records performed by Clark and Gould shows that Henriette Delille’s “matrilineal ancestors were prominent among those who created the statistical

73 Ibid., 413.
upswing in godparenting by people of African descent in the 1750s and 1760s.”74 Her aunts, grandmothers, great aunts and a great grandmother performed ministerial roles for their family members, friends, and others in the black community. They sponsored baptism, and witnessed marriages for cousins and extended Creole of color kin, as well as for enslaved women and a few young men. Henriette Delille’s maternal ancestor Nanette, it was determined by Clark and Gould, was likely a Senegambian derived from the Wolof nation. She was quickly initiated into the Catholic faith by conferesses belonging to the Children of Mary, and so were her female descendents. Moving down the pedigree chart to great grandmother Cécile, and then great aunt Marie Anne, each sponsored the rite of baptism for relatives, friends, and strangers “with a frequency that is distinctive,” Clark and Gould claimed.75 At very early ages—Marie Anne at age eleven (1746), and Cécile at age fourteen (1758)—the women were designated pious women worthy of serving as godparents and representatives of the faith. Henriette Delille’s grandmother, Henriette Laveau, continued the pattern of activism demonstrated by her forebears, as did Maria Josephe Diaz, Henriette Delille’s mother. Clark and Gould conclude that “when Henriette Delille was born to Maria Josephe Diaz in 1812, she inherited the legacy of four generations of active [Black] Catholic women.”76 A central aspect of that ministry was a pattern of convergence under religious premises for the benefit of relatives, friends, and enslaved persons. Knowledge of this development, Clark and Gould argued, “uncovers crucial elements of agency and the preservation of African cultural values otherwise obscured by the tide of apparent capitulation and conversion.”77

74 Ibid., 429.
75 Ibid., 430.
76 Ibid., 437.
77 Ibid., 421.
A tracing of the depth and extent of the Afro-Latin female communal tradition, and its indebtedness to West African communal values and practices, makes clear that *Regles et Règlements* was neither a spontaneous development nor a simple arrogation of Roman Catholic female monastic tradition. In Afro-Latin contexts, family and the community were highly valued and a variety of literate practices were engaged in service of their preservation. In this light, literacy had multiple uses: group socialization and preservation through inculcation of communal memory, morals, ancient arts, and technologies. Oral literacies dominated; language skills (i.e., the ability to speak artfully, use proverbs, be multilingual) defined one’s membership in the group, as did the ability to recite or sing designated texts. A strong and broadened sense of kinship nurtured the idea of being involved in the lives of the young, taking responsibility for educating distant relatives and extended relations (fictive or real) in these literacies. A profound religiosity wholly integrative of the sacred and secular suggested a lifestyle built on daily acts of worship and a spirituality which was expressed through both the epideictic (ceremonial), and the mundane (e.g., engaging in dialogue). Flexibility, an important value, compelled a state of openness to change, an aesthetic for “finding a way” where obstacles manifest. The African aesthetic for balance compelled an aesthetic for seeking equilibrium between heaven and earth, male and female, rich and poor, learned and unlearned. Finally, the West African reverence for ancient wisdom, social structures, and practices led to a spirit of conservancy and cultural pride. Viewed in this manner, the literate practices and expectations found at the center of the free black female community brings into vision the image of Henriette Delille working to weave together ancient threads in service of her goals of universal religious literacy.
A Community Begins

Following the reception of twenty-seven women into her organization in November, 1836, Henriette Delille commenced the model of monastic community expressed in Regles et Règlements through a lay congregation named the Sisters of the Presentation. On that day, the women of color, possibly accompanied by their ally, Marie Aliquot, a wealthy white religious zealot and longtime associate of the women, entered a covenantal relationship with one another and arranged their lives so as to fulfill its personal and public requirements. Corporate records, however, did not survive; critical details, like the names of all the members, specific duties, dates of consecration, student’s names or rule changes, etc., were degraded, lost, or destroyed. However, two public references affirm the existence of the alliance, the mission, and the women’s manner of conduct. First, sacramental records reveal that the core members—Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles—appeared regularly as sponsors of baptisands to poor and enslaved persons during these years and occasionally appeared as co-sponsors. Second, four years after the ratification of Regles et Règlements, in October of 1840, then Bishop Antoine Blanc posted a letter to the Vatican which requested that a certain group of pious women, called to works of piety, in serving the sick, assisting the dying, and teaching adolescent girls, etc., under the title of the Congregation of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin…be affiliated to the…Congregation of the Propaganda Fide’s [College in Rome].

In this manner Henriette Delille’s vision began to be realized. Blanc’s description suggests that when the women appeared before the altar for rituals, or in the church pews to instruct girls, they did so as a formal, locally recognized religious organization. The tone and content of

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78 Traditionally the name of an order reflects the alignment of the group with other orders of a similar name or ministry or the dedication of the group to a particular patron saint (spiritual benefactor). The Sisters of the Presentation calendar revolved around the Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, which occurred on November 21. The specific reason for the change to the Sisters of the Holy Family is not known; however, some oral traditions suggest that the arrival of a white Irish order of the same name. Davis, Henriette Delille, 37.
Blanc’s request also indicated his unambiguous support, from which we may deduce that the women had lived up to or even exceeded prevailing standards for pious living; put another way, the women’s attitudes had garnered the respect and attention of at least some persons in the public sphere. Shortly thereafter, the Vatican answered Blanc’s request by awarding Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Presentation formal approbation from the College of Rome.

**Literacy and Community**

While there is little information to draw upon to render the daily concerns and struggles involving the exercise of the lay congregation’s mission or mode of living, an appreciation of the women’s concern with establishing a literacy-centered, literacy-sponsoring, female commune invites reflection on the relationship between literacy and community. The women’s struggle to initiate and maintain a literate collective without the general benefit of the educational franchise or public support for their literacy accomplishments is a telling reminder that notions of *community* play a central role in conceptualizing literacy, narrowly or broadly considered. In this section, I explore how the black community in general, and Henriette’s model of a black monastic congregation in particular, bear a discrete set of characteristics that amplify the insight that literacy is indeed a community act. The reclamation, or as Kamberelis put it, *deterritorialization and reterritorialization*, of mainstream literate practices in the context of broader literacy occlusions demonstrates the concept of literacy as a mode of social involvement. Viewing literacy in this manner underscores the limitations of traditional

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approaches to literacy and promotes the need to probe beyond the bounds of the school in our search for a better understanding of the nature of literacy.\textsuperscript{80} Henriette Delille’s vision of community as expressed by \textit{Regles et Règlements} and carried out by the Sisters of the Presentation highlights the manner in which literacy was and continues to be sponsored within and through community formations. For the most part, the development of literacy in most sections of the world, in the ancient past, has involved institutions other than the school. Our historical literacy imagination, Harvey Graff admits, has been limited not only to a narrow selection of competencies, but also perceptions about where in society literacy learning has occurred and why.\textsuperscript{81} Joanna Street and Brian Street maintain that for all too long, our approaches to literacy research have focused disproportionately on learning experiences that occur in schools or serve the interest of schooling. They find that “the meanings and uses of literacy are deeply embedded in community values and practices.”\textsuperscript{82} The array of communicative strategies and interests which animate life in families, extended kinship groups, professional societies, and religious groups, etc., they argued, are responsible for reproducing and sustaining a “varied repertoire of literacy practices across both time and space.”\textsuperscript{83} Numerous studies have shown that the motivation and opportunity to develop and use reading, writing, numeracy skills, among other valued abilities, relied on family values and community structures.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} For extended treatment of the notion of literacy as a mode of social involvement, see Brandt, \textit{Literacy as Involvement}, 2.
\textsuperscript{81} Harvey J. Graff, “The Shock of the ‘‘New’ (Histories)’: Social Science and Historical Literacies. Social Science History, 25 (winter 2001): 513-514.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{84} The literature on interactions between community and literacy practices is extensive. For a seminal treatment of these relationships as they pertain to marginalized communities, see Heath, \textit{Ways with words}. 

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Many scholars of the history of literacy, including Jacqueline Royster Jones, Deborah Brandt, Janet Cornelius, and Phyllis Belt-Beyan, have recognized the black antebellum experience to be a prime example of the manner in which literacy was conceptualized outside traditional (Western) notions of schooling and pedagogy. Barred from the opportunity to openly associate (apart from worship) or to organize formal schooling, New Orleans’ blacks, like blacks across the nation, responded by diverting literacy education to less overt sites. Under these circumstances, Brandt wrote, families and community agencies such as churches and women’s groups, were pressed to play unconventionally dense roles in sponsoring literacy learning and development. During this era and for some time to come, black literacy, conceived narrowly or broadly, remained constant and secure in the context of small but critical literacy convergences—the willful coming together of literates and illiterates in the interest of black universal literacy. Henriette Delille’s monastic community represents a prime example of this social history. Through these types of flexible, mobile points of convergence, free, freed, and bonded persons built qualitatively critical sites of literacy advocacy within their community, or what Deborah Brandt refers to as a “concentrated site of sponsorship.” The intensity and necessity of this strategy of altered venues of literacy sponsorship, outside of direct sight of officials and in sacred spaces, meant that literacy practices were acutely enacted and imbued with super-ordinary meanings: communal, spatial, psychic, religious, cultural, historical, and political. Janet Cornelius observed,

For enslaved African-Americans, literacy was more than a path to individual freedom—it was a communal act, a political demonstration of resistance to oppression.

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85 For an extended treatment of blacks’ struggle to establish venues for literacy development outside of schooling, see Cornelius, ‘When I Can Read My Title Is Clear’; Deborah Brandt, Literacy in American Lives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Phyllis Belt-Beyan, The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century; foreword by Ronald Lewis. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004).

and of self-determination for the black community. Through literacy the slave could obtain the skills valuable to the white world, thereby defeating those whites who withheld skills, and could use those skills for special privileges or to gain freedom.\textsuperscript{87}

The same could be said for free blacks as well. Living and learning or failing to learn otherwise prohibited literacies created highly charged contexts for literacy practices. In fact, illiteracy was such an essential aspect of the racial divide, and so deeply associated with the condition of race-gender-class subjugation, that the ability to read, write, or compute with numbers amounted to a communal act of humanization for both new literates and established readers in the broader community.

Literacy’s role in Henriette’s model of a black monastic congregation—which by all indications bore all the weight of the meanings and values mentioned above—carried additional layers of meaning and modes of use specific to the cornering effects of race and gender. To the practical and esoteric uses employed within mainstream nineteenth century society: “gaining further knowledge and enrichment, facilitating access to culture and learning, and influencing social standing, self-esteem, and respectability”\textsuperscript{88} were added to the signifying effects of literacy for women of color—the assertion of womanhood, piety, equality, voice, and agency. Literacy, in terms of what it signified to free black women in the nineteenth century, amounted to a veritable shield of protection from the most egregious aspects of race/gender oppression. The women’s needs and desires were unsurprising. The world outside Henriette Delille’s French Quarter area residence was extreme in its moral confusion: a center of activity and power for the Louisiana Catholic Church, all the while it served as the hub of slave

\textsuperscript{87} Cornelius, ‘\textit{When I Can Read},’ 3. [italics added]
\textsuperscript{88} Harvey J. Graff, \textit{The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City}. (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 303.
trafficking, prostitution, and demonstrations of super-ordinary opulence.\textsuperscript{89} The Church, largely trapped in the tight clinch of power of the white planter class and blinded by its own internal white supremacist ideology, struggled to exorcise the spread of evils of the type it was established to contain.

New Orleans, an international port, indulged the citizens, among them the Church’s members, by offering to them the object of any desire, human or otherwise, so long as they could supply the appropriate funds. Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Presentation knew that among the indulgences most hotly desired for purchase or casual \textit{use} was a mulatto female. In buildings all around their geographical domain, women like themselves, near-white or visibly mulatto, were sold at auction for high prices; frequently they were set up for a potential lifetime of sexual and reproductive violation.\textsuperscript{90} Alarmingly, some were reputed to be free black women captured by slave pirates—an ever present reminder of the free black woman’s ever-present vulnerabilities. Captured and sold as \textit{fancy girls} or \textit{fancy maids}, women were prostituted, sometimes sent across the country to \textit{service} friends or acquaintances. Henriette Delille also knew from her personal experiences with the tradition of plaçage, that white men desired as near an approximation of the white woman as possible—a woman with the appearance of purity, but whose abject exploitation bore little or no social or moral consequence. In this light, acts of reading and piety, particularly as a collective, was a radical act, at once an assertion of the sanctity of their minds, bodies, and souls.

\textsuperscript{89} Sites for the sale of slaves were part of the texture of their lives. Archival records indicate that Henriette Delille’s mother lived on Burgundy Street, just outside the French Quarter; her niece resided at 139 Hospital Street, and oral tradition maintains that prior to moving into the convent Henriette Delille may have resided with Juliette Gaudin, whose residence was in the French Quarter on Royal Street. ASHF.

In terms of their constitution as a Catholic communality, literate practices had the potential to act as a liberating force in the lives and minds of the women by connecting them to a broader vision of a literate community. Apart from Protestant tradition, Roman Catholicism allowed them to not only imagine themselves part of a global community, both French and Catholic, but also, in accordance with Catholic theology, to participate, through the rite of the Mass, in a worldwide contingency of worship and global interaction. This meant open and direct access to persons, ideas, and philosophies arising from across the Roman Catholic empire and, in particular, the Francophone world. It included the ideas of revolution and race-pride emanating from the French Antilles, and the theological and worldly accomplishments of medieval mystics like Teresa of Avila. In these ways, the community Henriette Delille scripted in *Regles et Règlements* gained its function and meaning from its ability to define an affirmative context for girls and women of color to learn to be literate, to be citizens of the world, to be holy, and to be *women*.

In this manner, Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Presentation fit Lave and Wenger’s concept of a *community of practice*, a group of persons who, when joined under the umbrella of a common interest, create a rich and responsive learning environment through close and extended social interactions. In communities of practice, like other communities, the individual members experience a network of relationships that bind each to one another. Tacitly or otherwise, members agree to share identity, rules, and social roles with one another, often including the role of propagating communal knowledge and skills. The process of learning, rather than being individualized or acontextualized, is carried out by vested members, sometimes through extended, personal learning relationships, like a mentorship, and occur often through group settings that are dynamic, multigenerational, and profound, as with biblical
knowledge in a prayer group or architectural knowledge in a carpenter’s union. Considered as
thus, literacy learning and development in the context of a black monastic community invites
recollections of the ways communities nurture literate abilities and underscores the limitations
of our historical literacy imagination. Reading, writing, and numeracy, as well as a host of
other socialized skills, like praying, reciting Latin verse, singing in unison, etc., aid individuals
and groups in attaining social fluency and critical cognitive awareness of their humanity and
their relationship to the broader social world. In fact, their location at the foundation of human
development—interpersonal communication, individual and group identity, and group
ideology—would suggest a rethinking of literacy as a process of social involvement, as a
community act. In community, knowledge is collected and disseminated according to need and
relevancy, and with the expectation of attainment. Still further, unlike conventional schooling,
communities allow and expect those who take the role of teacher to communicate high levels
of care and concern and are thus capable of enhancing interior motivation.

**Summary**

The literacy values and practices embraced by Henriette Delille and the charter
generation of SHF women are better understood through an exploration of their decision to live
and act from within the Black Catholic monastic tradition. Henriette Delille’s handwritten text
*Regles et Règlements* suggests that one of the first social arrangements that she proposed was a
Catholic women’s lay congregation. The rules and regulations of this society were found to be
in strong accordance with those of an avowed Catholic teaching sisterhood, apart from the
establishment of a convent or public profession of vows. Foremost, the document expresses her
vision of black monastic community. Communal practices featured, among other literate acts,
communal readings and lectures and instruction of illiterates; communal contexts bore
traditional elements of an apostolic Catholic congregation: solemnity, fervency, activism, matrilineality, woman-centered-ness, multilingualism, self-discipline, relative diversity, resistiveness (to male oppression), and a profound level of commitment to the survival of the group. In particular, that commitment entailed submission to the notion of learning as a lifetime commitment and a responsibility to self and the people in the community where they worked. Many of these were found to be contingent with West African culture, especially a profound sense of communal responsibility and a sense of responsibility to propagate knowledge throughout the community. Because the racial milieu necessitated that free black Catholics constantly assert their value to society and the church through their demonstrations of mental and moral aptitude, Henriette Delille and the charter women likely brought to the monastic tradition the values and practices of a struggling people. To traditional Catholic congregational values and meanings, the following were added: racial pride, heightened sense of interdependence, creativity/flexibility, holism, and a spirit of resistance.

Viewing literacy as a community act brings into view the varied social and cultural influences that support or inhibit, propel or baffle the development and enrichment of literate practices in the community, both on the intimate scale and writ large. The limitation of pursuing literacy in terms of schooling and schools has led to skewed notions of the range of competencies that we deem to be literate, and has diverted attention away from recognizing communities as critical supporters of literacy, as social structures equipped with the strategies necessary to address literacy dilemmas, real or fictive. Most importantly, the emphasis on schools has obscured from view those social institutions which played a strong role in determining the future of certain literacy practices in the lives of African American students on a long-term basis. Finally, I surmised that the black monastic community’s location amid a
culture of imposed ignorance and illiteracy inspired a palpably deep appreciation of the power of literacy for themselves and the black community, especially its ability to render them human, global citizens, and the females among them, women.
Chapter Four  
Literacy as a Spatial Act:  
Producing Sites/Sights for Black Literacy in Antebellum New Orleans  

First Passages

One autumn morning around the year 1852, Henriette Delille stepped out of her private chapel in the center of her new convent on Bayou Road and strode toward the adjacent room, a classroom filled with twenty or more *filles de couleur libres* (free girls of color) from the Tremé and Marginy faubourgs in New Orleans. After completion of her morning prayers, Henriette joined Sister Juliette Gaudin’s French grammar class. Befitting their teacher’s gentle disposition, the atmosphere in the classroom was light and productive. A pair of *dixianieres*, or class mentors, milled freely about the room and then paused beside the desks of their younger charges, where they corrected their writing assignment, and offered suggestions on the art of pen and ink. All the while, their teacher offered a softly spoken lecture on the topic of syntax, the rules of style, or French pronunciation drawn from the text *Grammaire de Napoleon Landais*.¹ The walls of the convent were thin, and the two first floor classrooms so small, that in order for the sisters to conduct two classes at once, that it was necessary for her to maintain a lecture voice that was little above a whisper.²

¹Napoleon Landais, *Grammaire de Napoleon Landais: Resume General De Toutes Les Grammaires Francaises . . .* (Paris: Au Bureau Central, Rue De Faubourg Montmartre, No. 15, 1835), ASHF. See list of nineteenth-century texts in the Appendix A.
²Sister Mary Bernard Deggs described Juliette Gaudin as a “docile” woman with an endearing personality. She was a favorite among the children and hesitant to react strongly to criticism. Deggs, *No Cross, No Crown*, 14-18. "Juliette Gaudin was a soul who could not see anyone in want and would go in rags herself to give to those who [merely] pretended to have no bread to eat" (ibid., 128). By tradition of Catholic pedagogy and circumstance, Holy Family pedagogy likely emphasized quietness, even if they did not always achieve it. Deggs reported that the early sisters received repeated complaints about the noise emitted from their school yard, and the north wall of small wood frame house had to be boarded to diminish the sounds emitted by their neighbors. (ibid., 12). For a detailed description of the importance of silence in nineteenth century French Catholic pedagogy, see Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 82-99.
At the first sight of Henriette on this morning, the serene atmosphere and the hour’s lesson was disrupted. All the occupants of the room straightened their spines and sang in unison, “Bonjour Mère Henriette.” A few of the students, day scholars, released whispers of surprise as they became cognizant of a change in their leader’s appearance. The tattered blue percale dress she had used day in and day out had been freshly replaced. Mother Henriette wore a new black dress. Further, the spirited, sometimes, defiant countenance now stirred with introspection from a new sense of obligation. That morning, before the altar of St. Augustine church, had she had been transformed into a professed Catholic sister.

Indeed, Mother Henriette had not been present that morning for the ringing of the bell, a signal which drew boarders down from their dormitory rooms on the second floor, and she had not welcomed the day scholars, leading them in from the banquette, or front sidewalk, as was the custom. Instead, she departed from the convent in the early morning and met Father Étienne Rousselon a few blocks away, and towards the Mississippi River at 21 Hospital Street, the location of a studio for local photographer, Monsieur A. Constant.³ It was in this manner that the two allies, one a free black woman from New Orleans and the other, a white priest from Lyons, France, chose to mark the passing of a great threshold in the history of their relationship. They had worked together for at least decade, he as the official clerical advisor for her congregation, and she as a point of contact with the active Catholic women of color and the wealthy sector of the free black community. It was a development made possible by the culmination of a series of events which began with the foundation of the Sisters of the Presentation and likely ended with Henriette Delille’s act of professing a vow of obedience to the church, that morning.

³ Sr. Audrey Detiege, “Henriette Delille: A Picture,” unpublished notes, ASHF.
The event was a solemn and private act which raised her status from that of a pious lay woman to that of an avowed or professed woman religious. Along the way, Henriette had undertaken a set of daunting tasks in an effort to carve a new space for black women on the social landscape of New Orleans: she purchased land and built a new convent, established a presence in local churches through her weekly ministry to the poor and to enslaved women and girls, opened a nursing home for abandoned slaves, operated an orphanage, a free school, and, most recently, had begun formal operation of a convent school for girls of color. Near this time she would have celebrated the ten-year anniversary of living communally in a religious home—ten years as a church-sanctioned confraternity of free black women who later took the name Sisters of the Holy Family. For all of these reasons, Henriette Delille had gained sufficient respect and public reputation for the Very Reverend Father Rousselon to meet with her publicly and all but stand beside her for the purposes of the historical record.

Henriette stood that day before the camera as she would appear to all posterity: an accomplished and devout woman in the prime of her life. Her gaze was direct and her posture straight, but comfortable. She wore a solid black cap and matching dress that billowed down her arms to her wrist and ended in crisp white cuffs. Her accoutrement consisted of a round cap, black fabric (ironically), as well as a cape, rosary, and crucifix—the uniform of a devout Catholic woman. The full coverage of the dress and its restrained but dignified style attested to her religiosity and obedience to the Roman Catholic Church. In the photograph the lightness of her hand resting only ceremonially on a Greco-Roman pillar indicated possession of the energy of youth yet at the same time symbolized her awareness of the importance of classical tradition. She appeared healthy and ready to act. And as historical accounts will later confirm, what the camera captured that morning was the image of a woman on the cusp of her greatest endeavors.
Yet, as Henriette Delille pulled the classroom doors closed and allowed the class to continue, she was no doubt cognizant of the multiple ways in which the auspicious day had fallen short. As she prepared to leave the convent and travel five blocks to arrive at the order’s nursing home, the Asylum of the Holy Family, she knew that to the eyes of a stranger passing by, her movements through the heart of the city would likely fail to garner any specific attention. She did not wear a veil or a gimp, the principal elements of the uniform of a nineteenth century Catholic woman religious, or even the white veil of a novice nun.\(^4\) Father Étienne had held the opinion (not unjustifiably) that the white Catholic community would react unfavorably to the idea, if not the sight, of a woman of African descent wearing the religious habit. Indeed, some of the locals who had knowledge of their status had castigated and ridiculed them upon sight of their discreet uniform. Despite a lifetime of effort, she probably knew that they would never fully escape the grasp of the ideological net that marked their bodies as impure and profane. Indeed, Sr. Borgia Hart reported that “their presence on the streets was hailed with ridicule, for, in the minds of the early inhabitants of this Louisiana port, Colored Sisters were simply an anomaly.”\(^5\) Thus, Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and the remaining members of the Sisters of the Holy Family settled for signifying their pious status and their affiliation with the church with subtle modesty.

Unfortunately for Henriette Delille, this act of conciliation to a racist paradigm was representative of a multiple sites/sights of ambiguity and instability she would encounter over the course of the congregation’s second decade. These unique and awkward experiences of conflict and distress positioned the women of the order in a liminal space between the affirmed

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\(^5\) Hart, *Violets in the King’s Garden*, 1 (italics added).
(pious women) and the negated (woman of African descent, a product of a métissage relationship, and a sponsor of black literacy). This positioning, coupled with an incredible depth of faith, propelled the young foundress toward a spiritual philosophy based on struggle and a mission dedicated to reclaiming the sanctity of black minds, bodies, and souls. In a hostile environment and at a time “when the chains of slavery were so strongly riveted on the Negro,” Henriette Delille gathered the women and planned the forwarding of her vision to reclaim black women’s bodies as sacred spaces, their minds as fertile fields, and their small convent a home and a site of safe harbor for black literacy sponsorship. Further, Henriette Delille led them by setting in place a set of spiritual practices, educational methodologies, and socio-political strategies around which their soon-to-come reinforcements could build their lives for generations to come.⁶

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This chapter focuses on the thoughts and experiences of Henriette Delille and The Sisters of the Holy Family between the years 1842 and 1852, their first decade as an enclosed, sanctioned black teaching congregation. During this time period, Henriette Delille was formally assigned the role of leader; she then further formalized the religious and spiritual traditions that had commenced in the prior decade in the form of a conventual culture. I describe the manner in which Delille established the convent as a base and then led the women out into the field of their self-chosen apostolic domain in and around the Vieux Carré. Here, I approach Henriette Delille’s mission and pattern of activity as spatial activity.⁷ The very nature of the project to establish a black-run female-led institution required profound spatial acts: creating safe, affirmative, and productive spaces for women of color to think, contemplate, and

⁶ Hart, Violets in the King’s Garden, Violets, 1.
⁷ Ibid., 4.
to act, and negating those that were destructive to them. In the sections that follow, I narrate the particulars of the first decade and then explore the dimensions that monastic enclosure and Vatican sanction brought to their community of practice. I begin with a summary review of the decade and then focus on the formulation of a space that was exquisitely paradoxical to the chief themes of the antebellum era: a Catholic convent for women of color. I then trace the charter women’s movement from this unique base of operations outward along multiple lines of movement that carried them into the public domain as both holy black women and sponsors of literacy. I engage each of these developments from what Edward Soja terms a “critical spatial perspective” so as to make visible the ways in which literacy in the lives of black women religious was influenced and determined by their social and physical location, movements, and material resources.\(^8\)

**Making Space**

Although few records exist regarding the occurrences between the years 1842 and 1852, oral accounts and a smattering of artifacts (legal records, business records, library books, church records), suggest this was a critical period in the life of Henriette Delille. A void was created when her mother died, her brother departed for Opelousas, and some of her friends and allies seemed to have abandoned the cause.\(^9\) It was also a critical period in the development of the sisterhood. In terms of an institutional history, the period commenced with a momentous series of events: Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin came together to live in a convent as a two-member religious community; their ministry shifted when they gained a church and parish

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\(^9\) Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 5-16.
from which to base part of their ministry, St. Augustine. Soon after they gained a new member, a longtime compatriot named Josephine Charles.

An account written in 1894 by Sister Mary Bernard Deggs indicates that this was a period marked by episodes of both struggle and achievement. “Many were the souls brought to God in that humble house and many a pain and sorrow did the women pass in their first ten years, but they never lost hope.” 10 Relieved of the duties typically associated with nineteenth century women: romance, marriage, childbearing, or the care of the family home, the three women were then free to carry out the type of ministry expressed in *Regles et Règlements*. Although none of the women professed public vows of chastity, obedience, or poverty during the first decade as an organization they did begin to live out the enclosed, communal lifestyle associated with a formal Catholic sisterhood. They shared a home, lived chaste lives and were largely independent of their families of origin; they programmed their days with acts of charity and devotion. Historical sources are largely mute with regard to their daily activities or the actual religious rule to which they adhered, but sacramental records indicate that the members amplified their presence in the Black Catholic community. Baptismal records show that Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles appeared regularly at multiple church locations in the New Orleans diocese to sponsor converts, both enslaved persons and free blacks. 11 Records also show that, after a gratingly slow start, and an extended journey to achieve recognition, the women and the order developed followers.

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11 The women appear regularly in sacramental records during this decade, sometimes together as godparents for free blacks and enslaved women and children. They appeared at the altar of St. Mary’s Church on nineteen occasions during this decade. Similar patterns are observed at St. Augustine’s baptismal font; the three women appear under similar circumstances twenty-six times. “Baptisms, St. Mary’s Church, 1834-1890,” in Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 132-136, table 1 and 2.
Under Henriette Delille’s leadership, the small collective laid the groundwork for the role the order would assume for the next fifty years: as innovators, women who opened up new lines of connection between the free black community and white French male clergy, between wealthy black elites and the most fragile members of the community, and, most importantly, between literates and illiterates. There is evidence that they began to amass a library by collecting books from both the free black Catholic community and the Church hierarchy. By the end of this period, the women doubled their membership, from three to six, and put into place the basic elements of their institutional matrix: a pious association (1847), a hospice/nursing home (1848-1849), an orphanage and infirmary (1848-49), and a convent school (1851). In addition, as a consequence of their egalitarian and industrious work caring for the sick during the momentous yellow fever outbreak of 1852, they garnered the respect and support of many in the broader (white) society.

Additionally, one may discern from prior Holy Family histories that this period was seminal because it was the time when Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles first experienced the limits and perils of attempting to establish a black sisterhood in a Southern slave society. It was, without doubt, a racially segregated society deeply, unabashedly invested in chattel slavery and subordination of its free black inhabitants. Alongside the triumph of Holy Family congregational formation, that is, the achievement of institutional recognition and establishment of their own parochial domain, the charter women struggled against significant patterns of negation and repression. As leader, Henriette Delille encountered continual episodes of social, political, and institutional resistance to her vision to reshape black women’s identities and social roles through the formation of a black monastic

12 See Cyprian Davis, Henriette Delille; Hart, Violets in the King’s Garden; Deggs, No Cross, No Crown.
tradition. Within the boundary of their roles as Catholic religious, their mission was made subject to patriarchal authoritarian intrusions and foreclosures, as well as “religious” race apologetics. French ecclesiastics offered some protection from civil authorities, but also demanded some measure of control. The nascent congregation felt the particular interests of the Bishop and their clerical advisor Étienne Rousselon in many ways, including, but not limited to, the choice of their mission, their mode of monastic life, their religious dress, and even their pedagogy, among other things. Sister Deggs reported that the founding mother experienced pressure to remand the group to cloistered status, a pressure which they resisted successfully.¹³ Male clerics may even have attempted to claim undue credit for the women’s accomplishments, leading Henriette Delille to boldly assert the primacy of her role. In 1851, at the prospect of dying, the foundress wrote a will that insisted that the foundation of the Holy Family order, which “having as its object the religious instruction of the poor and illiterate,” was “work already undertaken by me.”¹⁴

Moreover, the racially inspired resistance encountered by the charter women shaped a religious and educational philosophy responsive to their unique identities as free black women religious. To a degree not experienced by her white female religious counterparts, Henriette Delille encountered laws and customs that restricted their personal lives, spiritual development, and professional activities, especially as educators. The literacy tenet of their mission sent them into hostile domains where the care of slaves and poor freed persons was regarded with suspicion, even malice. In addition, their roles as proselytizers, catechists, and founders of a

¹³ Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 10.
¹⁴ Henriette Delille became seriously ill May 23, 1851. Upon considering the prospect of her mortality, she called upon the notary, Octave de Armas, to hand over her mission and property to the care of Archbishop Antoine Blanc. “The notary found Henriette ill in bed ‘but healthy in spirit, memory, and understanding.’ ” Cyprian Davis, Henriette Delille, 55, (italics added).
school for free black girls placed them in the crosshairs of anti-literacy crusades of the period.\textsuperscript{15}

This state of affairs purportedly prompted church officials to hide or disguise or outright forbid their educational initiatives; drawing in part upon oral tradition, Detiege asserted that at one point Rousselon advised the women to restrain their work because “the Church had to compromise its respect for the laws of the land if it were to be able to have any mission.”\textsuperscript{16} As a consequence, the women’s work was nearly completely silenced from the public record. Even so, it would appear that the memory of the charter women’s inaugural activities were not wholly irrepressible. A rich oral tradition and artifacts point us to the conclusion that the first decade appears to have been a time of way-making, accomplished with acts of courage, as well as strategic acts of conciliation. It was a tenuous time, reshaped by critical, social, and geographical boundary work (race/gender/class/caste crossings and re-territorializations), all of which led to the creation/sanctioning/sanctification of a new space for antebellum black women in the city of New Orleans.

\textbf{“Where we might live in peace”}

\textbf{Historigraphical Perspectives}

In his comprehensive investigation of the life history of Henriette Delille, Cyprian Davis appraised the manner of development of the Sisters of the Holy Family as gradual, saying that “between the years of 1842 and 1851 a slow evolution took place.”\textsuperscript{17} Rather than a dramatic leap or a steep advance, he argued, the women’s vocational journey was a gentle


\textsuperscript{16} Detiege asserted, that in the wake of publication of two anonymous pamphlets advocating the instruction of slaves as part of missionary work, the Attorney General of Louisiana launched a campaign to identify the source and punish any religious educator who broke anti-literacy laws. Detiege, \textit{Henriette Delille, free woman of color}, 28.

\textsuperscript{17} Davis, \textit{Henriette Delille}, 48.
evolution which ambled across an approximate ten-year span. Historical sources do indeed confirm the fact that prior to the start of this decade, the Sisters of the Presentation had already been recognized by the New Orleans Diocese for the roles they had developed over the course of a prior decade. Back in October of 1840, Bishop Antoine Blanc posted a letter to the Vatican which requested that a certain group of pious women, called to works of piety, in serving the sick, assisting the dying, and teaching adolescent girls, etc., under the title of the Congregation of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary...be affiliated to the...Congregation of the Propaganda Fide’s [College in Rome].

Months later, the Sisters of the Presentation received Vatican sanction: formal approbation from the College of Rome. The idea of a gradual pattern of development is also supported by the fact that it was not until near the end of this period, 1851, that the founding mother made her novitiate and professed public vows— inarguably, a foundational milestone in Holy Family history. While the temporal distance between these dates could indicate that their advance up the ladder of the Catholic religious hierarchy for women happened gradually, it could also reflect that the bureaucracy was simply out of step with the momentous changes that occurred in the women’s lives. Unfortunately, detailed information about their daily routines, the religious rule they adopted, and the actual dates for points along the transition from lay to religious remain elusive. Based on this fact, Davis concluded:

This absence of any detailed description . . . may be one more indication that the life of Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles was a gradual transition from a union of pious and devout women to a community of religious sisters.

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18 Ibid., 45.  
19 Ibid., 46.  
20 Ibid., 60.
Gould and Nolan concluded similarly; they explained that this pattern was consistent with the
development of the other women’s collectivities in this era and throughout the history of
Catholic women’s history. They wrote,

The transition from a loose-knit association of laywomen to a pious community and
eventually to a religious order was not uncommon. Groups of secular women Catholic
women had been dedicating themselves to God and to the works of the Church outside
formal organization since the Counter-Reformation. Most of the women’s organizations
went through long years of transition in which their futures were always tenuous.²¹

Such a view, however, underplays the significance of the social, psychic, and material
milestones the women passed during their inaugural decade. The fragmented, polyphonic Holy
Family history suggests that the charter women experienced moments of profound change, risk,
and challenge. Most of these happened to converge on the practical consequences of being
black and female and being in pursuit of a dignified space for pious women of their ilk (les
femmes de couleur libre, mulattos, natural daughters) within the highest echelons of the most
powerful institution/polity in the western world. Clearly, ecclesiastical and public reticence to
accept them and thus further their advance as a congregation turned on whatever prejudices
their identities incited.

Historical accounts support this assertion. To emphasize a point a previously made, the
order came into existence in the context of a highly racist, racially segregated society.
Antebellum southern discourses were patriarchal and white supremacist. Popular cultural
productions and scientific racism robustly insisted that black women were untrustworthy,
licitious, and morally and intellectually undeveloped to the point of pathology.²² While the

²² For full treatment of the image of black women during the antebellum and Civil War eras, see the following:
Virginia Meacham Gould, Chained to the Rock of Adversity. To Be Free, Black, and Female in the Old South
(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Alexander Adele Logan, Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in
Rural Georgia, 1789-1879 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991). Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies,
White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and
character and lifestyle of some elite mulatto women allowed them to pass into white identity, most suffered the pedestrian level effects of their public misrepresentation as “unnatural” (i.e., sterile like a mule) allowing for attendant speculations about their genetic propensity to physical ailments, insanity, hyper-sexuality, and feeblemindedness. At the same time, the presence of a highly literate, skilled black population led to the creation of an alternate injurious icon of blacks characterized as wily and dangerous to society. Near-whites clearly confused and confounded the clarity of the social boundaries of race. They required surveillance due to their inclination toward sabotage of the institution of slavery. More broadly, secular institutions like hospitals, graveyards, and schools excluded blacks in accordance with the law. Most Protestant churches in the state maintained separate churches for blacks or summarily excluded them from membership. Roman Catholic Church services were indeed racially integrated, but the congregation seating was segregated according to race and caste. Thus, in the place where the charter women worshipped, whites drew into the queue for communion from pews on one side of the church, free blacks from the other (or in a balcony) and the enslaved, who arrived once a month and on feast days, emerged from benches that were placed in the rear and along the aisles. This pattern of segregation was most sharply felt by women of the mulatto classes, like Henriette Delille, who could identify family members in each section of the church.

From the Holy Family historical record, we learn that regardless of being near-white, and born free, the charter women directly experienced conflict in religious domains due to their racial identification. For one, their identification as women of color precluded the possibility of

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joining an existing religious order. Secondly, because of past experiences, the women knew that their organizing efforts would likely encounter at best neglectful treatment or outright resistance. Two prior attempts to organize pious free black women into an association or congregation that were led by activistic representatives of the church, namely, Sr. Ste Marthé Fontière and Father Michael Portier, failed to garner or retain proper church support. Second, the status of their congregation and its mission remained tenuous throughout this time period, specifically due to the fact that their status was as an association of women of color. An oral account by Sister Deggs maintains that Henriette and Juliette faced public derision within their first month as a religious community. The women were ridiculed and insulted by their neighbors. Deggs recalled that “Our Rev. Mother foundress . . . became disgusted with the [first religious] house on account of the malice of our persecutors,” so much so that Henriette Delille led them on a twelve-month respite to a “place near St. Mary’s Church where we might live in peace.”

Finally, the political climate worsened around the mid-century mark. Anti-free black activism approached its legal nadir in 1850 when the Louisiana legislature pointedly attacked free black schools, benevolence organizations, and artisan groups by summarily revoking their incorporated status. In that year, the law of 1847 which authorized free blacks to incorporate their collectives, one which legitimized their public fund-raising efforts and protected their ability to assemble privately and without interference or supervision, was

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24 Sr. Ste. Marthé Fontière endured a period of struggle involving financial and personnel support, then gave up and returned to France. In 1820 Father Michael Portier attempted to organize some type of programming involving free blacks, possibly a group of young women. He wrote “I have formed a congregation among the young people of color, . . . they teach the blacks to pray, they catechize, and they instruct.” Davis, Henriette Delille, 21-22. Roger Baudier maintains that Portier turned the old Ursuline convent into a college for boys and a “School of Charity” for poor girls. In 1826 he was transferred and went on to become the bishop of Mobile, and the school was closed. Baudier, The Catholic Church, 293-4.
25 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 11.
amended to annul incorporations awarded to free persons of color for religious associations.\(^{26}\)

It was deemed thus that

In no case shall the provisions of this act [of 1847] be construed to apply to free persons of color in this State incorporated for religious purposes or secret associations, and any corporations that may have been organized by such persons under this act, . . . are hereby annulled and revoked.\(^{27}\)

Stripped of the legal protections afforded to them by their incorporated status, the women’s activities fell within the grasp of 1830s laws which restricted free black movement and attenuated their rights. These rights included the right to assemble, to teach literacy to slaves, and those acts of free speech which might cause unrest amongst the enslaved. Henceforth, Henriette Delille and the charter women were pressed to conduct their mission in stealth, beneath the radar of the law and, quite possibly hidden, or at least strategically positioned, beyond reach of racially intolerant clergymen and ecclesiastics.

**Spatial Overtures**

Clearly, for the women, the Catholic community, and the city of New Orleans allocation of the most revered and opportune spaces for women’s activism space to black women *mattered.* These and other accounts of discrimination, disruption, dislocation, and disarticulation emerge from the founding years of the religious order and serve to highlight the manner in which Holy Family historical developments were intrinsically *spatial,* that is, how they speak to the manner in which humans make practical and theoretical sense of their world through the use, production, and negation of the “real” and imagined spaces. As demonstrated in what follows, the Holy Family *community of practice* reflected Henriette Delille’s response to the dynamic interplay of sanctified, racially-determined, gendered, and class-determined

\(^{26}\) Deteige, *Henriette Delille,* 46.
\(^{27}\) Bell, *Revolution,* 126.
spaces—both material and social. Its ultimate success and sustainability through the challenges of the antebellum and Civil War eras may be credited to the founder’s explicit or implicit sensitivity to the importance of creating a safe, stable space for black women to act and respond within an uneasy, unethical, and morally bankrupt society.

Henriette Delille’s mission to bring blacks to “the knowledge and love of God and of their fellowmen,” as Sr. Borgia Hart characterized the Holy Family mission, might be better understood if viewed through a spatial lens. The very nature of the project which nineteenth century French Congregationalists referred to as “rescue work,” required profound spatial acts: way-making, space production, (re)territorializatons, boundary crossings, and amalgamations. This work was carried out in complex ways acting simultaneously on the sacred divide (religious/secular), the racial divide, and the tripartite (white/free black/enslaved) social schedule of antebellum New Orleans. The spatial theories of Lefebvre aid not only in piecing together and gaining a gist of the fragmented, polyphonic Holy Family history, but may well help connect the community’s pattern of activism, advocacy, and action to the broader struggle for human dignity through education—in the past and present. In the sections below, I define and explore the foundational movements initiated by Henriette Delille: into a collective, into a convent, and then into public spaces.

The House of the Holy Family

The most crucial development to occur in the first decade as a sanctioned community was the dramatic movement launched when the women entered a convent and began to live out their lives as an enclosed religious community. In 1842, Father Étienne Rousselon leased a small house on St. Bernard Street for Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin. The group’s first

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historian, Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, emphasized the importance of this spatial conquest. She equated the occupancy of a religious house with the inauguration of the religious order: “Our dear community commenced . . . [when] they first came together in community in an old house on St. Bernard Street.” It was the act which marked the conceptual divide between a formal alliance of pious free women of color and the members of a religious sodality; as such they were now a religious community, (a) bound by the experience of living in a state of material and spiritual interdependence, (b) with a convent enclosure, and (c) a commitment (albeit informal) to each other, and (d) a stated mission. Equally important, the process of establishing and gaining public acceptance for a black convent in antebellum New Orleans would strongly shape community practices and philosophy.

A convent established in the nineteenth-century French activist tradition provided a suitably bounded and defined space through which reform-minded women could realize their activist goals. As detailed in the earlier chapters, the social and physical territory was one delimited for the use of women across a span of nearly two millennia. Since ancient times, the clausura, the commitment to live within physical enclosure, had acted as a shelter from outside influences; it restricted familial or public surveillance and protected the collective from routine interference by male clerics by means of adherence to a religious rule. This state of affairs had long ensured the chaste reputations of unmarried elites and guarded the social standing of their families, because similar to its medieval European predecessors, nineteenth century New Orleans religious houses were places where wealthy and respectable women garnered the liberty to develop their intellects and reinvent their lives; they could rename themselves, learn a trade, and form intimate social bonds with one another. Most important, it was a place where women could teach without a teaching certificate, administer and build schools, and write
Yet, perhaps the most important advantage of this type of social and physical space to pious Catholic free women of color was less than fully religious. A Catholic religious house was a space that was socially and politically supported by the Bishop; hence, it would bring these women, their house, and their organization under the protection of liberal French clerics who continued to dominate Louisiana’s Catholic Church hierarchy and, in turn, wield a moderate measure of influence over a majority population that remained overwhelmingly Catholic.

Yet the ideal space for the leadership of Henriette Delille and where the collective might establish permanent roots could not be a cocoon; the Sisters of the Holy Family were to be an apostolic teaching order, not a contemplative one. Unlike the strict clausura observed under France’s Old Regime, dismantled in 1792, or the semi-cloistered state of the Ursulines, they would require what Rapley refers to as a *passive* clausura: a permeable enclosure which not only filtered or impeded the flow of *profane* information, ideas, issues, and non-religious persons, but also one which allowed for inward movement. The boundaries of the Holy Family domain needed to be flexible and mobile. Furthermore, their structural enclosure needed to be located in the midst of the community that it was to serve. (Recall that the Ursulines had departed this same area, after having formed it into a city-wide center of female action, agency, and education.) Their call was to serve the black community by aiding the needy and bringing moral reform to society. Through their visible actions, they hoped to inspire other elite women to turn to a life of service to the community. When given the choice, Henriette Delille selected a site adjacent to structures of power and centered in the heart of the urban scene, (see figure

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4.1). It was an expensive choice, signaling priorities and affinities. Sensing this, Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs remarked: “It was not an easy thing to pay for a place that was located just a half block away from the city’s principal churches and was surrounded by five or six different streetcars [lines].” The choice reveals a firmness of purpose on the part of Henriette Delille and points to her awareness of the importance of place and space.

Figure 4.1. Map of Relevant Properties and Structures (Circa 1845).

Only a few details about daily convent life during the first decade are extant. When a smattering of surviving artifacts (religious rules, legal records, business records, library books, church records, and convent renderings) are interwoven with insights from oral tradition about the latter part, we gain the ability to draw at least a speculative sketch. The women lived arduous and breathlessly demanding lives built around prayer, acts of charity, education and the cause of basic survival for the community. First, we may discern that Henriette Delille put into place a rigorous communal lifestyle. No religious rule is extent for this entire period; we may, however, presume that there exists a basic thread of consistency with the prior rule, *Regles et Règlements* and the next subsequent rule, *Reglement Provisoire des Soeurs de la Saint Famille* written in 1876.\(^{32}\) Cyprian Davis also allows that “it is quite possible that the community practices of 1876 were already in practice during the lifetime of Delille.”\(^{33}\) In keeping with longstanding women religious traditions, the charter women were positioned to undergo deep personal transformations from the very nature of their lifestyle. The women likely followed a basic schedule marked by worship events every few hours. The time between was used to accomplish humanitarian and educational work, to train aspirants, and complete energy-consuming domestic duties, like laundering clothes, sewing, and preparing meals or directing others in these tasks. In addition, in keeping with nineteenth-century women religious traditions, they were expected to engage in professional trade work and tutoring to raise money for their religious household. Besides the fees earned through tutoring day students and boarders and income from personal trusts, it was necessary that the women of the order procure

\(^{32}\) *Reglement Provisoire des Soeurs de la Saint Famille*, or Provisional Temporary Regulations of Sisters of the Holy Family, heretofore *Reglement Provisoire*, was either recorded or composed by Father G. Raymond, their subsequent clerical advisor after Étienne Rousselon. By then, the collective known as the Sisters of the Presentation were referred to as the Sisters of the Holy Family. It is not clear when the transition occurred. *Reglement Provisoire des Soeurs de la Saint Famille*, ASHF.

\(^{33}\) Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 111.
donations from the rectors of nearby churches and by canvassing the neighborhood. With the arrival in 1843 of Josephine Charles, a skilled seamstress, they began to operate a busy linen department which made trousseaus and repaired clothes. Later, they would launder vestments for members of the clergy and became responsible for baking Eucharist bread for all the churches in the area.

Second, we may generally surmise that the nature of the society amongst members was relatively egalitarian. Henriette Delille appeared to strive against the reproduction of social class and other social divisions that were expected within traditional (white) conventual life. Where the Ursulines and many other religious orders had segregated their membership according to prior social and economic status, Henriette Delille declined to distinguish their memberships into choir nuns versus lay sisters. The members divided their time equally, if periodically, between public ministerial acts (i.e., sponsoring baptisms, catechism classes, etc.) and conventual duties. Yet, the historical record does suggest that the collective did, on occasion, employ the services of “poor girls” (impoverished or enslaved persons) who were sent to them by others to aid them during difficult times. It is also written that Henriette Delille employed Betsy, a slave she inherited around the 1830s, who was sent to work in the nursing home. In all other accounts it is clear that the women labored for themselves and embraced long days and hard work as a part of their pursuit of spiritual perfection. Membership was undoubtedly restricted; no enslaved or poor black women were members. Formal acceptance of an enslaved woman would have been illegal and would have compromised the women’s tenuous position, as would accepting a women without sufficient means to contribute to the

34 Before entrance to the convent, Josephine had been employed as one of the few women of color to work as a seamstress in the famed D. H. Holmes store. Cyprian Davis, Henriette Delille, 48.
35 Upon her sister’s death Henriette Delille became owner of a slave named Betsy. Henriette Delille’s will indicates that she desired that Betsy be freed but appeared to be fearful of releasing her until it could be assured that she would not be forced to leave the state, as the law then required.
religious household. Henriette Delille and the charter women would have risked a change in their mission or a lowering of their hard-fought status as educators. 36 Evidence of an egalitarian spirit is hinted at in other narratives. Sometime during or after the Civil War, Sr. Deggs proudly reported that the sisters had occasion to accept a mistress and her former slave into their nursing home; she reported that at mealtime they were required to sit side by side and were treated with equal respect. 37 After the Civil War, then Mother Superior Josephine Charles did accept a former slave into the community.

The rigorous schedule and aggressively charitable character of Henriette Delille’s vision of community and religious activism brought the group close to failure on more than one occasion. While they had not taken formal vows of poverty, the women, who had most certainly come from comfortable if not luxurious circumstances, soon found themselves struggling to meet their most basic needs. They surrendered their extra clothes and cloaks to the needy and offered their meals to those who they thought could use them better. Such a pattern of charity, coupled with real estate debts, created a situation where the charter women, like the objects of their ministry, had occasion to rely on acts of charity so as to carry them from day to day. Conditions sometimes became quite desperate. They reportedly dined on sugar water and went without heat or proper clothing in the winter. Deggs recounted:

Many were the times that the foundresses had nothing to eat but cold hominy that had been left from some rich family’s table. It is not necessary to say a word about their clothing, for it was more like Joseph’s coat that was of many pieces and colors darned,

36 Sister Mary Joachim, formerly Chloé Preval, entered the order in a cloud of controversy. She was a former housemaid for the clergy and her reception was strongly resisted by Juliette Gaudin. While bias is possible, it is likely her reception threatened to redirect the women’s mission from teaching to domestic service. Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 197. The fear was not unfounded. The Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore had previously suffered this outcome; two of the sisters were reassigned to domestic duties for a period of time and their archbishop suggested that the entire group completely “disband and become domestics.” Davis, History of Black Catholics, 102-103.

37 Ibid., 45.
until darn was not the word. In spite of the charity of their many kind friends, they suffered much owing to the strictness of the times.\textsuperscript{38}

Even so, the exuberance of the first years likely quelled any true sense of doom; in fact, the women soon positioned themselves to develop further and even expand.

Across the second decade the women entertained a wider range of work and the community began to grow; they were also required to relocate on multiple occasions. A few weeks after moving into their first convent, a rented building on St. Bernard, they were forced to abandon it, as mentioned earlier. After a year’s lease, a second location on Bayou Road was evacuated. Finally, a third move occurred during the summer of 1851, when Henriette used her inheritance to purchase a lot and construct a convent according to her own specifications. With this act, Sr. Borgia Hart wrote, “Their dream was realized.”\textsuperscript{39} A wooden, two-story house was built on a lot purchased from Aristide Polenne. The increased space and autonomy in implementing the design allowed the women to organize and expand their burgeoning work load. As such, the structure represents an unrecognized text produced by Henriette Delille. An oral history account obtained from a former student and subsequent life-time neighbor, Mrs. Clarice Lebeau Brusly, led to the production of a facsimile of the building (see figure 4.2).\textsuperscript{40} In addition, recorders were able to elicit fine details about the arrangements maintained within the structure. These offer a hint of the nature and context of Bayou Road conventual life and Henriette Delille’s original vision for the community. It was reported as follows:

\begin{quote}
[It had] two stories. On the second floor were two dormitories separated by a hallway. One dorm was for the Sisters, the other for the boarders and orphans. The descriptions were a perfect replica of the ones on Orleans Street.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{39} Hart, \textit{Violets in the King’s Garden}, 12.
\textsuperscript{40} Oral report by Mrs. Clarice Lebeau Brusly reported in “A Memorable Visit” recorded by Sr. Mary Raymond Green, ASHF, and also cited in Hart, \textit{Violets in the King’s Garden}, 22.
The steps of our Foundress’ house were on the banquette (sidewalk) at the entrance of the house. There was a wooden knocker on the left side of the door. Entering into a small vestibule, one could visit the small chapel to the right which had a small circular glass window. A small parlor was on the left side. From the vestibule, swinging doors opened into a hallway. The dining room was on the right of the hallway and a classroom on the left. In the hallway, the staircase led up to the second floor. At the foot of the stairs was a large cowbell. Here Mother Juliette rang the bell for following the daily schedule.\footnote{Mrs. Clarice Lebeau Brusley, “A Memorable Visit,” 4.}

Interestingly, the account goes on to depict social arrangements that sought to be as familiar or even familial as possible. Mrs. Brusly had recalled that meals were taken together in a single room, the sisters at one table and the children at another. Rather than separate themselves totally from their charges, as they might have, the charter women appeared to have arranged their lives to maximize personal and pedagogical interactions with their charges. The students, in turn, were expected to help with the elderly in the nursing home. Later accounts depict the elderly volunteering to aid in the care of the orphans. Provocatively, Brusly described a May Day tradition with strong African overtones. She recalled that on May Day, an occasion of a day of devotion to St. Mary, the founding sisters placed a statue of her in the fork of a tree in the courtyard; they then joined hands and encircled it as they sang hymns of tribute. From accounts such as these, it would appear that Holy Family conventual life was a form of expression for the women, a spatial canvas on which they assembled the practices they found to be meaningful. The nature of conventual life that we glimpse through these accounts suggests they used that liberty to set forth a vision of an ideal society. Their new Eden, one of Christianity’s most prime spaces, reflected a desire to honor Christian principles while maintaining a familial, intimate, and Afro-Creole social environment.

With the move to the Bayou Road location, the St. Bernard Street property was purchased and used as a nursing home. Their litany of daily duties now included periodic...
shuttles from convent to former convent and from convent to church. Sister Deggs described the charter women’s days as long and unassuming. She supplied:

They cared for old indigents on St. Bernard street during the day, one remaining at night when an inmate seriously ill required a nurse; they attended to the old lady boarders who occupied the brick building in the yard at Bayou Road; and they taught catechism to children in the day and to adults and slaves at night.\textsuperscript{43}

From this description, and a few others of its type, it is clear that Henriette Delille had begun to systematize a program of holistic care (mind, body, and soul) centered at the convent. One can

\textsuperscript{42} Bayou Road Drawing, Mrs. Clarice Lebeau Brusely, unbound sketch, ASHF.  
\textsuperscript{43} Sister Mary Bernard Deggs, cited in Hart, \textit{Violets}, 12.
only imagine how important and strong a desire there was to impart a sense of order and personal commitment to their charges, and to each other. However, putting that system into place required a spirit of invention and flexibility on the part of the sisters. The type, pace, and level of activity depicted here was as far away from the stereotypical life of the New Orleans elite mulatto class as there could be. It was also strikingly mobile in comparison with that of the Ursulines. In the tremulous spaces between, the charter women forged new roles that would continue to change and evolve.

**Literacy in the House of the Holy Family**

Literacy played a central role in the women’s lives from the start; the convent was a centralized place where they could crystallize prior imaginings about the role that literacy and literacy education would play in their lives. As pointed out earlier, oral and print-related literacy practices were an integral part of Catholic pious women’s religiosity during this epoch. The spread of knowledge regarding Catholic and Afro-Latin Catholic philosophy and rituals were primal to their mission. From what we can discern from the historical record, multiple aspects of the early Holy Family *community of practice* were explicitly print-based and bibliographic. For example, *Regles et Règlements* makes evident the fact that Henriette Delille placed reading, writing (the composition of lectures), and instruction of these skills, at the center of the Sisters of the Presentation’s community of practice.\(^{44}\) Plainly, from its inception, the congregation was propelled by the charge “to instruct the ignorant.” Although it remains unclear whether or not they were permitted to aid all their students to learn to read or write, it is safe to say that Henriette Delille and the charter members’ will was to intercede *in a very literate manner* in the lives of those who were kept from chalk and slate. We may safely

\(^{44}\) There is no extant copy of the first rule.
surmise that Henriette Delille carried these responsive, if radical, literacy values and practices into the community life in the convent and expanded upon them in meaningful ways.

A glance forward affirms this suggestion. By 1876, *Reglement Provisoire* formally required that the women interact with texts seven or more times a day. After rising at four-thirty in the morning, the women entered the chapel at five o’clock for a session of “prayer and meditation in the chapel,” followed thirty minutes later by Latin mass. Confraternity prayers occurred at eight and then the “Particular Examen,” was recited at noon. 45 Dinner convocation was carried out in a manner consistent with St. Augustine’s Rule, where it was written that “there shall be lectures during the meals which are taken in silence.” 46 Chaplet recitations resumed at one o’clock, and then there were night prayers and a final session of chapel prayer at eight o’clock. Further, within this precise and intense schedule, at least three hours were designated for teaching classes or work.

A survey of nineteenth-century texts found in the Holy Family archives indicates that by 1842, the women may have amassed a small collection of books (see table 4.1) 47 In this manner, the women claimed for themselves and their adherents a space they were denied: a library, and with it connections to a world of ideas beyond the local boundaries. I identified French and Latin Bibles, prayer books, grammar texts, biographies, and Church-approved religious texts with dates or signatory marks that date back to the beginning years of this time period. Signatory marks and stamps indicate these texts came from varied sources: the

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45 *Reglement Provisoire*, ASHF, 1.
46 Ibid.; Augustine recommended the following: “At table, listen quietly and in silence to that which, according to custom, is being read to you, until you rise from the meal; so that not only your bodies may be refreshed with food, but your minds also may be strengthened with the word of God,” Augustine, *Rule of St. Augustine, Bishop*, (A facsimile found in ASHF), 4-5.
47 The Holy Family Library was not sealed; it must be acknowledged that some books may have been inherited by the Sisters of the Holy Family at a later date. When judgments are necessary, I defer my analysis to texts which bear appropriate markings, content themes, or have been tied to the charter women through oral tradition. See also Appendix A, List of Texts Attributable to the Foundresses).
members, their friend and benefactor Marie Aliquot, and their clerical sponsor, Étienne

Rousselon. A majority of the contributions that remain bear the stamp or seal of a French
religious lay association known as *Le Rosaire Vivant* (Society of the Living Rosary). Cyprian
Davis has explained that Étienne’s own biological brother, Paul Rousselon, a priest in the city
of Lyon, was the leader of this Lyon–based group which emphasized the use of religious
exercises based on praying the rosary. “Moreover,” Cyprian Davis wrote, “a very important
part of the Living Rosary devotions was the buying and distribution of pious literature.”
The members also acquired books collected from across France and shipped them to needy
missionary sites. Their presence in the library collection signals the order’s deep connection to
France and French religious thought and literary traditions. In fact, one of the rare texts which

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48 Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 47.
bears Henriette Delille’s signature was *Le Saint Rosaire et les Vertus de Marie*, a sort of guidebook to the organization; this artifact marks the founder as one who was familiar with, if not directly affiliated with, the spiritual and literacy practices of *Le Rosaire Vivant*. Cyprian Davis speculated that the mode of piety expressed through this French tradition may have had some influence on Holy Family congregational development. He noted that the system or schedule of plenary indulgences offered by the society in this text somewhat mirrors the plenary system Henriette Delille recorded in her book for her order in 1842.⁴⁹

Sacred texts found in the library indicated a strong literary component in daily religious exercises. With receipt of *La Sainte Bible* by Sacy, writes Davis, we may identify that the charter women read daily from one of the best written, most literary of the French translations of the Holy Bible.⁵⁰ Juliette’s contributions to the library were observed as being particularly “educated,” and included a Latin edition of the New Testament, the works of medieval mystics, St. Teresa of Avila, and Mary of Agreda, and a choral music book. Ultimately, as the decade progressed, the Holy Family collection grew appreciably. Ultimately, Cyprian Davis assessed: “[T]he library was a very good one from the viewpoint of French Catholic intellectual life.” The holdings reveal that Holy Family literacy practices were strongly rooted in classical and French post-revolutionary religious traditions.

The presence of religious literary works beside secular literacy educational materials is significant in that it marks the first observable integration of religious and secular literacy education in the curriculum material belonging to the early congregation. Some interplay was

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⁴⁹ Plenary indulgences are a Roman Catholic construct whereby sins are remitted by various non-sacramental acts, like reading scripture, praying the rosary, etc. Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 47 and 111.

⁵⁰ The quality of this volume is significant. “This French translation of the seventeenth century was known for its literary quality. It has been described as the ‘purest from the point of view of language and the best written’” Cyprian Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 111.
evident in nineteenth-century Catholic catechism texts; texts were often concatenated, or affixed at the end with full *abécédaires* (a table of alphabets) and abridged mathematics tables, although it was not entirely clear which were used by the Holy Family order for the instruction of slaves. Oral tradition implies that, at some point, such materials were confiscated from Henriette Delille, at which point she and the founding sisters were remanded to oral instruction, reflexive practice, and drama. I will speak more of this later.

In this sense and in these ways, it becomes clear that the move into the convent enabled the charter women to transcend the limitations Henriette Delille had so dutifully inscribed in *Regles et Règlements*. The convent and religious identity liberated the women from those same constraints which had proven so deleterious to black literacy development and formal literacy education in the general black population. They now had access to public and private space, space and time to be profoundly religious, activist, and literate. Here they could develop, in a more extensive manner their ability to act as sponsors of literacy for the black community. Where earlier this community of practice had convened for only a few hours at a time and only once or perhaps twice a month, they remained after this point generally in constant contact, unsupervised (by whites) and uninterrupted by family obligations. The community was finally united under a single roof and afforded time to develop close relationships, traditions, values, practices, and a shared trove of literacy materials. As a result, they fashioned a resilient and enduring space for their conventual *culture of literacy*. It was a culture which revolved around the women’s relationship to God and the world through texts. Prayer was a major theme: they read and recited, collected, selected, and contemplated religious discourse in a deep and

51 Poor condition of texts inhibits some research in this area. When the book covers deteriorate, as is the case with many of the early texts of this collection, the front matter and end sections are frequently lost. Similar texts found at other archives but found in better condition affirm this observation.
continuous fashion and on a daily basis—all of which served to strengthen their abilities and build their knowledge of religious discourses. The culture of literacy they established revolved around transferring their collective appreciation of the power of words to the uninitiated. They arranged their spatial-temporal space around the reception of students, planning lessons, caring for the infirm. In this capacity the women were encouraged to develop individual formal skills, like reading and writing, bookkeeping, nursing, and sewing, that which might be useful for group survival. As well, they were encouraged to develop informal abilities they deemed critical to their mission to change the community at large: the ability to pray, hold themselves in a dignified manner, espouse compassion for the needy, and act boldly upon their principles of faith. Gathered together, the women could nourish what the outside world could not: the vision of black women as equal and active players in the world.

Nevertheless, there were negative sides to the centralization process. As a unit, they could be more easily controlled. Clergy could put inordinate pressure on the women of the collective to act in their accordance. In this manner the founder’s vision for black women's roles in community uplift was both supported and challenged by that unique dialectic between women’s agency and negation which traditionally accompanied nineteenth-century Catholic religious houses. Challenge often came by way of a pattern of surveillance, if not interference, by male clergy. An example of this tendency was the pressure clergy put on women religious to be humble and demonstrate obedience by yielding credit for their accomplishments to them. A black religious house was an easy target for detractors from the public sphere. Nothing of its kind had heretofore existed for black women. Regrettably, prevailing conceptions about black women did not correspond to what a convent represented: self-discipline, holiness, chastity, learnedness, and worth. The responses of some New Orleanians to this new concept was
negative and became an immediate source of conflict for the charter women. They were ridiculed and insulted by their neighbors. Interestingly, Henriette Delille responded spatially, by adding buildings to block the noise of the vocal attacks and the participants’ view of the rear of the convent with the erection of additional structures made of brick, thereby forming a screen of privacy and a sound barrier. In this way the Bayou Road location was able to remain the Holy Family convent until 1882.

Quite possibly, Deggs, like other member-historians, regarded the convent experience as definitive due to their own personal experiences gained while transitioning to religious communal life. They recognized it as a new beginning, a place to begin to build an ideal life in communion with others and the Divine—a new Garden of Eden. One may easily speculate that the production of this new social and physical space gave them an the opportunity to form intimate social bonds, an occasion to think, and yes, philosophize, about (a) the hostilities they experienced, (b) the suffering to which they bore witness, and, (c) to critically theorize a response. Henriette Delille, accompanied and supported by the charter members, now had the opportunity to move beyond the curricular limitations of planning a pious association meeting or a sodality event which lasted, at most, a couple of hours. With her life-partners, she now could compose a corporate plan, an educational philosophy, and a whole way of living and thinking and believing.

**The Movement Outward**

The House of the Holy Family was a significant development, but no less important than the pattern of development within was the model of community outreach and institutional expansion Henriette Delille launched during this time period. It would seem that the success of the Holy Family mission lay in part on Henriette Delille’s ability to utilize the unique social
and physical spaces she and the other founders helped to produce. Gould and Nolan noted that
the Bayou Road convent “served as a center for [Delille’s] expanding ministry to the sick and
catechetical instruction and education of girls. Over the next decade, a dozen other women
joined her there.”52 Equally important, members of the free black community viewed the
convent as a valued, spatial production. Henriette Delille’s contemporary, Rudolphe Desdunes,
later recalled that the convent had acted as “a nucleus for the antebellum free black
community.”53 Desdunes’s choice of metaphor implied a deep and enduring pattern of social
interaction between lay Black Catholics and their first black women religious. Critically, the
word choice signaled the perception of Henriette Delille and the charter women as community
leaders, in a broader sense. As demonstrated in the sections to follow, Henriette Delille desired
to make the most of those interactions, working to mitigate the most negative aspects of
antebellum life and Afro-Latin Creole society that she might be able to change, such as caste
bias or concubinage. At the same time, she drew upon this community’s significant intellectual
and financial resources to sponsor her humanitarian and educational projects.

Contemporaneous to establishing the convent, Henriette Delille’s concept of
community permeated the traditional cloister and unblinkingly cast its members from the
material safety and spiritual comfort of a base. She propelled the first group of three, then later
six women, along these selected trajectories to establish, in a rhizome-like fashion, certain
black-female-centered spaces within the View Carré and Creole faubourgs (see figure 4.3).
They extended themselves on to the social scene like the spreading root system Deleuze and
Guattari employed as a figuration and metaphor for interconnectedness of human ideas and
actions: they made themselves present through multiple “lines of flight,” extended in all

52 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, xxxv.
53 Desdunes, Our People, 99.
directions, and through “movements of deterritorialization and destratification.” Such movements brought the women and their community of practice into both generative and contested spaces, places where black literacy flourished all the while being challenged by the dominant regime. Demonstrating both resolve and flexibility, Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family were able to realize all three tenets of their mission: to care for the sick, aid the poor, and instruct the ignorant. Although multiple angles of exploration are possible for this explication, I choose to follow three principal trajectories as lines of movement which led to literacy sponsoring activities engaged within (1) churches, (2) lay association meeting and functions, and (3) Holy Family institutions (nursing home, novitiate, orphanage, infirmary, and

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school). I also examine the effects of the subsequent interactions between these sites/sights in shaping Holy Family theorizations about literacy.

**Houses of Worship**

Henriette Delille’s vision involved sending the sisters out into the community to establish black-women-centered spaces in local churches. As this practice long preceded the establishment of the order, it represents a fundamental commitment and their experiences in this ministry were likely foundational to their attitudes towards their group identity and their purposes. In this pursuit the women demonstrated the will and interest in working with groups which some of their privileged relatives, friends, and acquaintances would have disdained to deal with. The sisters first established a regular presence in St. Mary’s Chapel and site with great geo-social importance. Indeed, St. Mary’s on Chartres Street had been a sacred site of worship for Ursuline nuns for nearly fifty years.\(^\text{55}\) Prior to the 1820’s it lay within the boundary of the Ursulines’ property; thus the chapel was an extension of the religious order’s convent complex. However, it was distinctive from the other structures in that it served as one of the rare spaces *outside* the convent walls where women broke their cloister and interacted with the general public. Bishops and priests celebrated the Rite of the Eucharist here, as well as the other sacramental rites, like baptism, confirmation, and marriage. Roger Baudier characterized the chapel as “a favorite house of worship for the Creoles of the city,” so much so that the building was enlarged to form a proper church in 1828, then remodeled to seat even more parishioners in 1845.\(^\text{56}\) Without doubt, the structure’s most striking feature was its immense, ornate altar dedicated to St. Mary; the crowned, veiled figure of the mother of Jesus Christ sat

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\(^{55}\) According to Baudier, the chapel and an accompanying classroom building for the order were built in 1794 with funds provided by Don Andres Almonester y Roxas. Baudier, *The Catholic Church*, 217.

\(^{56}\) Baudier, *The Catholic Church*, 312.
on a marbled pedestal; it attracted a steady stream of petitioners, and the adolescent Henriette was said to be counted among them. In fact, oral tradition maintains that the foot of St. Mary’s altar was the very place where Henriette and her lifelong friend Juliette Gaudin first pronounced their intentions to pursue a religious vocation.

Another remarkable feature of the chapel was the aspect which had determined Henriette’s use of it as a work space for black women. It had long served a second purpose, as a schoolroom for blacks. During the colonial and early antebellum period the chapel had served as a shelter from laws and customs which forbade or discouraged teaching slaves to read or write, and as a place of respite from growing public anxieties about black education—sacred or profane. Since the colonial era, the structure, like the Ursuline convent school, had been utilized by the Ursulines as a place to promote their rather aggressive interpretation of Catholic universalistic ideals. French women religious and lay catechists brought black converts to this location to prepare them for First Communion and Confirmation rites. In the wooden pews arrayed before the sacred altar, they were instructed in the rudiments of Christian principles, the precepts of the Roman Catholic belief system, and possibly more.

There was no shortage of participants. For one, the adjacent neighborhoods, Faubourgs Tremé to the north and Marginy to the northeast, contained a significant number of free black households. Free blacks had obtained land there and had built a thriving community, economically propelled by successful family businesses and trade, real estate, and slaves. By 1840, 40 percent of the households were owned by free black women, many having obtained impressive estates through inter vivos donations from white “spouses” or forebears. Secondly, they were part of the Vieux Carré, the footprint of the original colonial city. It was both site and sight of the fastest growing slave trade market in the nation. With the event of the
foreclosure of the transatlantic slave trade to New Orleans, a growing percentage of its new inhabitants came to be American blacks who had been "sold down the river" from Anglo-Protestant contexts.\textsuperscript{57} To the benefit of Catholic evangelizers, those who were sold to live and to labor in Louisiana households and businesses fell under the legacy of Louisiana’s colonial-era Black codes, the Code Noir, which required that all slaves be converted to Catholicism and educated in the principles and practices of the faith.

It is likely that Henriette Delille counted her black ancestors and relatives among those early catechism students. Within a generation, her family members’ names had begun to appear in sacramental records as the sponsors of new black converts. After September of 1824, when the Ursulines relinquished their property, the use of this space for these radical purposes persisted.\textsuperscript{58} Sr. Ste. Marthé Fontière, the Sisters of Mount Carmel, and other white women religious bridged the gap until the day the Ursuline nuns made their return in 1837.\textsuperscript{59} By then, the seeds they had once planted had germinated; the great-great-granddaughter of a slave convert could be observed moving across the threshold of their chapel, and out into the city with the title Sister, Superior, and Mother—even garnering from some the signs of respect afforded a holy woman. Poetically, the Ursulines’ own chapel, was claimed as one of the first spaces where Henriette Delille and the charter women would begin to enact the identity of a

\textsuperscript{57} The end of the transatlantic slave trade spanned decades: In 1808, both the United States and Britain outlawed the Atlantic slave trade; in 1815, France and Spain made a similar declaration. All continued to participate, implicitly and explicitly, well into the 1840s. “In the seven decades between the Constitution and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South to the lower South.” See Walter Johnson, \textit{Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5.

\textsuperscript{58} The Ursulines moved out of their main convent on Chartres Street in the Vieux Carré to a site two miles below the city to a site that is now occupied by the Industrial Canal. The move was motivated in part by crowded conditions with the neighborhood and the domicile. After the old convent was repaired it came under the control of Father Michael Portier, who then used it to run a small college. Sister Jane Frances Heaney, \textit{A Century of Pioneering: A History of the Ursuline Nuns in New Orleans} (New Orleans: The Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans, 1993), 278.

\textsuperscript{59} It is my understanding that a group of Ursuline nuns were dispensed to the school to operate it.
black woman religious. Henriette Delille and the charter members appeared at the baptismal font as sponsors and the pews for catechism lessons; they stood at the church altar for sacraments of marriage and confirmation, and, presumably attended masses for the dead (for which there are no records).  

St. Augustine church was another important church site for the women. Established in the fall of 1842, its establishment coincided with the approximate date of the founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family. The new parish it created was planned to be a model of universalism. Blacks helped to build it and were allocated more than half the space in the church. Cyprian Davis observed, “St. Augustine was built with funds gathered from Creoles, both white and black, the foreign French, and slaves. The parishioners, both white and black, had pews; the slaves were relegated to special seats.” Henriette Delille and the charter women immediately claimed space in the new church, and relocated their convent to a lot nearby. Here, as well as at St. Mary’s, Henriette Delille reportedly presented as many as sixty of her converts at a time for their annual catechesis examinations. Oral tradition asserts that these were public affairs attended by the masters and family members.

Records of religious transactions show that Henriette Delille employed the social spaces of the church to intervene in the lives of free and enslaved persons. Over the course of the decade, she and other charter women appeared at regular intervals in St. Mary and St. Augustine churches, where they baptized free and enslaved persons, witnessed marriages, and

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60 At this time St. Louis Church was the site of tremendous upheaval; Father Rousselon had been driven out by an uprising of church trustees, or marguilliers. The uprisings were a complex and violent affair. The church warden sought to claim control of the Cathedral and wished to select the pastor. For fuller treatment see Baudier, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana*, 373 and 565. Hospice care, the sacrament of unction (for the sick and dying) and funeral rites were and remain important aspects of Catholic ministries for which there are no records. Oral accounts attest that this was an important part of Early Holy Family ministry. There was no greater indignity than lack of proper burial. The Code Noir required conversion to Catholicism for an honorable burial; all others were ordered to be buried near the place where they died.
taught catechism. Sacramental records indicate that, as a group, the charter sisters received two to five persons per year into their personal and collective spiritual fold. Between the years 1852 and 1862, Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles appeared at the baptismal fonts in St. Mary and St. Augustine churches at least twenty-six times to sponsor baptisms, nineteen of whom were of enslaved persons.\footnote{Davis, Henriette Delille, 132.} It is a pattern which indicates that the women maintained a steady presence in the church and underscores the women’s deep personal commitment towards the care and instruction of the enslaved.

**The Lay Association**

In July of 1847, Henriette Delille established a lay society to support the Holy Family ministry. The *Association de la Saint Famille* (Society of the Holy Family) represented the first major movement of the Sisters of the Holy Family beyond their convent, aside from general ministerial work in the churches. It had been a bold move. Henriette Delille claimed the title of *Presidente* and Juliette Gaudin that of *Secrétaire*, legally incorporating a constitution that extended the reach of the congregation, the protections of the law, and the personal influence of Henriette Delille in the secular Afro-Latin Creole community. The names listed as founding members were organized into groups of assistants, counselors, and *zélateurs* (male); these names, Dumas, Lavigne, and La Croix, could be counted among the most accomplished and elite free blacks families in the city.\footnote{Desdunes, *Our People*, 103–4. See also David C. Rankin, “The Politics of Caste: Free Colored Leadership in New Orleans During the Civil War,” in *Louisiana’s Black Heritage*, ed. Robert MacDonald, John R. Kemp, and Edward F. Haas (New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum, 1979), 142.} The married couple Cecile and François LaCroix, for example, are listed as an assistant and a zélateur, respectively; they were reportedly the wealthiest free blacks in the city.\footnote{François operated a merchant-tailoring business, a plantation, and a real estate business. In 1861 François LaCroix’s property was valued at $242,570. That amount today, would equal approximately five million dollars.} He was a prominent businessman and co-founder of the
Société Catholique pour l’instruction des orphelins dans l’indigence (Catholic Society for the education of orphans and indigents), the lay association which, for its part, incorporated the Institute Catholique or Widow Bernard Couvent School, also in 1847. Little is known about Cecile, or any of the other women on the board, but logic dictates that she would have been the wealthiest free black woman in antebellum New Orleans.

The constitution declared its purpose was “pour but le soulegement des personnes indigentes maladies” (for the relief of poor and sick persons). Their first and most important project, it was written, was to build and finance the operation of an asylum or nursing home for the elderly and orphans. Members, it was written, were to pay a monthly subscription and canvas their respective domains for monetary contributions and other gifts and pool them in a treasury chest held by the group. In addition, the group held lotteries and fairs to raise money and to promote support for their causes. For example, society record books indicate that a public lottery was held August 2, 1848 “to aid in the erection of a hospice.” The funds were to be used to employ a doctor and support staff, and to purchase necessary medicines for the residents. The constitution provides a small window on the social world that permeated the convent and the type of world that Henriette Delille sought to create. From her base, she not only reached out toward the needy, or simply begged financial support from the prosperous free black community, but established a benevolence organization where middle class and wealthy blacks could participate in the ministry and perhaps be drawn into her worldview.

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Note, though commonly referred to as the Couvent school, the Institute Catholique was not a convent school, although it claimed to be established under the auspices of the Church. Desdunes, Our People, 103-4.

Constitution of the Association of the Holy Family, ASHF.

Ibid.

Association de la Saint Famille records, ASHF; See also Cyprian Davis, Henriette Delille, 57.

Constitution of the Association of the Holy Family, ASHF.
worldview reportedly rejected materialism, the institution of *plaçage* (illicit unions between free black women and white men), and laxity in the application of Afro-Latin Catholic religious values and practices.

*Association de la Saint Famille* served many purposes for Henriette Delille and the charter women. First, it permitted her to delegate tasks and thereby extend the order’s reach into the members’ respective domains: the French Quarter, Jefferson Parish, and the farthest reaches of the Creoles faubourgs. This form of community outreach acted in a manner analogous to that of the Society of Mary, which enhanced the reach and function of the Ursulines during the colonial era. In this respect, the society enabled Henriette Delille to raise money to fund her projects; the results indicated a strong desire to counteract the ills of slavery and racism through both social and “brick and mortar” institutions, near and far. Third, the society made it possible for her to either re-establish or deeply extend Holy Family ministerial reach into the elite free black community, which struggled for altogether different reasons than the enslaved. While the relationship was not altogether sanguine, the connections proved to be productive and influential. Indeed, the historical record, both oral and written, does affirm that the convent pulsed with movement of these supporters, their activities, and their texts.\(^69\)

One prominent text found among the Holy Family nineteenth-century texts is said to have been used by Henriette Delille and seems likely to have emerged from her interactions with the free black community. *Choix de Poesies Pour la Jeunes Personnes* is attributed by oral tradition to the foundress. The book is an 1850 compilation of verse intended for young persons. The compilation, edited by A. Couton, presents works by noted French Romantic

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\(^69\) The movement of supporters is evidenced by later accounts. Decades after Henriette Delille’s death, a later superior attempted to close the convent to supporters. Sr. Borgia Hart recorded that the community went into a furor.
literary figures such as Alphonse Lamartine (1790-1869), Victor Hugo (1802-1885), Amable Tastu (1798-1885), Anais Ségalas (1819-1895), Alexander Dumas (1802-1870), Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859) and many others. Importantly, the names and works of three, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, and Anais Ségalas, had particular meaning for free blacks of New Orleans.

Victor Hugo had denounced slavery and had written an early abolitionist novel, *Bug Jargal* in 1826; it represented one of the first full literary treatments of the Haitian Revolution. He specifically wrote letters and essays on behalf of black freedom in the United States. The namesake son of Alexander Dumas was a mulatto who had friends and purportedly relatives lived in the Creole community in New Orleans. Anais Ségalas, a Creole from what is now Haiti, would also have been known to literary-minded Creoles in the antebellum era; she had published poetry collections and a novel that explored issues of race, colonization, and slavery in the wake of the French Revolution. Notably, the text presents the works of a numbers of French female literary figures; ten of the fifty-seven contributors are women, representing forty-seven of the two hundred and seventy-seven poems. Their works generally evoke a call for the recognition of women’s abilities and power, but cautions them to pursue change through their traditional gendered roles as model mothers, daughters of the church, and as

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70 Hugo wrote: "Slavery in such a country! Can there be an incongruity more monstrous. Barbarism installed in the very heart of a society, which is itself the affirmation of civilization ... the collar of the negro chained to the pedestal of Washington! It is a thing unheard of. ... The United States must renounce slavery, or they must renounce liberty. They cannot renounce slavery." John Latrobe, *Colonization. A Notice of Victor Hugo's Views of Slavery in the United States, in a Letter from John H.B. Latrobe, of Baltimore, to Thomas Saffern, of New York* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1851); See also Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 288;

71 Dumas’ friend was Eugene Warbourg, a talented free black sculptor who Harriet Beecher Stowe met and reportedly used as the model for a protagonist in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Bell, *Revolution*, 183.

wives, sisters, and daughters. It was a kind of conditional form of French feminism typical of many French woman writers of their day.\textsuperscript{73}

In summary, community outreach through the \textit{Association de la Saint Famille} served to broaden the congregation’s reach religiously, socially, fiscally, and geographically. Importantly, it served as a direct and traceable link between Henriette Delille and the charter members of the Sisters of the Holy Family and their prior milieu—the highly literate, educationally accomplished, and political ambitious world of \textit{les gens de couleur libre} of antebellum New Orleans. It was also the case that they, along with the poor and illiterate, were objects of her ministry.

\textbf{Other Holy Family Institutions}

Through financial donations, gifts, and volunteer support from the \textit{Association de la Sainte Famille}, Henriette Delille was able to further construct the Holy Family institutional matrix. The conventions of nineteenth century convent life required that the sisters train new recruits through a year-long study program, called the novitiate. For a teaching congregation, the novitiate program functioned not unlike a normal school; it allowed aspirants to study pedagogical techniques, act as teachers’ aides, and develop expertise in the subject matter that was to be taught. In addition to serving as a domicile for the women, and a training school for teaching sisters, the convent grounds included a nursing home and an infirmary, and thus was a site for inculcating aspirants in Afro-Creole nursing techniques. In this manner, the teacher-education program was inclusive of care for the mind, body, and soul.

In 1851 Henriette Delille realized the ultimate goal of a teaching congregation: a convent school, the Bayou Road School for Colored Girls. It should be noted that the year of

the opening of the convent school coincides roughly with the opening of the Bayou Road convent. The timing of the events makes lucid a fact never pointed out in oral accounts: the construction of a custom designed the religious house equivocated the construction and design of their first school. It is probable that the charter women had taken in students prior to this date, for tutoring and short term-boarding terms. With the benefit of a physical structure of their own, and status conferred by the Vatican they could now formalize their roles as teachers. Moreover, the opportunity to design a convent building to her own specifications gave Henriette Delille the opportunity to represent through architectural design, her vision for the congregation’s future as the builders of schools, writers of curriculum, and education administrators. We know from the spatial arrangements expressed through oral tradition by Mrs. Brusly that half the living space and work space was allotted for the women and the other half was allotted for the boarding dormitories and classrooms. Henriette Delille had planned for her convent to serve as a school and thus had planned a conventual way of life wholly integrated with the physical presence of students, the concerns of educators, and interactions with parents. In this manner this development represented a major outreach executed by drawing the community within their domain. As shall be detailed in later chapters, their patrons brought ideas, texts, controversy, and their daughters—some of whom decided to stay.

**Literacy and Space**

“Every history that is not merely a chronicle or a fable must presume to be intrinsically spatial, to be about spatiality, in much the same way that history is presumed to be intrinsically social, about the sociality of human life,” wrote Edward W. Soja.74 The history of the genesis

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of the Sisters of the Holy Family demonstrates this contention. Establishing a place for black women to be holy women and purveyors of literacy during the era of slavery and when racial tyranny and overt gender domination were normative required producing protective, nurturing spaces and negating some that were destructive to their self-realization. Most important, Henriette Delille’s words and choices indicate that she did indeed recognize the role that space played in her life and its ability to help or hinder the fulfillment of her vision to establish a black teaching sisterhood. In consideration of this observation, I claim that Henriette Delille theorized literacy as a spatial act. As Lefebvre and Soja convincingly argued, theorizing spatiality calls for making visible what had been rendered invisible by dominant socio-political ideologies. In terms of literacy, as Leander and Sheehy offered, this means bringing to the foreground what was once regarded as the mere background noise of literacy learning and practice and recognizing that literacy can be meaningfully analyzed as a construct that is as much about creating the context for practice as it is about encoding and decoding texts. Through a spatial analysis, we can see the importance of collecting the social and material elements necessary to create and maintain a literate culture.

Commonly, on the micro level, the background of literacy was constituted by the tangible materials of literacy: writing devices, writing surfaces, books, libraries, reading rooms, classrooms, and schoolhouses. As the history of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans points out, none of these could be taken for granted by antebellum blacks. What nineteenth century schools required, in terms of social and material space, Holy Family sisters often had to strategize to acquire. They needed not only the writing instruments, paper, and books, and so

75 Soja, explicating the ideas of Lefebvre, maintained that space’s rendering as transparent makes it a fitting hiding place for social reproduction. As the same time, the opacity of material objects, discourages scholarly traditions from looking beyond their surfaces for meaning. Soja, Thirdspace, 62-64.
forth, but coals for the fire in winter, a writ of state incorporation to assemble, and a schoolyard that protected the children from insults, for example. Henriette Delille knew that only from within her own private space bounded by walls she owned could she freely speak out, perhaps even preach, against social traditions and behaviors that were harmful to the reputations of women of color, like the system of plaçage. Print culture, as experienced through letters, books, and newspapers, served as a link to the world beyond, a world populated by authors and ideas that spoke without referencing local racist ideologies.

Spatial analysis involves more than a mapping of the material world; it is seeing how the materials of the physical universe act to create social or conceptual space. Viewing literacy as a spatial act also means identifying the manner in which being literate creates lines of flight from local oppression. Henriette Delille’s geographical choices indicated preferences and points of conflict. The Holy Family institutional sites remained in a part of the city that was close to centers of power and the most important churches in the city, allowing them to benefit from sedimentation, adjacency, and proximity. They were close to the river and slave markets, yet also located in an area where free blacks had lived and thrived for hundred of years, where they had made their presence felt. Literacy is about forming spatial contingencies; the very presence of a large group of literate black persons during the antebellum era (and beyond) conveyed a powerful message about who could be literate and, for sponsors of literacy, just how far blacks could go in developing their literate abilities.

A spatial approach to literacy highlights the ways in which corporeal bodies represent spatial texts which can be read by others. The convent was both site and sight where women could both be and be seen as literates, intellects, leaders, and public agents of change. Literacy was an embodied practice with embodied meanings. Henriette Delille likely theorized that the
mythical claims about the inferiority of blacks and women might best be accosted by the presence of a prominently pious and literate black female. Every slave they catechized, every school girl they instructed was an embodied rhetorical challenge to the leading rationale for colonization and slavery: black inferiority. The mode of living of a teaching sisterhood put on display to students, supporters, and the world the faces and names of women of color who were literate, thoughtful, moral, committed, ambitious, and capable of planning the future of the black community. In these ways appreciating literacy from a spatial perspective draw into view the practical, corporeal, socio-political aspects of literacy.

For Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family, the walls of the convent, the boundaries of the property, performed a purpose beyond that of shielding its occupants from the rain and cold. In the case of antebellum blacks, the black schoolhouse was a highly desired space; it represented a public claim for the type of space that had been traditionally kept from them or that they were discouraged from creating. It was a space where they imagined they could converge, take control over their children’s education, self-govern, collect material resources, write curricula, and build a teacher corps. Such a space also served the purpose of negating those spaces that were destructive to black women’s self-realization. The convent gave Henriette Delille time and space to write a curriculum that refuted the precepts of racism and injurious iconography about black women and quadroons. The texts that the women chose for pious readings or for formal study could be screened against iconic representations of black women and racist Catholic religious philosophies prevalent in the nineteenth century. Further, by maintaining a strict code of conduct and a rigorous lifestyle and intense pattern of spiritual exercises, the women exorcized, on a daily basis, low moral and intellectual expectations of themselves.
Equally, the convent might be seen as sight/site of the *lived-space* production. The approbation of the order, and all the protections that came with it, required a transformation brought by merging the *conceived spaces* produced by the Roman Catholic tradition of the Catholic sisterhood with the *perceived spaces* that black Catholic women had developed over the course of several generations of Catholic activism. The convent was in many ways the ultimate realization the regularized (albeit unofficial) roles and practices that women of color had quietly taken up for generations. These acts were in complete defiance of prevailing conceptions of race and had transgressed the seemingly unbreakable association of holiness with whiteness. Viewing the convent/congregation as a lived space production illustrates how small, discrete acts can accumulate to create a dramatic change. Henriette Delille’s choice to draw the pious association into convent living, I argue, was a way of writing the women into the world as sanctified bodies, and their work as sanctified actions.

**Summary**

During this period, the foundational decade of the enclosed community, Henriette Delille led the women into their first convent and subsequently out onto the field of their apostolic domain. In this manner she carved out a unique space for free black women of New Orleans: the social space of a black religious sodality and the physical space of a convent. Through their first decade the women engaged in transformative activity, fostering religious and secular literacy at home in the convent, in churches, and out in the free black community. Already set apart from the dominant culture by race, gender, class, and, to a degree, by caste, and having separated from their families and homes in accordance with their chosen religious vocation, Henriette Delille and the charter women found themselves entering an awkward and dangerous social spaces, with fragile identities and risky assignments. Delille responded in a
planned and organized fashion, producing a traceable pattern of activity in the community. That pattern was described as being profoundly spatial: making a way out of clausura, prioritizing site selection of their convent, designing a convent to suit their purposes, and by extending themselves into the community along lines of connection which extended to a library, churches, lay association meeting places, and the various other Holy Family institutions. In this sense, the first decade of the religious community might be viewed as a prime example of a transformative space-producing and space-negating activity. The work of the founding women may be viewed as exertions upon conceived space (racial order and literacy paradigm) through the perceived spatial production (daily acts of piety and literacy) in the lived space of an original black woman’s community of practice. Such activity might be viewed not only in terms of the ability to produce space, but also the ability to know, or be cognizant of, the equal importance of social and physical design in the struggle for human dignity. In so doing, Henriette Delille’s choices signaled recognition that, in terms of the form, function, and future success of the order, space mattered.\textsuperscript{76}

In the chapter to follow, I focus on the establishment of the convent school and its curriculum; I take the view that Henriette Delille’s vision to establish a black Catholic schooling tradition represented an attempt to assert the dignity, equality and civic potential of the girls of color, and with them, all of the black community.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., ix.
Chapter Five
Literacy as a “Humanizing” Act:
Fulfilling the Vision/Mission Through Schooling

Bold Moves

As Sister Juliette resumed her class in the Bayou Road convent that autumn of 1852, Mother Henriette prepared to enter an entirely different educational space: a catechism class for enslaved women and girls. Accompanied by one of her novices, thirty-one-year-old Susanne Navarre of Boston, the Mother Superior entered a second classroom where she met and greeted a group of enslaved girls and women. The worn and wounded faces of the elder women contrasted sharply with those of the girls whose countenances shone with innocence. Back when Henriette was a teenager, it had been the look in these women’s faces and the narratives that their malnourished and sometimes impregnated bodies told that had brought her to a clearer understanding of the devastating effects of slavery. Then as now, she bore witness to the unjust and dehumanizing phenomenon whereby girls become mothers before they knew what it was to be women.1 Alongside brute force, imposed ignorance had been used to make black women into easy targets for white sexual aggression. Illiteracy served to further their isolation from the knowledge and beliefs that might contradict a plantation culture where "white men considered every slave cabin a bordello."2 The inability to read or write, or sometimes even to count, was used to mark a slave, control her movements, and, at times, to denigrate and humiliate her. Moreover, it denied the women and girls access to the Word.

Years later, when Delille chose to dedicate her life to God and elected to serve Him through a life spent addressing the needs of the enslaved, poor, and uninstructed, Henriette

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1 “Henriette Delille and her friends were coming in contact with the sordid conditions of slavery, which indeed caused them to mature rapidly.” Detiege, Henriette Delille, 19-20.
2 Blassingame, Black New Orleans, 82-83.
Delille placed concerns for their minds on equal footing with care of their souls and bodies. She taught the women and girls to read. In accordance with the precepts of religious catechesis, she spoke strongly and convincingly to convey to them that in spite of their condition, there was a God that loved them and He showed it by leaving the gift of the Divine Word.

At present, however, Mother Henriette’s goals had been compromised. The social landscape had changed markedly since her youth. By the mid-nineteenth century, racial hostilities had intensified in New Orleans and across the state; the Catholic clergy in New Orleans and elsewhere in the state began to demand strict adherence to the state and civil laws which kept control over the black population. As much as possible, free blacks were to be kept separate from the enslaved; the latter were expressly forbidden to be taught to read or write, and any speech act which might draw into question the institution of slavery was outlawed. The convent classroom was partitioned, creating a classroom for bondspersons and another for free blacks. It was an arrangement installed by Fr. Étienne Rousselon, who sought to protect the congregation by bringing them into accordance with the law.3 Anonymous charges had been leveled at Delille for her work; she was thereafter denied the use of any text when catechizing the enslaved. At that time Delille and the other charter members of the sisterhood devised an alternate strategy for slave catechesis. Lacking books of any kind, she then improvised a pedagogy built around memorization, drama, and a kind of reflexive practice, using the story of her life, as well as the lives of other teachers, to illustrate key religious principles.4 It would seem that Henriette Delille was out to prove that emancipatory knowledge, truth, or what Holy

3 Hart, *Violets in the King’s Garden*, 386.
Family sisters sometimes refer to as “the bread of life” could be imparted in very literate ways without the use of texts.

When she returned to teaching classes for free black girls, it would have been difficult for Mother Henriette not to feel, in a very palpable way, the contrast brought about by switching pedagogical gears from teaching the enslaved to teaching free black girls. Markedly different was the level of freedom experienced within the context of a traditional formal school setting. In this space the teachers did not have to work in tension, with concern for honoring a slaveholder’s wishes or respecting legal restrictions learning. Mother Henriette desired that her house be a site of freedom and collective uplift: freedom from the dehumanizing conditions set up by a fearful church and secular society, freedom to cultivate a systematic approach to the addressing needs of her community, and the space to conserve and perhaps even enhance core elements of a sophisticated, culturally rich, and capable community. It was not without its flaws; young women of color were continually exposed to a society that struggled at times to find its moral footing amid a world that had grown rancid with power, greed, and apathy. The transformation of that world would be personal and require faith, struggle, and hard work, she decided.

As Henriette Delille looked upon the free girls’ beige and brown faces, she saw children she knew or to whom she was related; their parents expected her to provide their daughters with the trappings of a proper French congregational education: graceful manners, the ability to converse with prospective male suitors, to write letters to distant relatives, to sew, learn basic accounting, or appreciate poetry. What they would receive by way of her curriculum was not only reading, writing, arithmetic, and female social graces, but the
introduction to a specialized way of life, philosophy of living, spirituality, and a new vocational possibility.

* * *

This chapter explores the critical events and developments in the history of the Sisters of the Holy Family during their second decade as an enclosed, Vatican-sanctioned community. Between the years 1852 and 1862, the founding women and their community of practice continued to function, evolve, and grow. Propelled by faith, buttressed by a literate, woman-centered Afro-Latin Creole tradition, and substantiated by a defined social and physical domain, the women cultivated their convent in a perilous manner: as a school for girls of color. This occurred during an era increasingly hostile to black schooling and amid racist discourses that used blacks’ illiteracy and purported inability to self-organize as evidence of their subhuman status. Thus, this chapter will focus on the dimension that formal schooling gave their literate practices, that is, (1) the manner in which congregational schooling both shaped and allowed for expression of their conceptualizations of literacy and literacy sponsorship, and (2) how that formation represented an act of asserting the human potentiality of women of color in particular and all persons of color, in general. It shall be shown how the institutionalization of literacy education practices on the part of Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family represented an attempt to realize, as Friere put it, “a pedagogy of liberation,” a way to help the oppressed to perceive critically the causes of oppression and how they might change it “to regain their humanity.”

5 Recall that as the Sisters of the Presentation, the group had received formal Vatican approbation as a pious society; then in 1842 local ecclesiastics recognized them as what would become the Sisters of the Holy Family. They would garner this name at some indeterminate date after Henriette Delille’s death.

In the first section, I begin with an overview of the decade. The second section will explore the educational aspects of the Holy Family ministry. Within this section, I first explore the changes in the politico-educational milieu which informed Henriette Delille’s ideas and choices and draw into relief the radical aspect of her project. I then piece together the fragments of knowledge about the Bayou Road school, to render an impression of the curriculum, instructors, and methods of instruction. I conclude with a brief discussion of the relationship between the project to establish schooling and Delille’s project have black women be recognized as fully human.

**Historical Overview**

In their second decade, Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family persevered and developed, and, happily, began to leave a slightly more definable historical trail. While there remains little documentation regarding the personal thoughts or daily activities of the charter women after the mid-mark of the nineteenth century (for example, there is no rule available for this era, nor do there exist daily dairies or personal letters written by Henriette Delille or other the charter women during this period); nevertheless, a larger body of written evidence substantiates the congregation’s presence, activities, and obstacles, together with the primacy of Henriette Delille’s role and the place that literacy occupied in her vision of community uplift. All of the documentary artifacts typical of the prior decade—church records, notary documents, the book collection, a spattering of bills, and census entries—continue to be produced in the 1850s and early 1860s, signaling continuity with the prior decade. Around 1851, these are joined by critical artifacts, first, personal correspondence Henriette Delille received from a niece, which offers additional clues about her personal literacy practices, and second, two portrait-type photographs of Henriette Delille and Father Etienne Rousselon,
which, though individual, appear to signal the beginning of a public presence for their professional alliance. Equally important, by 1852, there is a clearly defined point in Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs’ journal when the recollections become firsthand. These are joined by the recollections of a former student who did not become a member, Mrs. Clarice Brusely, an informant who was mentioned in the prior chapter. Taken together, they sketch the configuration of a congregation in full movement, a philosophy shaped by and fitted with the social tools to manage conflict and disappointment, and a vision drawn into sharper focus, becoming ever more distinct.

A focus on the insights that oral tradition alone offers brings to light a dramatic decade-long journey. From congregation historians Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs and Sr. Mary Francis Borgia Hart, we gain a sense of how this period was thought to be at once triumphal, tenuous, and tragic. Triumph came with the achievement of four key developments: the completion of their new convent, full attainment of their teaching vocation, acquisition of a professed status, and greater recognition by citizens of the city. However, the mid 1850s and early 1860s were particularly harsh for members of Louisiana’s free black class. Gould and Nolan observed, “Deggs tells a story of a community . . . [that] emerged victors despite their subordinate places within a political system that was in turmoil.” Changing socio-political contexts challenged any gains they had made at, or near, the beginning of the second decade as a sanctioned black sisterhood. In particular, the near decimation of New Orleans’ les gens de couleur libre community due to free black emigration and European immigration rendered Holy Family spatial productions tenuous. Interestingly, the women’s response to their renewed

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7 Previous accounts given by Deggs were in all likelihood oral transmissions; Gould and Nolan content that she likely came to the convent as a student somewhere in the 1850s. For further discussion, see Gould and Nolan, No Cross, No Cross, “Preface,” ix-xxx.
vulnerabilities, antagonisms, and encounters with natural and man-made calamities led to the development of a Holy Family religious philosophy and teleology adaptive to spiritual and material struggle. Importantly, they re-appropriated difficult and even tragic experiences and an environment of overwhelming persecution as part of a dialectic with the Divine. Under a guiding principle exemplified by the motto, “no cross in heaven, no crown on earth,”⁹ the women emboldened themselves to see the challenges they faced as an affirmation of the value of their mission by God. In other words, if they did not bear crosses or experience tribulation, then they were not doing God’s work and would not earn heavenly accolades. Finally, the decade was, on multiple counts, deemed tragic by bearers of oral tradition. The women’s developing religious philosophy was profoundly tested by the upheaval and poverty of the Civil War and Henriette Delille’s declining health. Her death in November of 1862 served as the penultimate test of the merits of her vision and the survivability of the community of practice she had guided into development.

**The Movement Continues**

The period began with a flurry of activity, largely a pattern attributable to initiatives begun in 1850-1851, when Henriette Delille purchased land, had it surveyed, and contracted to build a new convent and school. Financial and notary records corresponding to the first two years depict Henriette Delille administering the office of a mother superior by transacting business with craftsmen, paying taxes, and providing for the order in the case of her death. All of these represent very literate activities. Business receipts and church account entries involving a builder named Antoine Chevillon indicate that as late as October 2 of 1853,

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⁹ Ibid., xvii.
Henriette Delille continued to shape and reshape the convent structure and grounds.\textsuperscript{10} We also learn from these records that Delille chose to use her own funds and to incur personal debt to finance the congregation’s various projects and that she received direct financial support from others, namely Marie Aliquot and Father Etienne Rousselon. Notably, each loaned her money and, on occasion, subsequently cancelled the debt. Notary records also provide a rare statement of purpose which reveals Henriette Delille’s point of focus, shared with her friend and benefactor, Marie Aliquot. One loan transaction between the women included a required pledge that the purchase was “for the sole purpose and with the firm determination to establish in perpetuity an establishment or asylum of charity, for the religious education according to Catholic doctrine for persons of color”\textsuperscript{11} It would appear that Henriette Delille had not veered from her prior commitment to black instruction.

There is an appreciable pause in Henriette Delille’s church ministry activities at one particular point. From August 24, 1851, to April 14, 1853, Henriette Delille did not appear at the altars of St. Mary chapel or St. Augustine Church for baptisms, while Josephine and Juliette did. This period of absence coincides with the peak period of activity described above. It is apparent that in that eighty-five week span, building and operating the convent and school, as well as the reception of girls into her fold as convent school students, occupied time once spent sponsoring new entrants to the faith. The prior level of activity resumes quickly, however. In this way, the religious record confirms the logistical or bureaucratic record.

There was another possibility. At the close of the prior decade, Father Rousselon had likely begun to make logistical arrangements for another time-consuming and organizationally


critical advancement: transforming the order into a professed sisterhood. Oral tradition maintains that Henriette Delille entered a program of religious formation, or novitiate, and exercised the rite of profession around 1852. The novitiate traditionally featured a period of study and immersion in the appropriate religious culture (i.e., teaching sisterhood), designed to prepare or test an applicant or novice for reception into a religious community. The curriculum involved study of Catholic pedagogical methods, apprenticeships in the duties of a religious, wearing a provisional habit, following a sister through a typical day as a religious, and a period of testing for spiritual readiness—all leading to the act of professing the simple vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty. For this to happen, it would have been necessary for Henriette Delille to leave the convent for a period of weeks, months, or use blocks of her time for a significant duration. Given that the Holy Family order was original, logic dictates that the vicar general would have asked another professed sisterhood to allow Henriette Delille to enter their novitiate program. Oral tradition offered by Sr. Borgia Hart indicates that none of the religious houses in the city would accept Delille and she was sent to St. Michael’s convent in St. James Parish and into the care of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.\(^{12}\) The Sacred Heart Sisterhood, however, possesses no written record or oral history regarding Henriette Delille’s participation in their novitiate. Typical of many aspects of the founder’s experiences and the organization’s history, race likely played a determining factor in the historical discrepancies. Davis concurs: “Any informal arrangements that a religious community may have made to accept temporarily a woman of color would most likely not have been recorded.”\(^{13}\) Davis speculates further that “there is little doubt that somehow Henriette Delille and her companions received enough formation to satisfy the diocese that they might make religious vows. Very likely, these vows

\(^{12}\) Davis, *Henriette Delille*, 62.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 63.
were made in 1851 or 1852.” Soon afterwards, oral tradition maintains, Henriette Delille returned to the convent to direct Juliette and Josephine through a similar process. Regardless, it was around this time that Rousselon permitted Henriette Delille to trade in the blue dress she used as part of an adaptive habit for a black one, likely signifying her change in status to that of a professed sister. Around that time she entered a photographic studio with Rousselon where they paused before a camera to produce the carte vista photograph found in the Holy Family Archives.

During this period four key developments—domicile, vocation, profession, and acceptance in their domain—occurred within a relatively short span. These developments suggest that the women experienced a sort of threshold level of spatial momentum. Indeed, by the middle of the decade, the community had grown in membership to more than fifteen. With regard to this development, Deggs exclaimed in her journal, “Only after thirty or more years of pain and trouble were those noble women consoled when one after another came to join them in the good and fervent work!” The congregation more than doubled its numbers during this decade. The 1860 census indicates that in addition to the original three, Henriette Delille, Juliette Gaudin, and Josephine Charles, the convent had previously added four new members: Josephine Vecque, Suzanne Navarre, Henriette Fazende, and Orphise Romain. By 1862, the congregation had grown to at least fifteen. We have no comprehensive record of all the novices or members for this particular period. However, Deggs recalled the names of eight members who abandoned the cause after 1862, three of whom attempted to establish themselves in France.

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14 Ibid.
15 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 8.
16 These are the names reported in the 1860 Census. Davis, Henriette Delille, 67.
In fact, the historical record suggests that seeds for the organization’s leadership for the subsequent twenty-five years were planted during this time. Information retrieved from the Matricula, a text which records vital information on each of the nuns, as well as other historical sources on former members, indicates that toward the latter portion of the decade, the community received some of its future leaders as students.\(^{17}\) Gould and Nolan deemed that Sr. Mary Bernard Degg’s account was “too personal to be from a second-hand perspective.”\(^{18}\)

Born November 9, 1846, in a community outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the young Deggs was raised in New Orleans and likely took part in catechism classes offered by the charter women. Besides cofounders Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles, another future Mother Superior entered the convent as a student about this time. Magdalene Alpaugh, the fourth superior, was born in 1849 and likely began her schooling under the charter women in 1860. From Degg’s account we may infer that by 1863, she “had begun some form of duties within the community when she was only twelve years old and [officially] too young to enter.”\(^{19}\) Deggs specified that it was Josephine Charles who instructed her in how “to make the sign of the cross when she was enrolled for the first communion [classes].”\(^{20}\)

Over the decade, their successes brought them into contact with a wide spectrum of the black community, culminating in a growing body of support and a steadily increasing number of applicants. However, support for Henriette Delille and the charter women, the school, or the benevolent society did not always translate into a context favorable for young women who wished to follow in their lead. “There were many who, with the consent of their families, would have entered, but they did not

\(^{17}\) The Matricula was recorded after the antebellum period; data on the charter members was written after the fact.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 60.
want to displease their relatives and friends, not knowing whether they would remain and then have to return back into the world.”

Despite these gains, the tenuousness of the sisterhood remained a strong theme throughout this decade, largely because of socio-political changes in the secular milieu. The contexts in which the charter women carried out their work worsened significantly over time. The struggle to remain a viable, sanctioned community, as well as agents of change, was exacerbated by their position at the center of a dangerous crosscurrent: a surging wave of oppression aimed directly at *les gens de couleur libre*, as a class, and with yet another related undertow of intolerance, targeting sponsors of slave literacy and black education, detailed in the section to follow. Suffice it to say that for every friend and supporter, the charter women could also count a critic or detractor. Or as Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs recalled in her journal: “[W]e had many dear friends and also, like the Church of Christ, many enemies.” As they moved into the Civil War era, the merit and meaning of their organization, its culture, and its mission to instruct, emerged in sharper relief.

Lastly, but most importantly, the whole of the city was devastated by two significant events during this period. First, the city endured its most devastating epidemic. The yellow fever outbreak in the summer of 1853 killed at least 8,000 persons and affected some 40,000 other inhabitants. At its August peak, the scourge claimed the lives of more than 1,346 persons *per week.* Undeterred by the sight of disease and death, and largely immune to yellow fever, it was colloquially referred to as *Stranger’s* disease, the charter women were purported to have walked boldly through the streets, caring for the sick and dying. As a consequence, the women

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garnered a measure of respect and acceptance among their neighbors in the city. Although the experience of dealing with the epidemic women brought a moment of clarity in their mission and recognition, the aftermath of the plague presented a number of other problems: (1) it produced an overflow of orphans, (2) a fear of contracting the plague hindered the replacement of stricken priests and nuns and other aid workers, and (3) the human devastation intensified the level of poverty. Subsequent summers brought annual waves of misery.

Second, the end of the period was marked the calamity of war. Louisiana ceded from the Union in January of 1861, making the capture of New Orleans a priority to Lincoln and the Union generals. The city of New Orleans came under siege in the spring of 1862. Federal occupation immediately brought on a state of adversity for the Church and all who depended on acts of charity for their survival. The ranks of the poor included many who had once been rich. Schools closed or failed for lack of tuition-paying students; religious orders and other benevolence associations struggled as they never had before. In October of 1862, Father Etienne Rousselon could hardly imagine how he and those in his charge would survive the period:

We are sequestered in the town by an efficacious blocus. Impossible to correspond with the parishes in the rural area. Food is still very dear. And there is no income. The misery of the people is at its height… I can no longer pay the large debts, the interests, and the rents. There only remains enough for the upkeep of the household. To tell the truth, I have only about three thousand dollars in my wallet. All are bills in Confederate money without value for the moment.  

Henriette Delille’s health would not endure the rigors of the time. The distractions of war, deep poverty, debt, racial struggle, class antagonisms, and mortal fear were joined by serious concerns over Henriette Delille’s state of health. According to oral tradition, the experience of the naval bombardment of the city was unsettling enough to have sent the founder’s health into

24 Rousselon to Odin October 15, 1862. University of Notre Dame Archives. Cited in Davis, Henriette Delille, 75.
a period of permanent decline. Near the end of this decade, the collective was forced to prepare for the eventual loss of their leader and visionary spark. Tragically, on November 17, 1862, only weeks prior to hearing the promises offered in Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Henriette Delille succumbed to tuberculosis and the House of the Holy Family became site and sight of a great wake.

“Elevating Our Race” Through Formal Education

The crucial final steps taken toward fulfillment of Henriette Delille’s vision were also vital first steps in a new, black, female-led, social movement to educate black youth in New Orleans. With the commencement of her primary-level convent school, referred to here as the Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls (see figure 5.1), Henriette Delille led the collective and their movement for community reform and uplift into the arena of formal education. These women had been instructors in other capacities prior to this effort. However, in launching their own school, with their own interpretation of a universalizing curriculum, they created a social catalyst. The humble, but forward-looking actions in this regard signaled a profound shift in the history of black women’s education in New Orleans. The convent school came to be among the first nativist, or black-initiated and black-run, educational enterprises in the South and the second such Catholic girl’s school in the nation.25 It was an even more dramatic change within the convent. Through the establishment of the convent school, the congregation members would now spend a large portion of time and energy inculcating the young in their specific ways of knowing, thinking, believing, and being literate. This would prove particularly important because their school served as a cradle for the young women who

25 The first was St. Francis School in Baltimore, which was established by the Oblate Sisters of Providence. If the Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls were counted as part of the prehistory of St. Mary’s Academy (1880), it may represent the oldest surviving schools for black girls in the nation.
Figure 5.1 Bayou Road Convent and School. Facsimile of a watercolor image of the type of structure used by Henriette Delille, New Orleans Notarial Archives.
would one day reinforce their numbers and eventually become their replacements. The institution of the school also permitted them to extend themselves in a very personal way into the lives of their scholars’ parents, relatives, and entire kinship groups. Equally, it allowed them to spread awareness of their ministry, their philosophy, and their message of black female self-empowerment throughout the community and beyond. Henriette Delille had given her life in full measure for her cause. Her vision and her ability to lead and inspire others was then placed in the hands of her spiritual daughters.

**Religious Instruction of the Enslaved**

When the law or a master’s whim forbade full academic instruction, Delille and the charter members of the Sisters of the Holy Family used religious education to foster the acquisition of an Afro-Latin Creole epistemology and literacy practices to the enslaved. This meant the blended knowledge systems arising from their African and European heritages; evidence suggests that Delille interpreted the notions of religious education broadly, including knowledge and skills that were customarily discouraged or forbidden. In her study of slave literacy Janet Cornelius found that “former slaves who learned [to read and write] on their own initiative mentioned the religious context for their learning more than any other factor. . . One-third of the Federal Writers’ Project interviewees whose learning was slave-initiated specified a religious context for their learning to read and write.”

Further, “Religion . . . was mentioned by former slaves more often than any other context in which teaching by whites took place.”

For some enslaved persons, religious instruction served as sole entry point into the dominant discourses of the world; for others it served as supplement to prior initiatives toward self-

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26 Janet Cornelius, “‘We Slipped and Learned to Read’: Slave Accounts of the Literacy Process, 1830-1865,” *Phylon*, 44, no. 3 (3rd Qtr, 1983): 181.
27 Ibid., 179.
education, whether clandestine or master initiated. While it could be used as an instrument of social control, catechesis offered the positive benefits, foremost the possibility of dialogue with a mindset other than that of the slaveholder and the possibility of the formation of liberating or what Freire sometimes referred to as “humanizing” practices. In this manner, catechesis had the potential to be constituted a critical literacy event, that is, imbued with the possibility of raising the enslaved person’s consciousness by rendering to the oppressed a vision of the systems which oppressed them.

Like all other evangelists of the enslaved, Delille and charter women were limited in their choice of literacy materials. Typically, religious education was restricted to specially prepared manuals or catechism texts. In a recent study of the religious instruction of Blacks in the nineteenth century, Addie Walker determined that no national guide to Roman Catholic religious instruction was produced until 1885, and that only three were known to be available to free blacks during the nineteenth century. Religious education texts were the responsibility of local bishops to locate or produce for their own bishopric or geographical domain. Walker identified three religious education texts that could have been used before the Civil War. The first, The Poor Man’s Catechism, written in 1815 was selected by free Blacks in Baltimore. The second text, A Catechism of the Roman Catholic Faith, was composed by Bishop John England in 1830, “for young children, servants, and others of small capacities or limited time.” Finally, there was an immensely popular German text written by the Rev. Joseph DeHarbe in 1850 entitled, A Catechism of Christian Doctrine.

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A fourth catechism text is relevant, however, although it was not produced during the antebellum period. An 1878 edition of the *Catéchisme du Diocese de La Nouvelle-Orleans* was located in the archives of the SHF. Walker finds that, “It is likely that this text, the only one [formally] allowed in the diocese, was used in the instruction of Blacks in various catechetical settings conducted by the Sisters in New Orleans.”  

Although this edition of the catechism was published by Archbishop Perché after the war, the text was originally commissioned by Archbishop Antoine Blanc in 1846; it is *his* mandate, not that of his successor— which opens the book:

> We have ordered and do order all parish priests, ministers . . . boarding house and school teachers . . . teaching now and in the future throughout the diocese, the exclusive use of the present catechism.

As the text was conceived and possibly drafted during the antebellum period, I believe that a brief description of this text is useful in conveying a sense of the pre-war catechism lessons.

The 1878 New Orleans Catechism had 175 pages and was composed of 955 questions and answers written in French, with prayers, psalms, and hymns in Latin and Greek. The text commences with fifty-three pages of prayers to supply a daily regime of prayers and then those which are appropriate for first communion rites. The content was graduated according to the ability of the student, “well explained, contains only, in a very small space, all that is necessary to prepare persons of very limited intelligence or memory.” A sample reads:

D. Qui vous a cree et conservé jusqu’à présent? [Who is it that creates and now sustains us?]

R. C’est Dieu qui m’a créé et me conserve. [It’s God who created and saves me.]

D. Pourquoi Dieu vous a-t-il créé et pourquoi vous conserve-t-il? [Why did God create you and why had he saved you?]

R. Dieu m’a créé et me conservé pour le connaître, l’aimer et le servir, et parc moyen,

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30 Ibid., 141.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 143.
acquérir la vie éternelle. [God created me and saved me to understand and serve and thereby acquire an eternal life.]  

Designed as a dialogue, the text renders a view of the Christian cosmology, the covenantal relationship between humans and the Divine. It explains the role of Jesus, the value and meanings of scripture, and authority of the Roman Church. Beyond basic Catholic doctrine, semiotics, axiology, and means of communication with the Divine, etc., various forms of knowledge are conveyed: historical, lexical, and structural information pertaining to the Church, as well as a common knowledge base for living in a Catholic society. In the course of oral instruction, the catechists could also acquire various potentially liberating literacies: subversive skills (e.g., reading between the lines, critiquing social practices, principles of Judeo-Christian rhetoric and argument), cultural knowledge (values, tastes, and requirements) and linguistic fluencies (Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, or English). With these, an acute student (supported by a strong clandestine learning community) could deduce discontinuities between the doctrine and practice of Catholic and secular American ideals.

Early religious education efforts by Henriette Dellile and the charter women differed markedly from instruction offered sometime in the antebellum period, likely after 1830, when civil codes were enacted to prohibit the teaching of reading and writing to the enslaved and ended unsupervised association between the enslaved and free Blacks, or possibly after 1850 when the group’s incorporated status was revoked. The dramatic change in the socio-political context brought changes in SHF educational initiatives and the material content of their curriculum. Sr. Boniface Adams Borgia Hart (1976) recounted that all texts, including the catechisms, were removed, and so at that time Henriette and her companions continued to teach using techniques that emphasized “memorization, dramatization, meaningful practice outside

33 Ibid., 144.
of class, using Jesus’ teachings and Mary’s example as models, as well as the lives of teachers, especially in the prayers, the sacraments, and the beatitudes.”

Through these means, Delille and Sisters of the Holy Family prepared students—some of whom were middle-aged or elderly—for the rites of baptism and first communion. Thereafter, Delille and the SHF were required by the Black Code to maintain separate educational tracts and class meeting times so as to maintain boundaries between the bonded and unfree. The response demonstrates that methods and materials of instruction for education of the enslaved may have been limited, but not the imagination or commitment of the sisters. Henriette Delille’s educational philosophy called forth, among other characteristics, creativity, flexibility, personal resolve, and a spirit of resistance.

**The Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls**

Holy Family oral tradition makes clear the fact that education was Henriette Delille’s and the other charter women’s chosen instrument of social and spiritual transformation, with the establishment of a formal school as the direct object of their ministry. Congregational historian Sr. Audrey Marie Detiege noted that immediately after taking form, “the first work undertaken by the little religious community was the teaching of poor slave children, and a great deal was accomplished.” The idea of establishing a formal school seems embedded in their earliest initiatives. Among Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs’ first recollections of the early period is the insistence that “[w]e always had many young ladies boarding with us.” As she

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34 Hart, Violets, 160. According to Sr. M. Boniface Adams, “The law that forbade the teaching of reading to slaves led to Henriette Delille and her fellow teachers [toward] designing interesting ways of unfolding the truth of living, as given in the catechism classes. It became regular practice to have pupils demonstrate to parents and to masters at special exhibition times the lessons [they] learned and to observe their [level of] interest[,] [P]upils not only recited but dramatized as well, in the classroom and also as part of special rituals which the teachers designed.” “The Gift,” (see note 4), 9.

remembered it, the date of the commencement of the order coincided with the founding of the religious house—November 21, 1842. This statement suggests that the charter sisters had begun to offer a program of general Catholic education to free girls of color a full decade before the establishment of the Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls. As former students and teachers in the St. Claude School run by Sr. Ste. Marthée Fontiere, they realized that the establishment of a school would add a vital dimension to their organization, as well as momentum for their movement toward community through female agency. Henriette Delille and Juliette Gaudin no doubt gleaned from their own personal experiences as Catholic parochial school students that bearing witness to the traditions and material legacy of white women religious allowed students to become potential sisters; their families, a source of support and objects of ministry; their unconverted acquaintances, new points of expansion. In short, education provided converts within the school and from without. Knowledge, skills, ideas about literacy—including the idea of the black teaching sister—could be lifted on these ever-widening circles of influence to produce a successful movement for community uplift and racial reform.

**Educational Contexts for French Catholic Girls of Color**

As far as can be discerned from the data and traditions made available, The Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls offered their student body an education in the French classical tradition. In a typical congregation school of nineteenth-century France, this meant classes in reading, writing, language, music, and the technical arts. “Like Catholic schools of the Reformation,” wrote Sarah Curtis, “congregational primary schools before the Third Republic stuck to basics.”

36 Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 84.
creating loyal members of church and civil society, good mothers, dutiful daughters and future
women religious. In the case of working class girls, this also meant persons with marketable
skills.

Besides the all important religious curriculum, . . . pupils could expect to learn reading,
writing, French, arithmetic, and a smattering of history and geography. Girls learned to
sew and knit and boys might learn how to draw. In its focus on basic subjects, the
congregational curriculum mirrored the requirements of the [French] state. The Guizot
Law of 1833 listed religious and moral instruction, reading, writing, French, arithmetic,
and the metric system as the required topics in an elementary school classroom; it
reserved geometry, line drawing, natural and physical sciences, singing, history, and
geography for “superior” primary education. This list remained unchanged at the time
of the Falloux laws of 1850, but teachers could add additional subjects, such as
agriculture, industry, hygiene, surveying, history and geography, drawing, and
gymnastics [for boys].

In France, the same Falloux ordinances insisted that girls were only required to be instructed in
“moral and religious instruction, reading, writing, arithmetic, French, singing, drawing, and
needlework.”

As neither Louisiana nor the Federal government demonstrated comparable laws, (the
public school system was still in its infancy in the 1850s), I find that the French congregational
model is more useful for understanding the congregational school in Franco-American contexts
and for speculating on schooling practices in Afro-Latin Creole contexts. As was explained in
an earlier chapter, but bears repeating here, French congregational schooling had a strong
influence on American education discourses in the nineteenth century. Though the Catholic
congregational school movement involved a diverse group, which included American,
Canadian, and Italian-born women, most Catholic congregational schools in the United States
traced their origins to France and French traditions, and standards set by what Elizabeth Rapley

37 Ibid.
38 Curtis maintains that these laws greatly facilitated the growth of orders and education of girls in France.
Interestingly, this area which demonstrated its most influential effects were in Lyon. Recall that Sr. Ste. Marthé
was from Belley, a town in France not far from Lyon, and Bishop Antoine Blanc’s brother was a priest in Lyon.
Sarah A. Curtis, Educating the Faithful, n5, 203.
describes as “professional nun-teachers” of the *Ancien régime.*³⁹ These educators sponsored institutions which promoted the education of girls and sold to Pre-Revolutionary France the concept of free schooling for the poor. Further, Sarah Curtis maintains that after the revolutionary period, a Catholic congregational system dominated the educational imagination of civic leaders: “From the French Catholic primary school, lay educators borrowed curriculum and methods, as well as the very idea that a school could deliver ideology and shape behavior.”⁴⁰ In nineteenth-century America, French congregational discourses were readily disseminated to the public and into broader educational discourses through prospectuses published in annual Catholic directories, as well as seasonal advertisements in newspapers, articles, and pamphlets. In the case of the former, the directory edition offered a compilation of data about clergy and religious working across the nation and the entire Catholic empire. One of its highlights provided detailed descriptions of congregational schools, including the names of leaders, physical descriptions of the school, lists of coursework, and declarations of educational philosophy directed toward the parents of prospective students. While it is true that the entries were not always a direct reflection of the actual situation or even the will of the congregation, they cannot be totally disregarded. In an indirect manner, this was a space where teaching religious entered something of their own voices into public discourses about education. In so doing so, they made clear their view that women were capable of mastering a great range of disciplines and depth of knowledge about the world in which they lived.

Unfortunately, there are no such entries for the Sisters of the Holy Family or their convent school until 1880. By that time the congregation’s flagship school was named St.

Mary’s Academy, one of the first female college preparatory institutions for blacks in New Orleans. It is believed by at least one scholar that the absence of directory entries for black women’s schools is tied to issues of race. In her review of the reports of Maryland’s black teaching congregation, Dianne Bate Morrow discovered an absence of entries for the Oblate Sisters of Providence. “Compiled from data submitted by diocesan authorities across the nation, the directories reflected official diocesan views,” she wrote.41 For many years, that meant overlooking the free black congregations. However, the Oblates did make an appearance in the directory in 1834. A review of their prospectus and that of three other relevant prospectuses offer important clues about the educational environs Henriette Delille accessed. They will allow us to speculate with some confidence about the curriculum of the Bayou Road convent school.

St. Frances Academy, which was also run by Afro-French women who were working under the auspices of French clergy and through an Afro-Latin milieu was the only other black (run) convent school in the nation. Directed by Mary Elizabeth Lange (1784-1882), leader of the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the curriculum fell generally in line with the 1833 Guizot requirements for French primary schools (c.f. table 5.1). The first iteration of the curriculum recorded in 1832 offered identical core classes: Religion, French, Arithmetic, and Writing, with Sewing and Embroidery classes for the technical arts.42 It was remarkably rigorous and advanced parity with a French system. It differed in one way, by the addition—not substitution—of an English class. In 1834, the Oblate’s entry in the Catholic Almanac advertised a similar curriculum, Cyphering, which was offered in distinction from Writing, as

well as a more telling addition to the technical arts: Washing and Ironing, and “the care of young children.” The statement of purpose argued on behalf of the merits of black instruction on the grounds that “these girls will either become mothers of families or household

**Table 5.1 1832 French Primary School Curriculum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral and religious instruction</th>
<th>Prayers and pious studies</th>
<th>Religious history</th>
<th>Christian teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>This exercise shall graduate in turn from the alphabet, through spelling and reading proper, to the reading of manuscripts and Latin.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>This exercise shall graduate in turn from the slate to the black board, and lastly to paper, in small and big letters, in the three kinds of handwriting (bastard, running, and round).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arithmetic</td>
<td>Mental Arithmetic</td>
<td>Written numbers, and the first four rules of arithmetic.</td>
<td>Ordinary fractions and decimals; legal system of weights and measures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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43 *The United States Catholic Almanac Almanac... for 1835* (Baltimore: James Myres, 1835), 126.
44 Furet and Ozouf, *Reading and Writing*, 137.
servants." Stated thus, the curriculum advertised spoke volumes about the standard expectations of black female education and the practical reality for black females in general. While free black women were taking bold strides to advance their girls’ literacy development to a level of parity with whites, opportunities and practical expectations for their vocational future remained quite low. It is also possible that failing to offer to prepare the girls for domestic vocations would have made the school seem radical, too disruptive to the status quo.

Void of such entries are the curricula of two well-established white French Catholic congregational schools in Louisiana. Parents or guardians were assured a full program of “classical duties” meant to “adorn the pupil’s minds with knowledge and the forming of their hearts with virtue.” In fact, this vanguard program, inclusive of secondary preparation, managed to offer in the 1830s what primary boys in France were to be guaranteed in the mid-nineteenth century. The Ursuline Academy, for example, advertised it as follows:

The system of instruction embraces the following objects.—The English and French Languages, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography, the uses of the Globes; History, Ancient and Modern; Mythology, Chronology; English and French Literature, Elements of Astronomy, Plain and Fancy Needlework. The elements of Natural Philosophy, of Botany and Chemistry, will be taught to those young ladies whose parents desire; as also Music, Drawing, and Dancing.\[47\]

In the nearby community in St. James Parish, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart professed to have 38 religious and 200 boarding students pursing similar courses:

Elements of Botany, Chemistry, Natural Philosophy and Geometry; Reading, Writing, and Grammar, both English and French; Arithmetic; History, Ancient and Modern; Chronology, Mythology, English and Polite Literature, Geography, Elements of

\[45\] The United States Catholic Almanac . . . for the Year 1834 (Baltimore: James Myres, 1834), 126.
\[46\] The United States Catholic Almanac . . . for the Year 1835 (Baltimore: James Myres, 1835), 126.
\[47\] The United States Catholic Almanac . . . for the Year 1839 (Baltimore: James Myres, 1839), 165-166.
Astronomy, the use of the Globes, Domestic Economy, Plain and Fancy Needlework, Embroidery, marking, Lace-work, &c. [sic]
Music, Drawing, and other fine arts, are paid extra. 48

In 1882, the course of studies for the Sisters of the Holy Family’s St. Mary’s Academy was in accordance with the range and depth presented above. In addition to religion, first year students were offered Geography, History, Grammar, Composition, Science, Latin, Philosophy, Arithmetic, Algebra, and Bookkeeping. In the second year students dropped Latin and Science and studied French, Rhetoric (English), and Natural Philosophy. Chemistry and Astronomy set apart the third year, which was condensed to eight courses, presumably to allow for what was termed extras, such as study in music, or “drawing and painting, embroidery in linen and silk, the making of tapestry, and the making of wax and worsted flowers.” 49

Clearly, some twenty years after Henriette Delille’s death, the Holy Family curriculum demonstrated remarkable parity with important women’s curricula of the day. But what can be known about the type of schooling, curriculum and educational philosophy in Henriette Delille’s first school?

**Bayou Road Curriculum**

Henriette Delille formally opened the first Holy Family educational institutes around 1851 or 1852. Henriette Delille opened their upstairs dormitory to elite femmes de couleur filles. The pensionnaires, or boarders, united with local day scholars or externs, to form a unified school body that took classes on the first floor of the convent. In this manner, the Holy Family community of practice became seriously integrated with the practices and values associated with formal schooling. In doing so, importantly, Henriette Delille assumed a prevailing French tradition (later codified in 1850 as the Falloux laws) which enabled women

48 Ibid., 166-167.
religious to open schools and instruct pupils without the requirement of a teaching certificate.  

Their schooling initiatives included a program of free instruction for indigent girls at St. Augustine Church. “Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, and Manual Work,” comprised a similar program of “gratuitous instruction” in the Ursuline tradition. According to traditional precedents, free classes were offered in the evening, lasting forty-five minutes to an hour after daily family chores at home, convent duties, or other occupational work. According to Deggs’ account of the free school in later years, the charter sisters gladly offered their indigent students classes in Latin and music, as well. In this manner, instruction appeared to have departed from the Ursuline model, adopting the philosophy that girls of lower standing possessed equal potential to be scholars.

The earliest formal expression of the Holy Family Convent school life or curriculum extant was recorded in 1881, approximately eighteen years after Delille’s death and shortly after women entered the Orleans convent. Titled by its unidentified author, Les Règles Des Enfants, it provides a small window into the lives of pensionnaires and their instructors.

Première:
- Le Leveré [Awake/rise] 5 h
- Messe [Mass] 7 h
- Classe 9 h
- Récréation 12 h
- Chapelet [Chapel prayer] 1 h
- L’écriture [Writing] 1½ h
- Français 2 h
- Les Travaux [work] 3 h
- Récréation 5 h
- Etude 6 h
- Lecture Spirituelle 6 ½ h

Récréation: 7 ¼ [h]  
Coucher [Go to bed]: 8 h

The Sisters of the Holy Family’s first school likely offered a robust curriculum, reflecting high moral and intellectual expectations for their female students. Further, because the charter women represented diverse traditions, speaking the languages of Latin, French, English, Spanish, and Louisiana Creole, the contexts for learning in the Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls were richly diverse, multi-lingual, and multiliterate.

Holy Family history suggests that the first Holy Family teachers were capable of implementing a rather rigorous curriculum, offering significantly more than the four rudiments offered in the free schooling. In this sense, the Bayou Road School leaned towards Sarah Curtis’ definition of a *superior* French primary education. The range of courses was decidedly less expansive than that which was advertised for St. Mary’s Academy, The Ursuline Academy, or the Sacred Heart Academy at St. Michael’s. I speculate that Henriette Delille’s first curriculum likely offered a few courses beyond the core, which presented a more elitist approach to the technical arts than that of the Oblates’ St. Francis. Oral tradition, library artifacts, and life histories of the charter members map out a distinct possibility of the school approaching parity with white Catholic congregation schools.

By virtue of its teaching core, The Bayou Road Convent School for Colored Girls cited courses of Religion, Grammar, French, Latin, History, Bookkeeping, Geography, Music, Sewing, and Embroidery. Juliette Gaudin, the child of a local principal, was likely the strongest disciplinary instructor, capable of carrying out instruction in the greatest range of courses. She was four years senior to Henriette Delille, and likely had four more years of experience.

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52 According to tradition a bell was rung to pace the day. *Les Règles Des Enfants*, Holy Family Orleans Convent ledger book, ASHF, 216.
teaching or mentoring at the St. Claude School. Deggs acclaimed that Juliette “had a superior intellectual capacity and had kept all the books [bookkeeping] of the community since her entrance.” Further, it was Juliette’s holdings in the book collection that were the most impressive, ranging from deeply mystical works to French grammar texts to Latin New Testament. From the plethora of these texts we may discern that Henriette Delille’s first assistant was likely prepared to teach Latin, Grammar, History, Bookkeeping, and Music. It is also likely that if Juliette desired to teach a particular subject requested by a parent, she could have obtained the materials and instructional support. Sr. Deggs recalled that Juliette’s father, Pierre Gaudin, “had been a professor at one of the principal young men’s high schools.”

Henriette Delille was the group’s acknowledged spiritual leader and congregation administrator. Her strongest capacity in the school was likely that of a school administrator, a position that involved managing the day-to-day activities in the school (i.e., ringing the bell for classes, motivating students and teachers, resolving problems, supervising support staff for meals, implementing dress code, etc.). Deggs described her as a fervent manager of the housework. As administrator, she was also involved in securing the long-term future of the institution; according to Deggs, she was particularly suited in this capacity.

Delille’s capacity was much more valuable than the money for she was a good beggar and her holiness was of still a greater value to our foundation than any money would have been to us at that time, even though we needed so many things at the opening of the new abode.

Beyond campaigning in the community for the immediate needs of the school, she directed final examination programs which, if consistent with records of extant productions and later

53 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 14.
54 Ibid., 18; See also Davis, Henriette Delille, 46.
55 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 95.
56 Ibid.
Holy Family examination programs, were highly involved productions featuring recitations, music, and the type of dramatic enactments that were typical of the period.

Oral tradition makes lucid the fact that Henriette Delille taught classes as well. Having served as a mentor and teacher in the St. Claude school for a decade prior to opening her school, she was likely an accomplished teacher in her own right. It was she whom Rousselon first designated “Mistress of Novices.” In this manner, Henriette Delille was made responsible for directing the preparation of postulants and novices, who appear to have been present from the community’s inception. Interestingly, she was described by Deggs as “not a very brilliant instructor.” In this respect, we may suspect that Sister Mary Bernard Deggs makes reference to the founder’s lack of abilities in teaching math or keeping books, because Deggs shortly thereafter complained that Henriette Delille “had not enough knowledge of finances” to leave the nascent community fiscally sound at the time of her death. Prior expressions of reflective angst on the part of Deggs underscore that the burden of debt was deeply experienced by the members as extended periods of deprivation for the members. In any case, it would seem likely that she did not teach Math or Grammar. Henriette Delille most likely taught religion, sewing, and perhaps her nursing skills in some capacity. Sr. Audrey Detiege indicated that oral tradition connects Henriette Delille with the text *Choix des Poesies*, and maintained that the text was used in the Bayou Road convent school. The title and content of this text, as was discussed previously, suggests that Henriette Delille may have taught French literature or used poetry in another course. It signals a broader scope to Henriette Delille’s personal and professional literacy development than has previously been acknowledged.

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57 Ibid., 14.
All other accounts proffered by Deggs and others described Henriette Delille as a deeply persuasive person, capable of projecting a vision, defying church authority, drawing recalcitrant plantation masters (whom she did not trust or like) into her will, and gathering collectively persons of diverse interests. Her intensity and sense of focus are evident in Delille’s 1836 statement of personal philosophy: “I believe in God, I hope in God. I love. I wish to live and to die for God.” It is a philosophy, which when applied to teaching and learning, indicates her belief in primacy of achieving a dialectic with the Divine. One may infer that she appreciated the importance of helping others to do the same. The statement also signaled her approach to reform: hope and love. In the face of hate, conflict, exclusions, and apathy, she planned to change the world by cultivating hope and love. Delille’s brand of love, as has already been detailed, involved embodying the ideals she sought to engender in others and in the world: acts of charity, social activism, reaching out to others, and showing humility in the presence of human suffering. The special quality of Delille’s personal philosophy, what is known is Catholic literature as her charism, or gift, was apparently quite powerful. Henriette was consistently described by followers as a woman who seemed to affect a magnetic hold over her novices, nieces, and other young family members. The archives hold a pair of letters from her niece and godchild who lived in Chicago. Ella Bell’s response indicates that Henriette wrote letters to her godchildren regularly, apparently offering counseling and spiritual guidance.

Dear Godmother,

Mother told me just now that you have been ill but that you are doing better… It has been a long time since you have given me news about yourself with one of your letters filled with good and wise counsels[sic] to draw me from my long silence. I imagine that this has not been in your power but with the health, God willing, you will not forget me.

58 Davis, Henriette Delille, 35.
because I really need that someone call me back to my duties. Since I last wrote you, I
have worked for a Catholic fair which has brought in, I believe three thousand dollars.\textsuperscript{59}

In addition to indicating that Delille retained deep personal bonds with her family members,
this correspondence demonstrate that she took the role of godparenting seriously. Importantly,
the letter, coupled with another written on the occasion of the New Year, offers direct evidence
that Henriette used letter writing to extend her ministerial reach—and met with some success.
It would appear that “the good and wise counsel” proffered in them appeared well received.
Further, oral tradition maintains that Delille successfully campaigned for her other nieces to
reject the system of plaçage; instead of entering into concubinage relationships, two of them
chose instead to marry free black men. She appeared to have striven for the very best personal
effort in those around her. In this sense, we acknowledge that Delille sought to maintain an
academically and morally rigorous, as well as practical program of preparation for young
women of color.

Reflecting on the 1880s, Deggs noted that the order profited later from the rigorous
level of work and performance expectation established during this early period.

It was in that house [Chartres Street convent] that we also received [into the order]
many charming and valuable subjects, if not the most useful of all our sisters. Many had
been our young lady boarders [on Bayou Road?] . They are always better disposed than
others as they know what is taught in our classes and we don’t need to instruct them as
much as one who is a stranger.

We have received many very competent young ladies in our community, but we find
that they rarely ever did as well as our own scholars. Many of them are called brilliant
in their school, but they themselves said that in those schools they were only taught
counting without any explanation. In those schools, they rarely met as much modesty as
they found among their convent friends. They found nothing more pleasing than that, as
it is the most agreeable quality that a young lady has.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} Ella Bell to Henriette Delille, Chicago, July 23, 1860, ASHF, cited in French and English in Cyprian Davis,
Henriette Delille, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{60} Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 27.
Josephine Charles, the third of the charter women, was described by Deggs as the sister who enjoyed “all the confidence of all the sisters when she was only a simple sister.” From a wealthy and elite family, and of German paternal heritage, Josephine was privately educated by a reputable French tutor. We have no direct account of which courses she taught prior to 1862. However, Deggs identifies Josephine as a Latin and music teacher in later years. There exists little reason to suggest that Charles did not do so in the prior era. Sister Anne Fazende, also born of an elite family and formally educated, entered the order in 1858; Anne was said to have taught catechism and worked in the orphanage. Suzanne Navarre, a Bostonian and the fourth charter member of the congregation, entered in 1852; known as “queen of the needle” Suzanne was said to have “made thousands of dolls,” thus she likely instructed in the technical arts as well as in catechism.61

Religious instruction was, without doubt, a focal point of the curriculum. The founding sisters infused religious and spiritual literacies in all subject matters and daily activities.62 They likely devised courses with a special focus on inculcating Catholic theology and Afro-Latin religious values and practices. Aspects of these courses were designed to prepare students for the rites of communion and confirmation (a rite intended for adolescents and adults), the most crucial rites of admittance to the Catholic Church. This instruction included knowledge of the beliefs, practices, semiotics, discourse systems, and organizational structure of Catholicism. To gain this knowledge, students studied sacred scripture, French catechism texts, French prayer books, hymnals, and the narratives of the lives of the saints. Instruction in Latin would have been offered to allow for active participation in the rites of the church and the mass, including comprehension of Catholic publications, rites, and hymns. Less formally conveyed was

61 Ibid., 100.
spiritual literacy, understood as the ability to read the sacred in the texts of human experience. This set of skills included decoding spiritual truths through the lived experiences of religious practice, or spirituality. Consistent with what we know about Henriette Delille and the charter sisters through oral tradition imparted by Sr. Deggs, this meant deducing a sense of the Divine through history, embodied action, orature, and literature. As we have learned from Sr. Boniface Adams, it also meant drawing knowledge from interaction with the sisters, through narratives, dialogues, and reflection on the early history of the congregation. Through such means, students could learn to view personal tribulations through the lens of Holy Family teleology—as a divine plan for their spiritual growth, demonstrated by the motto of the founding sisters: “no cross [on earth], no crown [in heaven].”

The Bayou school was likely to have offered the core of a classic Latin curriculum model, in following the Ursuline tradition: Reading and Grammar in Latin, French, and English, as well as Math, and Bookkeeping or, as it was referred, casting accounts. In this respect it would appear to have followed a rigorous program on par with the Ursuline Convent School, and experienced in some capacity by the founding sisters as students of the St. Claude school. A window into Ursuline method may be viewed through Adam Hebert’s description of the Ursuline method:

The instructional program of the Ursulines consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, industrial training, and religious instruction. . . . Of the other subjects, reading was regarded as the most important and was taught in both the morning and afternoon, and was the subject around which all other instruction was centered. In teaching reading, the teacher read the lesson first, slowly and distinctly, with the students following in a low murmur. Then the pupils read, the better students first and then the slower pupils, the teacher correcting the mistakes. While the slower students read, the more advanced

63 Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat offer an extended definition: “Spiritual literacy is the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experience. Whether viewed as a gift from God or a skill to be cultivated, this facility enables us to discern and decipher a world full of meaning.” Frederic Brussat and Mary Ann Brussat, Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life (New York: Scribner, 1996), 1.
64 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 1.
ones practiced writing and “casting accounts.” . . . Spelling was taught in connection with reading. Two or three sentences from the reading were dictated and the students copied them on a clean sheet of paper. The students repeated the next day and again the following day until it was done correctly. Writing was done in a special room equipped with a long table and quill pens with pen and paper.Using a methodology with origins in the eighteenth century, students acquired reading and writing skills through modeling skills, which were then reinforced through perfunctory (albeit tedious) repetition. From this description one may deduce that language was learned in a more integrated fashion, unlike later nineteenth century developments in reading instruction which separated learning to read from learning to write. Further, it would appear that spelling, grammar, and orthography were mastered in the context of the meaning-making, as opposed to sole reliance upon rote memorization. Data gained thus far indicates that this method probably remained unchanged until after the Civil War. However, Furet and Ozouf suggest that reading and writing during this period in nineteenth-century France was in the process of being changed exactly during this era.

Critical technical literacies made up the remainder of the secular study subjects for SHF students. For women of color, these literacies consisted of basic accounting, sewing, and artificial flower-making. Unlike their white counterparts, young women of color were expected to learn a marketable trade and obtain employment as seamstresses, cooks, bookkeepers, hairdressers, and governesses. Deggs spoke of this ungendered social reality:

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67 François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry (Cambridge, London: Cambridge University), 137.
Parents saw the beautiful conduct of ... young ladies whom our dear Mother Marie Magdalene sent out into society after they had completed their studies. They are making their own living in the world and supporting their sick and aged mothers and fathers with the grace of God. They have become the star of their homes and the greatest consolation to the parents in their old days.  

As the esteem of the order grew, so did the number of girls who applied to become members of the congregation. Parents increasingly began to view membership in the congregation as an honorable option for their daughters.

After completion of the traditional secondary program, young women had the option of ascending to the novitiate, or program of instruction for novices. Following the tradition of the Ursulines, the faculty identified potential novices at an early age and assigned them in the role of dixianieres; these “students would aid teachers, sew, care for the elderly, or perform countless other tasks relegated to them,” wrote Gould and Nolan. After making a declaration or profession of interest in joining the community, students would then have the opportunity to study further; novices were instructed in the principles of living a religious life and apprenticed in anticipated roles within the order, such as teachers, nurses, seamstresses, or bookkeepers. From a secular point of view, the novitiate function of the order might be regarded as a normal school, that is, an institution which prepared young women of color for careers as teachers.

**Spaces of Apprehension**

At the time when Henriette Delille and the charter women found momentum and accumulated social capital through various acts and accomplishments, the environment in which they acted became more complex, more anxious, more circumscribed, to the point of

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69 Ibid., 57.
70 In fact, well into the twentieth century black women religious remained the Catholic church’s primary source for staffing black Catholic schools with certified teachers, as other processes of certification barred Blacks. See John Alberts, “Black Catholic Schools: The Josephite Parishes of New Orleans During the Jim Crow Era,” in Wade, *Education in Louisiana*, 326-342.
being dangerous. The history of the decline in educational conditions for blacks highlights the significance of the Bayou Road and renders Henriette Delille’s decision to carry out her vision all the more compelling. Near the time of the Bayou Road school’s opening around 1851-1852, the social, political, and religious contexts for black schooling and slave literacy education had become profoundly prohibitive. National and international debates on the social viability and morality of slavery, as well as the role of blacks in a democratic society—commonly known as *The Negro Question*—drew attention to the condition and ability of blacks who did not live in bondage. 71 The perpetuated falsehood of blacks’ inferiority and blacks’ purported unsuitability for unity with the rest of humankind was shown to be untrue, having been revealed in the black voices of those who, *once freed*, employed reason and morality in their demands for justice, liberty, freedom, and opportunity. The stunning realization of the socio-political significance of a growing free black population, swelled with former slaves and literate blacks, became a source of anxiety. The prominent and dignified presence of *les gens de couleur libre* in the church, in the local media, in the business district, in the theaters, and on the world’s stage had long been a thorn in the side of pro-slavery, anti-Free-black forces for generations. 72 Literate blacks had long been suspected for relating abolitionist literature and leading or at even planning slave insurrections. To make matters worse (in their biased view), Louisiana had received a wave of literate free black immigrants from Haiti, some of whom had indeed played a direct role in its famed revolution of 1791. 73


73 Free black leaders of this insurrection fled to Louisiana and were said to have led a failed insurrection just west of New Orleans in 1811. The Haitian Revolution lasted from 1791-1804; many Haitians fled the devastation and moved to other islands; years later, after they were expelled from Spanish islands they turned to Louisiana for
During the 1850s, due to white societal trepidations, leaders among Louisiana’s newly empowered Anglo-American population, together with those that represented white French Creoles, forged an alliance and began to carry out a plan that prior generations of the white planter class had not: the decimation of the free black class. This goal required the normalization of Louisiana’s distinctively liberal Black Code to mirror the relatively more dehumanizing regulations and conscriptions that had been enacted for generations in other slave-holding states. The result was a legislative effort to debase the free black from a position nearer to equality with whites to that of chattel slaves. Charles Rousseve observed:

The insurrectionary spirit which had begun to characterize the slaves, following the upheaval in the Antilles, it will be remembered, occasioned the development of far harsher methods in handling bondsmen. Because the free people of color were responsible, it was thought, for the growth of this spirit of revolt among the slaves, a system of legislation was inaugurated which by degrees debased the free Negro from his original rights civil and political status, practically equal to that of whites, to a level not far removed from that of the slave.

With the capital relocated out of the city of New Orleans, a strident campaign was mounted by the new Anglo and French Creole allies, which included the abrogation of basic rights which had survived the transition to American power and a heightened level of permissiveness toward rogue attacks. In the second decade of the congregation’s history, due to this hostile mindset, numerous social control laws, never having been enforced on a widespread basis, came to life and grew teeth. These included an 1830 provision of the law which declared that

Whossoever shall write, print, publish or distribute, any thing having a tendency to produce discontent among the free colored population of the state, or insubordination

among the slaves therein, shall, on conviction thereof, before any court of competent jurisdiction, be sentenced to imprisonment at hard labor for life, or suffer death, at the discretion of the court.\(^77\)

Other laws which were revived or were freshly enacted included: prohibitions against lodging (as a guest) or traveling out of the state, removal of the ability to manumit an enslaved person, to testify against whites, insult a white person, and form a school. Reinders wrote,

Most of the 1850 free Negroes who attended school in 1850 were educated in small institutions conducted in private homes in order not to arouse the fear and hostility of the white population. In spite of their caution, state laws and city ordinances were passed in the mid-fifties making it a legal offense to open a free Negro school. According to the federal census of 1860 only 275 free Negroes [in New Orleans] attended school.\(^78\)

What few spaces had been marshaled for educational use in the past now rapidly degenerated.

For the highly literate, self-cultivated free black community, conditions became intolerable.

Within a relatively short time, entire free black families—some of whom traced their heritage to the founding members of the French colony, some of whose hands had literally built the city, and who together held over 15 million dollars in New Orleans real estate—were made to feel like prisoners and outcasts. Rousseve observed,

By 1855 a free person of color could not move about the streets of New Orleans without permission, nor might he [or she] stop in the city without first presenting the guarantee of some white man. Failure to leave town when ordered meant years of imprisonment at hard labor. At the slightest whim of the most wretched white citizen or some rascally officer, the most respectable among the “gens de couleur” were subjected to arrest, violence, and imprisonment.\(^79\)

In 1857 Governor Robert C. Wickliffe addressed the Louisiana Legislature with a startlingly direct proposal:

Public policy dictates that immediate steps be taken at this time to move all free negroes now in the State when such removal can be affected without violation of the


law. Their example and association have a most pernicious affect (sic] upon our slave population.\textsuperscript{80}

In the fourth legislative session of 1859, the threat to the free black class worsened and reached a far more tyrannical level. There were penalties worse than outright expatriation. Enmity ran so deep that certain leaders proposed shocking and impossible solutions to the Negro problem. In them, the fears of most free black were realized. “Intoxicated with success in preventing emancipation,” and thereby achieving the cessation of the growth of the free black class, Sterkx wrote, “The anti-free-Negro forces urged consideration of legislation which would enable free persons of color to voluntarily select masters and become slaves for life.”\textsuperscript{81} Though none but one individual actually answered the call, the law and its tone signaled the primal nature of their struggle for social space.\textsuperscript{82} Across the decade, an uncounted number succumbed to the pressure and fled to France, Mexico, and San Domingo. A large wing of Henriette Delille’s own family departed permanently for Vera Cruz, Mexico. Charles Rousseve wrote:

Rather than remain to bear further usurpation of rights and continued persecution, many free Negroes moved permanently to regions where their personal liberties would not be interfered with. Some migrated to the North, some to France, and others to the West Indies. In 1855 Lucien Mansion of New Orleans gave generously of his means to make possible the departure of a number of his fellow citizens to Mexico and Haiti, where these persons, choosing self-expatriation in preference [to] submitting to the cruelties of increasing prejudice, found liberty and security.\textsuperscript{83}

The thriving community, which at its pinnacle in 1830 (see Table 5.2), represented over twenty percent of the city’s population, and forty percent of certain Creole faubourgs, streamed out


\textsuperscript{82} The tenuousness of that struggle is revealed by reports that in 1862 Georges Doyle reported that Louisiana’s Confederate forces “planned a mass assassination of free colored people in the state.” Charles Rousseve, \textit{The Negro In Louisiana}, 93.

\textsuperscript{83} Charles Rousseve, \textit{The Negro In Louisiana}, 48.
and then drizzled away, sinking their numbers over a thirty-year span from nearly 24% to a
diminutive 6%.

Contexts for educational initiatives for those who chose to remain in the state became
inhospitable, even to those operating with the sanction of the church. Caryn Cosse Bell wrote,

Evidently alarmed by the spread of free black religious, social, and educational
societies like the Société Catholique pour l'Instruction des Orphelins dans l'Indigence,
state lawmakers modified the 1847 incorporation law. An 1850 amendment to it
provided that "in no case shall the provisions of this act be construed to apply to free
persons of color in this State incorporated for religious purposes or secret associations,
and any corporations that may have been organized by such persons under l'Indigence,
state lawmakers modified the 1847 incorporation law. An 1850 amendment
this act, for religious purposes or secret associations are hereby annulled and revoked." In 1855, a subsequent enactment extended the ban to all charitable, scientific, or literary
societies. Designed to suppress the spread of free black institutions, the two measures
dealt a severe blow to free black schools. Between 1850 and 1860, student enrollment
for children of color in such schools dropped from 1,008 to 275.78

In 1852 one of the most prominent free black schools in the state, the Grimble Bell in
Opelousas, was completely dismantled. Bell wrote,

One of the most serious assaults upon free black schools occurred in St. Landry Parish. The region possessed the largest population of free persons of color outside of New
Orleans. In the decade before the war, white militants of the area conducted a campaign
of terror against free black inhabitants. In Washington near Opelousas, the Grimble Bell
School, a major educational institution for the region's free black population, operated
as a boarding school for many years during the antebellum period. The school averaged
an enrollment of 125 students, with four teachers offering classes on the primary and
secondary levels. The school charged fifteen dollars a month for board and tuition.
During the 1850s, however, white officials closed the facility. Deprived of the school,
parents who remained in the region were forced to send their children to private schools
in New Orleans.

However, neither the dense urban cover of the city of New Orleans, nor the shield of a Catholic
humanitarian status could completely guard free black schooling from a series of attacks. State

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84 Bell, Revolution, 125. See also Sterkx, The Free Negro, 269–70.
85 Bell, Revolution, 125.
appropriations which had supported the Widow Couvent school for nearly a decade were cut in 1858, which forced the school administration to raise tuition. During that time, two of the school’s students, A. Frilot and Léon Dupart (pseudonyms) used their expository writing assignment to express dismay at the state of affairs. We are left with a sense of the anxiety shared by students, parents, and administrators of this time.

A. Frilot

[Tr]he Prejudice against the colored population is very strong in this part of the country… the white people have an Institution [a public high school] in every district and they are all protected well. But we, who have but a single one, cannot be protected at all.

Léon Dupart

I assure you, my dear friend, that now the price of the pupils is very dear, I know many boys whose mothers say that they are going to take them out of school.87

The teachers and students endured threats, and their structure was attacked by vandals.

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Table 5.2: Table of Population Changes in Louisiana’s Free Black Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Free Blacks</th>
<th>Free Black Pop. Percentage in Orleans Parish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>16,710</td>
<td>23.90 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>25,502</td>
<td>18.81 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>17,462</td>
<td>8.34 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>18,647</td>
<td>6.27 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The core of the problem, Bell claims, was the idea that a free black school might be used to accommodate educational initiatives for enslaved persons. Despite the longstanding assertion that free blacks did little to aid or support the enslaved, the truth was that free blacks did participate in a sort of underground railroad for literacy acquisition. Leaders in the white community based their suspicion on fact in this regard. Nathan Wiley, writing for Harper Ferry in 1866 had noted:

In so large a city as New Orleans, where great numbers of free blacks and slaves were crowded together, it was sometimes impossible to keep the latter in ignorance, notwithstanding all the precautions which were taken and stringent laws which were passed. Intelligent free colored men [and women] would often ignore the differences of condition, and run the risks in teaching the slaves. They would have their schools at night in a room on some dark alley, where only one or two pupils were allowed to enter at a time, changing their locality every few weeks in order to avoid suspicion, and when their nocturnal exercises were over they separated in the same secret manner. Money was not the motive which induced them to run these risks, but the love of danger, the thirst for knowledge, and the instinct of benevolence, and the habits of secrecy which slavery engenders prompted them to take this course.88

It was within this cloud of anxiety about their present and their future, and in these socio-political terms that Henriette Delille and the charter members operated the first black parochial school for girls of color. One can imagine that the women must have remained pressed to maintain a wary stance and that they were never sure if their efforts would fall to official or rogue attack. Further, it would appear that the singular shield separating them from the kind of attacks experienced by other educational enterprises was their collective’s identity as a Catholic sisterhood.

**Literacy and “Humanization”**

A persistent theme in the history of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family was Henriette Delille’s commitment to addressing the effects of slavery and race tyranny. As

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was expressed by Sr. Mary Bernard Deggs, the Holy Family mission viewed education as a way of “elevat[ing] our people.” 89 Indeed, despite all forms of resistance, some enslaved blacks were so abused and neglected that they descended to behaviors and conditions barely recognizable as human. Others became mentally ill or committed suicide. More generally, however, enslaved and poor free blacks found ways to survive their circumstances, produced modes of expression to facilitate their continued existence, and even succeeded in mapping out social and physical routes of escape from oppression. However, the case was popularly made that blacks were something less than fully human and the centerpiece of that argument, as explained in previous chapters, was the claim that the difference between whites and blacks lay in their ability to reason, learn, interact with one another in a civil way, care for themselves, and plan for their futures. Henriette Delille’s approach to establish one of the city’s black schools was, in my view, to approach literacy as a “humanizing” act. Illiteracy was such an essential aspect of this conceptualized racial divide, and so deeply associated with the condition of race-gender-class subjugation, that the ability to not only be literate but organize publicly for literacy represented an assertion of blacks’ full humanity.

Literacy scholars have taken note of the manner in which free blacks’ relationship with schooling suggests that blacks thought of literacy as more than a set of skills learned in preparation for a vocation. In his 1979 study of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada, Harvey Graff investigated the relationship between literacy and social mobility and found the causal tie between them was without basis, thus constituted a myth. 90 In examining census tables, marriage records, and occupational data pertaining to major urban cities during the 1860s and

89 Deggs, No Cross, No Crown, 156.
1870s, he evaluated literacy data and observed a general pattern of vagueness and openness about the consequence of literacy acquisition. Although literacy has been “accorded a pervasive role,” it was no guarantor of social or economic security. Literacy could enhance an individual’s ability to obtain employment and raise her or his general status in society, but the acquisition of reading and writing abilities did not supplant the forces of race or class privilege. Graff concluded that literacy’s chief purpose was normative. “Literacy did carry certain benefits to those who possessed it, although its possession often signified attributes other than the abilities of reading and writing.”

He theorized that limited instruction was given to the poor to keep them from being totally illiterate and thus from becoming a danger to civil society, from becoming something less than fully humans: barbarians. However, not enough literacy education was offered to disrupt the social order. Ramona Fernandez noted,

Graff contends, like many others, that the teaching of literacy had to be controlled so that the underclass knew enough to work productively but not enough to take control of economic and political processes. Certain ethnic groups remained disadvantaged, whatever their literacy rates, while other groups continued to hold “skilled” jobs, despite their illiteracy rates.

Given that the ladder of meritocracy was supplanted by privilege, the pursuit of literacy might have appeared to be a useless enterprise—if that were the only motivation for acquiring literacy.

Nineteenth-century free blacks, Graff observed, had a more complicated, if not exceptional, relationship with literacy. Like Irish Catholics, women, and other marginalized ethnic groups who clustered in the large cities, blacks experienced high illiteracy rates and derived little direct benefit from the acquisition of literacy, demonstrating that “ethnicity and

\[91\text{Ibid., 19.}\]
\[92\text{Ramona Fernandez, }\text{Imagining Literacy: Rhizomes of Knowledge in American Culture and Literature (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 40.}\]
race served to distinguish the [their] experiences and social positions.”

They did forge a strong economic presence, despite literacy ideologies, however. Drawing upon skills other than reading and writing, they became occupationally secure. Graff observed that “compared with virtually all other illiterates, uneducated blacks were quite successful, ranking second [to Anglo-Protestants] while their literate peers stood only second to the lowest [in terms of occupational standing]. Such an assessment might suggest that the motivation for literacy acquisition was minimal. Yet, interestingly, they pursued literacy aggressively. Among all the groups in his study, Graff observed that school attendance patterns for blacks in the nineteenth century to be “most striking.”

He reported,

[Blacks sent] more of their young than any ethnic group in London (73 %) and ranking second to the more prosperous English in Hamilton (48%), they hungered for the schooling of their young, exceeding the attendance of literate blacks’ children by almost 10 percentage points, or 25%. With the same economic resources as the literates, their actions indicate a difference in attitudes and values toward education. . . They apparently sought for their children that which they themselves could not obtain legally, and rarely illegally, in many places.

It would seem that, at least for antebellum blacks in Canada, the meanings and uses of literacy impinged on the blacks’ historical relationship with literacy. Deprivation or impediments may have inspired a stronger impetus to acquire literacy through formal schooling.

In nineteenth-century Louisiana, free and enslaved blacks’ relationship with literacy continued to be informed by the institution of slavery. The peculiar institution shaped a literacy ideology which allowed explicit detailing of who could read and who could teach. The imposition of states of (script) illiteracy and ignorance on blacks was seen by the planter class as a means of stabilizing “the peculiar institution” and the racial order. Through illiteracy they

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93 Graff, *The Literacy Myth*, 58.
94 Ibid., 163.
95 Ibid., 164.
hoped to maintain a submissive, fearful, and passive black population, one stripped of its ability to imagine life apart from their appointed places under the control of whites. Lack of access to print was intended to limit blacks’ ability interaction with the broader world, a world populated with revolutionary people and ideas. Through illiteracy, enslaved and free blacks were rendered less human in the eyes of their captors or competitors, and the exploitation of each became _fair use_. The mere perception of illiteracy—its association with blacks—permitted whites to deny them jobs, limit social opportunities, and thwart their use of the courts. Through illiteracy or underdeveloped literacy, the Catholic religion could be co-opted to propagate the master-slave dialectic and deny new converts knowledge of an interpretation of Christianity which actually promoted their equality and challenged their dehumanizing treatment. In this respect the historical record makes clear the fact that blacks in general had reason to viewed schooling as their prime instrument for counteracting dehumanization; in this way literacy constituted a humanizing act. The school represented a line of flight from the dominant literacy ideology which permitted a political or masters to decide whether a person could and could not learn to read, write or compute or any other critical or liberatory literacies. Henriette Delille and the charter women’s response is instructive in how antebellum blacks could and did respond; in many ways they viewed literacy not as a matter of vocation aspiration, but as a communal act of asserting their right to be recognize as equals through the creation of free black pedagogy, curriculum, and institutions.

**Summary**

Henriette Delille theorized literacy in a manner which sought to restore human dignity to free blacks individually, and as a group. This effort was enhanced particularly when she elevated the group to the rank of professed sisterhood and established two formal schools, a
free school at St. Augustine’s church and the Bayou School for Colored Girls. Now, in addition to the women’s existing engagements as religious educators in two local churches, the women drew into their domain a small crowd of young, free black girls to instruct and among whom they gathered the subsequent generation of sisters. This development represented the permanent elevation of the third tenet of the community’s mission to instruct the uninstructed. During this era, specific ideas about literacy and literacy education were expressed by Henriette Delille and the charter women: (1) literacy education held a central place in their lives; its functions and meanings were magnified by the act of operating a school within anti-black-literacy contexts; (2) literacy education and development was offered in an egalitarian and familial context, and guided by Delille’s personal philosophy which embraced the notions of love, hope, and the primal importance of establishing a dialectic with the Divine; and (3) literacy was programmed through a rigorous curriculum, thereby challenging myths about black inferiority and ineptitude. Against the backdrop of the city’s pattern of educational disenfranchisement and neglect, and in the face of direct attacks on free black educational initiatives, the poignancy of the value and meaning of their role as sponsors of literacy was doubtlessly made profound. Further, in organizing the women and the school, Henriette Delille revealed her intellectual brilliance, personal charisma, courage, and her belief that organizing for literacy was key to asserting the equality and future potential of all blacks.
Chapter Six  
Convergences: Re-imagining Literacy  

Journey To The Motherhouse  

In March of 2003, I made my first journey to “The Motherhouse,” site of the present convent and center of operations for the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family. From my home in Baton Rouge, I traveled some eighty miles eastward via interstate highway to arrive at their address in East New Orleans. There, I hoped to learn more about the role of black women religious in the history of black literacy education. The nature of the journey was a poignant one, a reminder of the inextricable relations between people and the places where they live—especially in the American South. John Lowe, citing the views of Clenth Brooks, expressed the essence of the Southern culture in terms of three unchanging aspects: “a sense of place, a special conception of time that takes account of the past and of the timeless, and an interest in and aptitude for narrative that includes oral as well as the formal tradition of narration.”¹ No doubt, nineteenth century women of color like Henriette Delille had their meanings, uses, and practices shaped by the words, tempos, textures, images, and changing rhythms brought to them by their location blocks away from an international port. I imagined that the city’s crescent-shaped embrace of an ancient, powerful, and ever-shifting river gave their lives a distinct flavor and form. The launching and docking of vessels made the river wharf a portal on the world; the outpouring of humanity and cargo—especially human cargo—made the women first-hand witnesses to the best and the worst that the world offered. Chained, suffering slaves, nuns and clergy, starry-eyed immigrants, profiteers, and idealistic adventurers like Alexis de Tocqueville, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Abraham Lincoln—the women  

had likely seen them all. As I progressed down the road, moving closer toward the Gulf and its 
seagull-laden breezes, and toward a point of intersection with the deepest portion of the 
powerful Mississippi River, it became easy to imagine that their conception of literacy had 
been influenced by their access to the world of words and peoples from beyond. It was 
remarkable that this was the place/space/time when and where free black women in New 
Orleans became cohesive and grew, along with their male counterparts, into a distinctive 
community.

Nearing the motherhouse, I paused and observed a flock of uniform-clad children 
stream up the sidewalk. At the traffic light, the students stopped and—with a precocious sense 
of urgency and solemnity—gathered the hands of the smallest children to guide them across 
the roadway. Thereafter, the group forged ahead, veered leftward in unison like migratory 
birds, and then disappeared into an aging Catholic schoolhouse. On the other side of the 
boulevard I was offered an uncommon sight: an elevated billboard bearing the image of black 
nuns. A dozen women wearing the traditional black habit of a Catholic nun marched forward in 
an orderly array. Beside their image, bold lettering and bold smiles made a direct appeal: 
“Come, Join Us!”

Soon after, urban clutter broke open onto a quiet sea of green. Situated behind a twelve-
foot wrought iron fence on the left side of the street was a broad verdant landscape: six acres of 
meticulously-tended lawn adorned with trees, flower gardens, and broad patches of unfiltered 
sunlight. A pair of sturdy electronic gates marked the start of a broad boulevard lined with 
stately oaks, shrubs, and a giant flashy Canary Island palm tree. The convent sat at the end of 
the drive. Its façade was a bold geometric arrangement of steel and glass softened by Virgin-
Mary-azure blue walls.\(^2\) As I turned to enter the drive, I was greeted by the countenance of a woman. Cast in bronze relief and placed prominently in the middle of the turning lane was the portrait of the order’s first Mother Superior, the unquestioned beacon for the order. The street sign bore her name, Mother Henriette Delille Boulevard. Then, at the end of the boulevard I found the Motherhouse of the religious order first established by Henriette Delille.\(^3\) It had been the home for over five hundred black women educators over the last sixteen decades.\(^4\) In the time between, Henriette Delille’s vision for a sisterhood of color was transformed into a social movement for Black Catholic women, one which reached across the nation and the world. Art deco lettering above a pair of heavy glass doors spelled out the names of the occupants with clarity: The Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

Inside, I found a community buzzing with activity. The breakfast meal had recently concluded and now senior and middle-aged women spilled out of a narrow hall and toward a centermost chapel. Nuns wearing black, brown, and white habits—and still others who wore no habit at all—made their way to curbside transit vehicles that whisked them away to assignments across the city. Some of the women moved into small offices adorned with crosses, relics, and flashing computer screens, yet others ascended by elevator to the convent’s second floor nursing ward where they took up roles as nurses and nurse-aides, or were the actual recipients of care. A majority of these senior women were former professional

\(^2\) Traditionally, the shade of light blue is associated with the Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ. Folk beliefs claim it as the color of truth, in that this is the color of the sky after storm clouds (sin, lies, distress) have passed.

\(^3\) Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the convent has occupied various sites. Henriette Delille’s tenure was enacted at a convent located on Bayou Road. After a brief stay on Chartres Street in the French Quarter, the Holy Family convent was relocated away to a former ballroom on Orleans Street, where it remained for eighty years. After that time, the congregation relocated to a vast plot of land and a large, custom-built structure on Chef Menteur Highway.

\(^4\) Archivist Sr. Carolyn has estimated the total number of Holy Family Sisters who joined the order at approximately 500. She checked the membership roles and counted graves, and made note of departures. However, because of the limited records of early departures, it is likely that this number represents an undercount. At its peak in 1964, the order maintained 357 members. Sr. Carolyn Leslie in discussion with the author, January 2006.
educators, I was later told, who had served in the congregation’s forty-eight or more institutions established or operated over the last one-hundred and sixty-three years. These establishments included a junior college, around fifty schools, several orphanages, nursing homes, and children’s daycare facilities, across the state, nation, and in Central America.

But the movement of persons was not only outward, nor solely female. The convent attracted a crowd of staff workers, volunteers, and visitors from the greater metropolitan area—some of whom were male. Local volunteers and paid personnel assisted in the care of elderly nuns. Some prepared meals, while others maintained the physical facilities and tended the grounds. Mass in the convent’s centermost chapel drew in a priest/chaplain and an assortment of supporters: family members, alumnae, friends, and busloads of school children. Additionally, business interests of the congregation—an organization with regional, national, and global outposts—attracted local, national, and international ecclesiastics (church officials) as well as local clergy, most notably priests, monks, bishops, and archbishops of color. Finally, the rear service entrance was busy with deliveries of spontaneous gifts of produce, cakes, pies, and assorted supplies from local businesses.

Quickly, much of what I had gleaned from dry, cold artifacts became enfleshed. As was true when Henriette Delille established the religious community over a century and a half ago, the convent of the Holy Family congregation was an original site/sight: a sheltered space for black women, a center of learning and faithful religious expression, an integrated part of its surrounding community.

**Black Catholic Women as Sponsors of Literacy**

Most important, and the cause of my journey that day, was the notion that in founding a Black Catholic women’s religious order with a commitment to education, Henriette Delille and
the Sisters of the Holy Family composed a rare and long unrecognized space in antebellum history: a stable, shielded context whereby women of African descent could pursue lifelong occupations as sponsors of literacy. For years, I had been reading everything that I could about the history of the order, with an interest in investigating the deep roots of Black Catholic women’s educational accomplishments and ideas. Yet, after a year of archival research I had become stymied. At the end of my journey I found that the archives held, in my opinion, a paucity of primary materials, and the list of secondary sources was quite brief—in short, the residues of the order’s antebellum past were quite limited. When I participated in the Holy Family congregation’s daily dinner convocation, however, I came to a deeper understanding of what the order was about and gained insight regarding an interpretive framework with which to conduct and represent a study of the literacy in the lives of Henriette Delille and other charter members of the Holy Family congregation.

On that first afternoon in March of 2003, after hours of work in the archives, I was invited to join the congregation for “dinner,” their prime meal of the day. There, I made my first acquaintance with the Holy Family’s convent culture. After a litany of prayers and a formal blessing of the meal, the room fell quiet. Staff and guests had been asked to join the avowed women in observing a day-long vow of silence in honor of the Lenten season. We queued up to collect hot food from a buffet and then sat down to consume the meal. A short time later, the low clatter of utensils against plates yielded to the amplified voice of a young woman. The office assistant, Gail Johnson, offered a few brief announcements basic to the functioning of the order. These included a progress report on the congregation’s new constitution, which would need to be ratified by vote during the summer, a letter of tribute to the cause of canonization of Henriette Delille, and an Internet posting pertaining to the order’s
business. Gail then turned and introduced a Sister who was to lead the daily pious reading selection chosen by their Superior General, Mother Sylvia Thibodeaux. On this particular day the Holy Family history was selected for reading and thus became the assigned topic of contemplation for the remainder of the day and until the following convocation. She chose an excerpt from an historical novel by David Collins, *The Story of Henriette Delille*. A low, sober voice read:

> Henriette loved attending Mass at Saint Louis Cathedral. The stained glass windows, the varnished wood carved pews, the majestic altar—all raised her thoughts to heaven. But beyond all of that, there was the wonderful gathering of God’s family. The rich arrive in ornate carriages pulled by some of the strongest and best-kept horses in the world. There were wealthy white men in the congregation, their silk coats and vests covering Belgian lace shirts, their sleek pantaloons leading down to fine buckled shoes. . . . The poor arrived on foot, their clothing sometimes dirty and torn, shoes barely hanging on their feet. Though it hurt to see such stark differences between the social classes, Henriette was impressed to see that persons of every color, race and social standing were represented and welcomed. Each hand dipped into the holy water from the same font. All were members of God’s family, coming to worship the Lord and to seek his direction and comfort.

The readings continued in likewise manner for several minutes. The narrative account rippled back and forth across the room in almost imperceptible waves of a call and response pattern: the reader sent out arced phrases and the sister-diners responded in a dialogic manner. Quotes or allusions to the Holy Family oral tradition on the part of the author, for example, elicited the most recognizable responses, like shared glances and smiles or slight vocal gestures, light nods, or pauses in eating. At the close of the reading, all within earshot were directed to continue to reflect upon and (during non-Lenten times) discuss the readings as they carried out their duties and offices throughout the day.

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6 Ibid., 29. Another fictionalized account of the life of Henriette Delille that was read was the following: William Kelly, *A Servant of Slaves: the Life of Henriette Delille: a Novel* (New York: Crossroads, 2003).
I observed intently, fixed on various levels of inquiry at once: first, the descriptive level, where I sought to identify and then piece together the fragmented, polyphonic Holy Family history and second, on the explanatory level, where I sought to identify one of many various possible frameworks through which to best explicate this history. With respect to the former, the reading event and the larger context of the dinner convocation generated insight. It offered a first-hand view of convent practices. I glimpsed the depth of the women’s commitment to lifetime learning and the women’s attitudes toward teaching and their unique history. Literate practices were varied and multiple: spiritual and religious, yes, but also computer-based, scholarly, organizational, and historical. As for the latter, the explanatory level, the general pattern of interactions and literacy expectations signaled a manner in which the antebellum religious community might be fittingly analyzed: as a culture. The congregation was more than an assembly of teachers, their convent more than a school house or dormitory of teachers. The women comprised a discourse community, a collective with its own particular way of saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing. What interested me most was how these ways of being created a specialized context for literacy learning among the sisters themselves. It included texts, deep attitudes toward learning and their faith system. Cognizance of each of these levels of observation worked to shift my focus away from school literacy phenomena and towards the broader cultural legacy of literacy left by Henriette Delille to be found in the day-to-day, hour-to-hour activities carried out by the present-day sisterhood.

The event of the dinner convocation was, in fact, a living artifact of the conventual space originally produced by Henriette Delille and the charter women. The congregational archivist, Sr. Carolyn Leslie, connected the present-day practices to the nineteenth century community, noting that the original community followed St. Augustine’s Rule for nuns. As
explained in a prior chapter, he emphasized the use of sacred texts in spiritual development and specifically recommended that the nuns’ communal meals be used for communal readings. These events were regarded as spiritual exercises, and, in Sr. Carolyn Leslie’s words, served as “a form of spiritual nourishment.” She also pointed to the fact that the earliest version of the order’s religious rule, Regles et Règlements, had stipulated that on every day “one of the lecturices will give a pious reading.” The convocation affirmed that Holy Family conventual space was a site of black women’s creativity and pattern of authorship. I observed then, and over the course of the subsequent visits, the use of prayers, litanies, and ceremonial scripts that were original to the congregation. As noted above, the spiritual director had pulled together multiple pre-written texts from diverse sources to create a unique, intertextual experience for these purposes. Taken together, these observations signaled the importance of recognizing the religious community as a previously unreported site of black women’s literacy practices.

These observations were bolstered by what I had learned while reviewing texts in the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family. From the end of the nineteenth century through the twentieth century the Holy Family Sisters had left evidence of a pattern of composing texts, personal and institutional, in the form of governing rules, and more. Sisters wrote spiritual poetry and a few produced small, ornately embellished booklets containing prose, poetry, and personal wisdom. Sr. Mary Seraphine, the order’s longtime music instructor, composed original classical works for piano. The holdings in the archives indicate that the women read a wide range of materials, including bookmarks made from nineteenth-century newspaper clippings, indicating literacy.

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7 Interview with Sister Carolyn Leslie, March 12, 2003.
8 Henriette Delille, Regles et Règlements, 2.
9 Lester Sullivan identified Sr. Seraphine (1865-1932) as “the only woman identified among black composers in [nineteenth century] New Orleans.” A native of Puerto Rico, she played multiple instruments and served as the order’s music instructor for almost fifty years. She produced many works but all that remains is a piano composition entitled “La Puertorriqueña: Reverie.” “Composers of Color of Nineteenth-Century New Orleans: The History Behind the Music,” in Kein, Creole, 94-95.
practices which included the local newspapers. In the modern era, sisters produced sophisticated written texts to support their professions, including a hand-drafted science textbook by Sr. Borgia Hart, and histories published as articles, book chapters, master’s theses, and doctoral dissertations. Taken together, these reading and writing practices revealed the sisterhood’s intense relationship with literacy and demonstrated specific approaches to transmitting what Shirley Brice Heath has termed their “ways with words,” or a general behavior pattern associated with language learning and use.\textsuperscript{10} The meanings and values associated with their use of language, to support spiritual development, literacy development, or personal relationships, for example, point to a specific set of attitudes toward literacy. The various domains of practice, presented in table 6.1, illustrate the type and variety of purposes to which literacy served in the Holy Family conventual way of life.

It was then that I surmised that research on the topic of the charter congregation’s practices required more than delving through dusty archives, reading period materials, social science literature, or relevant historiography—all crucial and valuable aspects of the academic positivistic research tradition. Study of the everyday or otherwise routine (weekly, monthly, seasonal, epideictic) literacy practices of the living women of the order might offer clues and yield insights about the literacy practices of the women who were their foremothers. My observations in the field threw light on the Holy Family sisters’ profound relationship with the past. It was a past made tragic by black women’s systematic exclusion from access to literacy education. It was a past made complex by antebellum-era ambiguities and tensions regarding race. Yet it was also a past which made their predecessors into heroines. I recognized the convent as intersection of two rare and specialized types of spaces, a physical place or site

\textsuperscript{10} Heath, \textit{Ways with Words}, 13.
Table 6.1 Present /Past Literacy Practices of Holy Family Sisters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy Family Practices</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Specific activities or behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Professional materials (with respect to each nun’s assigned role within the community). These materials include history and education texts. This category overlaps heavily with activities and behaviors from the religious and spiritual domains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious/ Spiritual</td>
<td>Personal materials (poems, copybooks, letters), congregational materials, Ecclesiastical publications, and literature, Black Catholic publications, scholarly and common publications, race literature, New Orleans history, and academic theses written by other Black nuns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congregational</td>
<td>Oral and written readings selected by the congregation’s leading officer or a chaplain. An eclectic mixture of current events materials, (newspapers, e-mails, magazine articles), spiritual, and religious texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Historical texts, academic theses, scholarly articles. School curriculum, course planning, educational reports, and academic theses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious/ Spiritual</td>
<td>Scripture, prayer books, ecclesiastical literature, religious journals, [home crafted] books, and texts promoting the cause for the canonization of Delille.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Congregational</td>
<td>Official letters, directives, advisories, reports, and addresses produced in service of the congregation. Newsletters, pamphlets, scholarly and academic theses, articles, essays, T-shirts, memorials, and websites in support of the canonization of Henriette Delille. Official oral tradition and written congregational histories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Family and Intra-community letters, emails, [wills], [home crafted] books, diaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>New Orleans, and race-related: books, articles, academic theses . . . etc., related to the topic of local and regional history of blacks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.1 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy Family Practices</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Specific activities or behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious/Spiritual</td>
<td>Modeling literate behavior, teaching literacy skills, including reading and writing and music and foreign language. Praying through poetry, prose and song. Preserving congregational culture and transferring it formally to novices, students, and the public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acting</td>
<td>Working as advocates for the poor and aged. Representing black women religious at Roman Catholic conventions and assemblies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Building, staffing, and administering schools, writing curriculum; teaching and raising orphan children. Establishing a presence as literate women and educators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Reflecting on doctrine and theology. Contemplating the meaning of their organizational history, the life history of the founder, and other former leaders of the order. Drawing upon their cognitive skills to strategize for their future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Drawing upon their faith system as a resource for imagining a better society and a resource for support in the face of oppression and other obstacles. Sharing confidence in the ability of young black women to learn and setting high expectations for them, in spite of dominant views of them as inferior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

especially dedicated to the service of black women, and a location vivified by the sight of a social tradition reaching deep into black women’s complex history—heroic and tragic. The site/sight represented a space through which to express and enact the multiple, deep-seated ways of being literate that are particular to Black Catholicism and black womens’ experiences and viewpoints across time. Historically based transformations notwithstanding, a sketch of the present day community affirmed many of my understandings of how literacy was practiced, appreciated, and used in the antebellum past.
Literacy Re-Imagined

Reflecting on my first visit to the Motherhouse engendered in me the desire to look for another way to think about the history of literacy and schooling. Prior conceptions limited literacy to reading and writing, syntax, grammar, and vocabulary, and so forth, without taking into account how those formations came to be thought of as literacy and what ideations about it they displaced. When viewed broadly, it is clear that literacy pervades our lives, as literacy is really about human communication and thought. Turning our attention to the discrete literacy practices that occur daily can bring to the foreground literate practices and aspects of literacy that were previously unnoticed or ignored. Clearly, each day, most all of us read letters, books, e-mails, signposts, or blogs and possibly compose them as well. However, we also engage in daily literate practices that have been rendered less visible by habit or ideology. We engage in literate practices when we read the directions on a medicine bottle, read a fuel gauge, read a map, prepare a recipe, sing a lullaby, or teach a child to pray before bed. Each of these acts depends on our ability to understand and use the varied symbols and symbolic systems that texture our world.

A contemporary critical approach to the study of the history of literacy, as I have taken with this study, shows the possibilities offered by bringing those small, sometimes nuanced, acts and contexts to the foreground. Literacy may be approached in a manner that is open to perceiving the true diversity of practices, meanings, uses, practices and contexts that comprise the human experience. Re-imagining literacy draws beneath the umbrella of this powerful trope called literacy all the ways of thinking and acting with regard to the entire symbolic texture of a culture, including the use of prayer cards, folk lyrics, the body, pen and ink, chalk and slate board, a family forum, church architecture, a chat room, or a city’s landscape. Re-imagining
literacy illuminates the educational process because it makes visible all the practices which support literacy in its traditional definition. Re-imagining is a critical approach; it is a call to acknowledge the manner in which traditional conceptualizations of literacy as fixed, unitary, and acontextualized inform our ideas about literacy education. It is an approach that foregrounds issues of control, authority, and privilege carried by literacy, framed by the following fundamental questions: What is literacy, and Who can be literate? As those new ways of being literate and thinking about literate behavior emerge and come into view, the project of re-imagining only just begins, for to re-imagine literacy is (a) to envision the broad range of social practices through which groups act and react, (b) to locate and then highlight the ways in which these practices are put to serve emancipatory purposes, and (c) to interrogate the manner in which these ideas and practices relate to our prior historical literacy imagination.

**Literacy Among Afro-Latin Creole Women Religious**

The preceding description of the Holy Family convent community carries many of the same literacy practices, uses, modalities, and formations that this study found in the antebellum-era convent community. In the prior chapters I described how Henriette Delille and the charter members of the Sisters of the Holy Family practiced literacy and made it usable for their own purposes. Using documentary evidence, oral tradition, and prior histories, I sketched the image of a community of women actively cultivating the dominant literacy skills of the era (reading, writing, and mathematics). In seeking to re-imagine literacy, I gave an account of the multiple skills and ways of being that were associated with their vocation and their spiritual development, including the ability to pray, to sing, to contemplate, and to instruct through embodied action. I found that Henriette Delille enacted literacy on multiple levels and through multiple modes of expression, but what I found most salient was the manner in which literacy
was invoked through communal, spatial, and “humanizing” activities. Through this history I was able to show that black women acted willfully, boldly, intellectually, and in an organized manner to script their own reality (to the degree that this was possible), to rewrite themselves into the world as knowers and agents of change.

In founding one of the first Black Catholic sisterhoods, Henriette Delille permitted free black women to employ the literacy formations and traditions which already permitted white women to act in the public sphere as educators, ministers, and institution-builders. The Afro-Latin Creole culture that they were part of gave resistant meaning, orientation, and direction to those formations. Reflecting on the experiences and encounters that I shared at the convent, strongly affirmed my conception that what Henriette Delille had conceived during the early antebellum era literacy was a community of black women intellectuals.

First and foremost, Afro-Latin Creole women religious’ literacy was communal. The religious rules that Henriette Delille penned, *Regles et Règlements*, sketched the image of a society of nineteenth-century women who gathered around texts to enhance their spiritual awareness and development, to share knowledge, and script their own futures. A key element of that community was a profound commitment to care for and reform the broader black community and the community *writ large*. Their literacy formations, traditions, and concerns, like their heritage and culture, reflected their position at the intersection of both West African and Roman Catholic traditions. The two traditions were synchronous on several points relevant to women’s conventual literacy sponsorship: women’s roles as educators of girls, women’s activism in the community, religious fervency, and deep and total integration of religious literacy practices in every aspect their lives. Being demonstrably pious women permitted them to self-organize in a public fashion under the protection of the Roman Catholic Church, which
offered some benefits. Placing the Holy Family tradition within this cross-cultural context was critical; it was meant to direct attention away from simplistic renderings of the women as assimilators or mere cogs in a bureaucratic Church wheel, and instead, toward the image of women who were acting boldly and taking risks to build a new and distinctive tradition. This context also served to highlight the women’s position in the middle space between two very different sides of the history of literacy, the ease experienced by those with privilege versus the danger and violence associated with slave literacy. Because they were situated in this manner, the women represented a bridge across the literacy divide and they appeared to have taken full advantage of it. They conserved values and traditions that were most useful to them. The centrality of reading and writing as well as advanced literacy development, to the black community was underscored by this context. These skills were especially central to the Holy Family way of life; it was critical to the women’s social condition and mandatory for their mission to teach religious and secular literacies to others.

But literacy for them represented much more than the rudiments of education; it represented the rudiments of living; reading, writing, and math took their place beside whatever skills Henriette Delille and charter members thought were needed to acquire “the bread of life,” the knowledge and skills that could bring them eternal life and into a closer dialogue with the Divine. Equally, this conception of literacy was a way of thinking about literacy which underscored the values which prioritized group survival, namely interdependency, flexibility, and a lifetime commitment to learning. Most important of these qualities I observed directly at the convent was the commitment to learning as a communal commitment and a life-time pursuit. Even after a basic set of skills was mastered, the communal mode of living required that the members continue to learn, regardless of their age.
or rank. All of the women were expected to learning something new every day; throughout their lifetimes they were expected to be able to learn new skills to meet the needs of the community. This communal model of literacy represents a critical rethinking of what constitutes curriculum. The present-day focus on school literacy suggests that all we need to know must come through schooling and that knowledge is limited to the disciplines associated with schooling. Henriette Delille and the charter sisters, as well as their twentieth-century counterparts teach us that curriculum is so much more. In keeping with leading curriculum scholars such as William Pinar, curriculum was conceived by them as being a life-long journey, an unending series of learning trajectories whose end is not yet fully known. Literacy’s position in the curriculum is protean, ever-changing, and determined by desires and needs and of the collective, which are, in turn, shaped by external contexts.

Second, literacy was exquisitely spatial. A combination of elements—Catholic monastic traditions, a racially segregated society, and the institution of human bondage—gave the women’s struggle to establish a female teaching congregation a decidedly spatial aspect. The fulfillment of Henriette Delille’s vision required producing a safe social space for black women to act and to reclaim their bodies as sacred spaces. In prior chapters, I described how racial exclusions, legal and social prohibitions, and gender norms had bounded the women’s worlds and charged their most mundane literacy activities with burdensome, if not sometimes exquisite, meanings. We can imagine that when free black women moved through the streets of a city that served as site of the largest slave market in the nation—as they passed traders’ offices and auction blocks that would gladly have offered their bodies for sale—their most mundane daily activities were infused with a spirit of resistance. In the act of reading a book,

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attending mass, posting a letter, or conversing in the market with the grocer about the news printed in the daily paper, the free black woman of this community knew that literacy acts and behaviors continually positioned and re-positioned her in relation to Louisiana’s tripartite social schedule. Her deportment, dress, and intellect were all critical tools for survival.

Third, literacy was conceived of as a “humanizing” or critical change-oriented activity. Henriette Delille challenged the willful imposition of states of ignorance and illiteracy as part of their process of blacks’ dehumanization. It was a phenomenon which she bore witness to in her work with the enslaved in the St. Claude school for girls, and likely played a role in the lives of her family members and female kin. Henriette’s response—leading a quest to establish a shelter for, among other things, black literacy learning and development—demonstrated a level of awareness of the prevailing relationships among literacy, freedom, and oppression. But her view was broader, as it needed to be. Delille’s educational mission demonstrated a deep philosophical commitment to elevating the degraded condition of blacks not just by offering the rudiments of a classical education to privileged school girls, but by teaching them to intercede on behalf of the enslaved, the poor, the orphaned, and the diseased. Her approach was holistic. This choice represented a full-court challenge to the process of dehumanization that was enacted also through material deprivations and physical and sexual violence. In so doing, Henriette Delille signaled her appreciation that critical changes begin with critical knowledge. For her, religious faith and faith in her order’s own abilities to act and become change agents was critical knowledge. In this way, we can also come to appreciate how literacy came to mean more than acts of reading and writing, or the exhibition of grammar skills, it was a way to share the liberating knowledge that the oppressed and enslaved hold an equal place at the table of humanity (in the eyes of Christ).
Henriette Delille also theorized that literacy was a way to restore recognition of black humanity by demonstrating the capacity of free black women to self-organize and their ability to create a black system of schooling. In the contexts of widespread educational disenfranchisement, injurious iconography, and increasing hostility to black initiatives for education, this was a bold and important move. It served as both the fulfillment of Henriette Delille’s vision to establish a teaching sisterhood and a challenge to those would deny blacks the opportunity. My experiences with the present-day Holy Family Sisters underscored the continued importance of this mission. While the institution of human bondage was gone, its memory was not. When one sister paused to tell me that her grandfather had been a slave, I was reminded of how the history of slavery remained ever present. Through artwork, stained-glass, and other memorializations, the historical contexts that inspired Henriette Delille remained in view. Continued engagements with the history of the founding of the religious order and the personal histories of the members kept the issues surrounding its legacy in the contemporary society alive and quite close.

Re-imagining the History of Literacy

Reflecting on the richness of that first encounter with the women, as well as subsequent ones, affirmed the notion that literacy is defined by those who practice it. Literacy has not always been approached in this matter. Historical discourses about literacy in the United States have been limited by race, region, language, ethnicity, gender, and the range of literacy practices that are considered. The history of literacy education has commanded the perception that the history of organized black literacy education began after the emancipation of the enslaved and that black women’s role in its development was secondary or negligible. This report offers evidence that blacks were active players in history before the Civil War, and that
black women were key actors on the stage of American history, both the history of education and religion.

While the efforts by Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family were not wholly typical of the black female experience in a Southern slave state, neither were they completely anomalous. As their narratives make clear, black women did occasion to act boldly and in an organized fashion both on their own behalf and for the whole of their community. During the antebellum era, multiple black religious orders were founded; many attempts simply failed, while others, like Holy Family Sisters and the Oblate Sisters of Providence of Baltimore, experienced success. Their efforts and achievements represent a part of a larger historical pattern of black women’s activism that was just beginning to grow—albeit mostly in the northern states. Equally, Henriette Delille and the charter women acted, however unknowingly, in tandem with countless other nineteenth-century black women who specifically avowed themselves to the cause of black literacy. Historian Linda Perkins noted that the earliest black female college graduates repeatedly state their desire for an education was directly linked to aiding their race. Fanny Jackson Coppin expressed in her autobiography of 1913 that, from girlhood, her greatest ambition was “to get an education and to help [her] people.” Anna Julia Cooper (1882) . . . stated [that] she decided to attend college while in kindergarten and [then] devoted her entire life to the education of her race. Affluent Mary Church Terrell . . . [wrote] “All during my college course I had dreamed of the day when I could promote the welfare of my race.”

Thus, Henriette Delille and the charter members of the Sisters of the Holy Family represent part of a larger group of women and men who elected to commit their lives to the cause of

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black community uplift. This pattern of personal dedication of education among nineteenth-century black educators has not been emphasized. Studies about the nature and numbers of such declarations and about how they were (or were not) carried out might yield insight toward a more general pattern. However, the history of Henriette Delille and the Sisters of the Holy Family stands apart in that it provides a rare view into the thought, ideas, and daily lives of antebellum-era black women in a Southern slave state. Early Holy Family history speaks to Henriette Delille’s desire to write her life into the world, and aid others in doing the same; their world was directly implicated in slavery and it remained an ever-present risk throughout Henriette Delille’s life.

Recently, Jacqueline Royster Jones drew upon the metaphors of flow, space, and momentum to communicate a sense of the qualitative importance of these early black literacy champions like Henriette Delille. Through words, action, and call to action black women established practices which signaled their defiance to oppression. Jones observed:

Vibrant among these [nineteenth century] practices . . . is the use of literacy as an instrument for producing spiraling effects in both sociopolitical thought and sociopolitical action. Literacy has enabled African American women to create whirlpools in the pond of public discourse, such that educational opportunity became for them the epicenter by which change could occur. This image suggests that, with the acquisition of literacy, African American women were able to amass energy and concentrate it—deliberately and with persuasive intent—in support of sociopolitical action. The significance of literate practices grows richer and richer, not just at the critical juncture of acquisition, as literacy became more systematically available to African American women, but in terms of momentum created by the circles of activity made possible by those moments of opportunity.\(^\text{13}\)

In this respect Delille’s literacy education mission was representative. Henriette Delille gave black women a voice; critically, it was a voice made powerful in part due to its proximity to the heart of patriarchy. Working through a religious order allowed her to appropriate formations,

\(^{13}\) Jones, *Traces of a Stream.*
traditions, and protections without which that might have been eliminated. As well, the foundation of the sisterhood created for them an honorable public role in the community; it was a strong moral and social foundation on which to build a black women’s intellectual tradition. Delille was an intellect because she challenged the processes by which black women and girls were dehumanized. She inculcated a black-woman-centered epistemology through modeling and instruction, and she created qualitatively critical sites for sponsoring black literacy (church, convent, school, nursing home) that began small, grew, and radiated outward, carrying the message of self-empowerment and community uplift through education throughout the city.

A major significance of this research is that it narrates the history of a black women’s collective that persisted through the nineteenth-century era and extended its reach and influence well beyond the boundaries of the city of New Orleans. Because of this, I view the genesis of the order as being constitutive of the commencement of an unrecognized women’s literacy movement: a Black Catholic religious effort. Indeed, after Henriette Delille’s death in 1862, her vision to establish a perpetual community of black teaching sisters was placed in the hands of the order’s two remaining cofounders, Juliette Gaudin and Josephine Charles. Each became Mother Superior and worked toward adapting the group’s mission and culture toward the post-slavery era. The congregation endured a brief period of trial where they experienced a loss of members, divided leadership, and material deprivations due to the harsh set of conditions that arose in the wake of the Civil War.

During the late nineteenth century, the collective resumed the pattern of growth and expansion once enjoyed under Henriette Delille: the membership increased, their mission expanded, their institutions enlarged, and their institutional matrix expanded across the state of
Louisiana, then the nation, then the world. Through the trials of the Reconstruction period and Jim Crow Era a select group of young black women carried on Henriette Delille’s spiritual and social vision to serve God through community by joining the ranks of the Sisters of the Holy Family. Persuaded by the good work and honorable reputations established by the founding members, Black Catholic parents began to encourage their devout daughters to join the congregation. Although not all of them remained, many women did and went on to become lifelong teachers, mentors, school administrators, nurses, scholars, and congregation leaders. Throughout this time the purpose of the group, as stated in *Regles et Règlements*—to care for the diseased, help the poor, and instruct the ignorant—advanced without retreat. In fact, the congregation expanded its mission; they began to educate boys and extended their institutional matrix composed of convents, schools, and orphanages to other Louisiana localities, namely Opelousas, Donaldsonville, Baton Rouge, and Mandeville. In 1898, Mother Mary Austin Jones, only the fifth Mother Superior after Henriette Delille, began a dramatic expansion. Only thirty years old when she took the office, she led the women out of the state to establish operations including Galveston, Texas; they reached beyond the U.S. borders to establish a convent and several schools in Belize. Within fifty years after the death the founder, the congregation launched some eighteen educational initiatives, from daycare facilities to orphanages to a girl’s academy. In the years to follow the Congregation established a presence in various states, including California, Oklahoma and Florida. To the present the list of schools has multiplied threefold, reflecting over fifty institutions begun or administered by the congregation. Henriette Delille vision and the order’s mission to serve the needy and instruct

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14 In some cases women who were part of the order left and went on to found new black women’s religious orders. Margaret Beasley (1833-1903) of New Orleans, for example, went on to establish an order of Franciscan sisters in Savannah, Georgia. In 1887 a small group of Holy Family sisters founded a short-lived contemplative community in Convent, Louisiana. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 109-110. One of their members, a Baton Rouge resident named Elizabeth Barbara Williams, founded the Handmaids of Mary of Harlem, New York (ibid., 240).
the ignorant was a “chain unbroken.” A list of many, but not all of the schools the congregation founded or staffed appear in table 6.2. Their ways of being literate are relevant to the contemporary studies of educational practice in that the order continues in the present.

Theorizing Literacy in the Life of Henriette Delille

A persistent theme found in the personal writings of Henriette Delille and in the fragmented, polyphonic corpus that comprises early Holy Family history is her commitment to causing a change in the existing state of affairs by bringing her ideas and experiences to bear on her social and physical environment. Clearly, she had the opinion that religion and the interests of her faith system were foundational motivations for change. However, her words and choice of ministry signaled, with clarity, the view that an integrated approach was necessary. As we have learned in the previous chapters, Henriette Delille’s approach to change meant (1) elevating the degraded condition of the enslaved, the poor, the orphaned, and the diseased through care of mind, body, and soul, (2) transforming the image of black women in the church and the broader society through self-appropriation of both the icon of the holy woman-teacher-intellectual and the Catholic monastic model of community, and (3) altering the social topography by making available to free black women publicly sanctioned roles as knowledge-bearers and agents of change.

These three trajectories express a way of thinking about literacy that were inspired by and based upon a commitment to spiritual and social change. Henriette Delille’s choice to launch a pattern of activism that radiated out from her base and extended outward across the city reveals her community’s understanding and practical knowledge of the dilemmas of the era. She not only claimed their bodies as sacred spaces but extended their reach through

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16 At present there are 133 Holy Family Sisters. Sr. Carolyn Leslie in discussion with the author, January 2006.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Year of Founding, Duration, Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bayou Road School for Colored Girls</td>
<td>Grade level 4-7?</td>
<td>1851-1866, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary’s Academy</td>
<td>Grade level K-12, later 7-12</td>
<td>1867 to the present, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Ghost</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1874 to the present, merged with the Academy of the Immaculate Conception and became Opelousas Catholic in 1970, Opelousas, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary’s Academy</td>
<td>Grade level K-12, later 7-12</td>
<td>1867 to the present, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Ghost</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1874 to the present, merged with the Academy of the Immaculate Conception and became Opelousas Catholic in 1970, Opelousas, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary’s/ Holy Family Academy</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1881-1882; 1895-1919, Baton Rouge, LA (later emerged as St. Francis Xavier)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Catherine</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1885-1981, merged with the Academy of the Immaculate Conception in 1970, Donaldsonville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Maurice</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1892- (coeducational), New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. John Berchman’s Orphan’s Home</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1892-1969, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis School</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1893- (coed.) Carrolton (a suburb of New Orleans).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lafon Asylum for Orphan Boys</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1893- 1965, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Family</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1896-1959, Mandeville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Rosary</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1898-1979, Galveston, TX</td>
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**Table 6.2 continued.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Duration, Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Heart</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1898 to the present, Belize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis Xavier</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1900-1964, Madisonville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Nicholas</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1905-1977 Houston, TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaculate Conception</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1907-1909 Palmetto-Lebeau, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Katherine</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1907-1964, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Rosary Institute</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1913-1989, Lafayette, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Mother of Mercy</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1914-1966, Ames, TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Family</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1920-1968, Apalachicola, FL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis of Assisi</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1921-1973, Breaux Bridge, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Francis Xavier</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1920-1997, Baton Rouge, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Benedict de Moor</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1923-1965, Napoleonville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaculate Heart</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1934-1977, Lafayette, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1934-1964, Klotzville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Monica</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1939, merged with Holy Family Cathedral School in 1966. Tulsa, OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Raymond</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1940, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Grace</td>
<td>Elementary &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>1942, Reserve, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ the King</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1942, Belleview, LA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 6.2 continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Duration, Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holy Family</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1943-1967, Covington, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1945, Marshall, TX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Lady Help of Christians</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1946, Bastrop, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Ghost</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1946, Marksville, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1947, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Peter Claver</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1947-1982, Grand Coteau, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Martin de Porres</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1948-1965, L. Providence, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Jude Nursery</td>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>1951-1963, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Angels</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1952-1978, Stann Creek, Belize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecumenical High</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1953 to 1975, merged with Austin High School. Dangriga, Belize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Heart</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1959-1967, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeLisle College</td>
<td>Junior College</td>
<td>1959-1967, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Albert</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1962, Compton, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina Coeli</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1962, Compton, CA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Martin de Porres</td>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>1964-1966, Davant, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Ghost</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1964-1978, Stann Creek, Belize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>1965-1967, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lafon Day Care</td>
<td>Pre-School</td>
<td>1969 to the present, New Orleans, LA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
public spaces, making their bodies sites/sights of resistance. Through literacy she connected those bodies and those of her students to the world of words and ideas offered by women mystics and French Romantics and knowledge of the world beyond the moral desolation that enveloped the city of New Orleans.

In this respect, I align my views with those of Jacqueline Royster Jones, who identified a similar linkage between uses of literacy and socio-political advocacy in her analysis of the nineteenth-century black women rhetoricians. From Maria Stewart to Ida B. Wells, she argues, the nineteenth century presented a steady stream of black women who put their ideas onto the stage of public discourse for the purpose of reform. Jones demonstrated that black women’s literacy practices of the nineteenth century demonstrated “a propensity to work energetically to achieve political, social, and cultural goals.”¹⁸ The essays they wrote and their recorded oratory bore witness to a broader pattern of black women’s activism not always captured in print or firmly secured in historical memory.

Conclusion

The study concludes that understanding literacy in the lives of antebellum black women religious women requires recognition of the multiple literacies engaged in their daily practices: within conventual culture, within schooling contexts, and within families and the broader society in which they were situated. Antebellum New Orleans provided a contentious and revealing site for study that demonstrated the history of blacks’ struggle for inclusion and equality, especially with regard to literacy education. The Afro-Latin culture from which Henriette Delille emerged was both challenged and privileged in terms of their access to literacy education. Blacks New Orleanians of the antebellum era endured prohibitions against slave literacy and deterrents to black schools that had the effect of charging their environment with resistive meanings.

Literacy, as conceived by black women religious, was enacted in three principal ways, first, as a communal act: holistic, interdependent, and deeply-committed; second, literacy was experienced and advocated spatially; and third, humanizing act, as a public assertion of the black women’s full and equal potentiality. Literacy practices were used for various purposes: (1) to conserve and further develop their specialized ways of knowing, thinking, acting, and believing, and being literate; (2) as a means of expressing their religiosity, spirituality, equality and thus affirming their humanity; (3) to address the consequences of slavery and racism, and thereby uplift the whole of black community (4) as a means of developing their own moral and intellectual capacity, and others, especially black females; and (5) to reform the icon of the black female and thereby secure a legitimate and honorable place in society for themselves and other black women. These analyses suggest that from nineteenth century black women
religious we might glean an approach to literacy and literacy learning that is at once holistic, community-based, resistant, change-oriented, and pragmatic.
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Nelson, Nancy and Robert C. Calfee, “The Reading And Writing Connection Viewed Historically.” In *The Reading-Writing Connection: Ninety-seventh Yearbook of the


Soja, Edward W. “Preface.” In Leander, Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice, ix-xv.


**Unpublished Studies**


Appendix A: List of Nineteenth-Century Texts
Found in the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family

General Texts


Biechy, A. *Charles D'Anjou ou La Terreur De Naples*. Limoges: Barbou Frères, [1861?]


Danielo. *Vie De Madame Isabelle, Soeur de Saint Louis*. Paris: Chez Gaume Frères, 1840


Guenot, C. *Vie de PIE IX*. Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, Bibliothèque de la Jeunesse Chrétienne, 1873.


Marcel, P. *La Petite Mendiante*. Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1876.


Un prêtre diocèse de valence *Abrége des Prévues de la Religion*. Lyon: Chez François Guyot, 1829.

Un prêtre, Diocèse de Valence. *Abrége de Prévues de la Religion*. Chez Francios Guyot, 1829.


List of Texts Attributable to the Foundresses or Marie Aliquot


———. Commonplace book or notebook compiled by a Sacred Heart Sister, [1840-1850?].

———. *Délices des Ames Pieuses*, [1800s?] [Signed: “Ce Livre est de Noviciat”].

———. *Délices des Ames Pieuses*, n.d.


———. *Offices de la Quinzaine de paques*. Tours: Archevêque de Bordeaux, 1856.

———. *Paroissien Explique*. 
———. *Paroissien*. 1858.


———. *Seven Sundays in Honor of St. Joseph*. Benzinger Brothers.


Garnier, E. *Jérusalem et La Judee description de la Palestine ou Terre Sainte*. Tours: Ad Mame Et Cie., 1846 [signed by Gaudin].


Le Frère Arnaud Religieux de l'ordre de Saint-François, *Vie De Sainte Angèle de Foligno*. d'Evreux: Clermont-Ferrand Thibaud-Landriot, 1841[signed Mere Juliette].


Saint Thérèse d'Avila. *Oeuvres de Sainte Thérèse*, (Vol 1). Translated by Arnauld d'Andilly. Limoges: Chez Barbou, 1836 [signed Gaudin].

**List of Texts Attributable to the Early Years of the Congregation by Other Demarcations (e.g., Maison de la Saint Famille, Rousselon Collection)**


Danielo Vie De Madame Isabelle, Soeur de Saint Louis. Paris: Chez Gaume Frères, 1840. [signed/marked E. Rousselon, Rose Vivant]


Un prêtre diocèse de valence. Abrége des Prévues de la Religion. Lyon: Chez François Guyot, 1829 [signed/marked E. Rousselon, Bibliothèque du Rosaire Vivant, No. 2; 803].

List of Texts Originating from the Archives of the Ursuline Convent

Appendix B: Letter of Permission

To: dporche@lsu.edu

Re: Research project ( Fw: Congrats, Sisters of the Holy Family, etc)

Date: Sat, 21 Jan 2006 21:44:27 EST

Donna,

You have permission to use the photographs for your dissertation. Just write under the picture: Courtesy of the Archives of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

God bless you.

Sister Doris Goudeaux
Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family
6901 Chef Menteur Highway, New Orleans, LA 70126
Vita

Growing up in Louisiana served as a backdrop that fostered Donna Porche-Frilot’s interest in history and concern about literacy issues. Early schooling experiences in Baton Rouge’s newly desegregated schools exposed her to issues surrounding race, literacy, and schooling. She earned a degree in English in 1992 from Louisiana State University (LSU). She worked as a computer technologist and computer literacy instructor for more than ten years. Donna then entered the master’s degree program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction where she worked under Nancy Nelson to better understand the reader responses of adolescent girls in a thesis entitled “Case Study of the Responses of Three Adolescent Females to Young Adult Texts.” After earning a Master of Arts in education in 1998 she immediately entered the doctoral program at LSU in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. She began teaching multicultural education as a graduate assistant and began presenting papers at local and national education conferences. She is presently a member of the American Educational Research Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. She plans to graduate with a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in curriculum and instruction in May, 2006. Her research interests include literacy studies, women’s studies, adolescent literature, the history of education, educational technology, and curriculum theory.