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**“Civilization’s Supreme Test”: Cooperative Organizing in New Orleans,  
1890s-2014**

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**“Civilization’s Supreme Test”: Cooperative Organizing in New Orleans,  
1890s-2014**

**by**

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## **Dedication**

To Jim and Jenny Gessler, Nori Thorne, Jamie Eakin, and Angel Treviño.

# **“Civilization’s Supreme Test”: Cooperative Organizing in New Orleans, 1890s-2014**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This dissertation argues that cooperatives in New Orleans have drawn on homegrown ethnic and religious communal traditions to confront the vagaries of capitalism and its fraught connections to race, class, and gender. To historically and theoretically anchor my project, I examine seven cooperatives whose shifting alliances with labor, political, and consumer activist networks sustained the movement’s commitment to fashioning a new, egalitarian society. In chapter one, I analyze how socialist Catholic Creole, Caribbean, and European cooperatives transcended racial and ethnic barriers to citywide labor organizing in the 1890s. Chapter two examines the racial and class assumptions undermining white female activists’ interwar cooperative movement. Chapter three explores multiracial, cross-class, and gender-inclusive Popular Front cooperatives to recuperate the history of the city’s integrated political organizations. Chapter four examines one family’s intergenerational cooperative career to reveal the influence of black cooperative enterprise on twentieth-century civil rights projects. Finally, chapter five studies the continuity and rupture between pre- and post-

Hurricane Katrina cooperatives, as well as their vexed negotiation of neoliberal economic and political policies perpetuating systemic inequality.

While my dissertation highlights New Orleans' contributions to U.S. cooperative and social movements, it expands economic history more broadly. Using the methodological interventions of gender studies, cultural geography, oral history, and critical race theory, I contend that neighborhood context affects cooperatives' ability to implement economic alternatives, while cooperatives' moral economy is also inscribed on the physical landscape of their community. Studying scenes of cooperative members' daily lives reveals an accretion of ongoing political activity that contributes to a genealogy of social protest and grassroots mobilization. My dissertation offers a new, on-the-ground perspective on how cooperatives remold communities to reflect and strengthen a larger ethical project of societal transformation in modern America.

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## Introduction

New Orleans is hailed for its wealth of beautifully preserved French Quarter townhouses, stately Uptown and Garden District mansions, and restored Creole shotgun homes, all bolstering the city's well-cultivated image as a romantic, exotic, and deeply authentic place "where magic runs deep." In one 2014 New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation commercial, a narrator intones over scenes of a couple relaxing on a French Quarter balcony that "centuries-old architecture is a backdrop for a culture so invigorating it will rouse your spirit."<sup>1</sup> Yet, while one may spend days wending along the treacherous, tree-rooted brick sidewalks in Uptown and the Garden District, peeking through gates into luxurious gardens and wrap-around-porches, the city's tradition of cooperative organizing has left few historical markers.

Traversing the landscape of cooperative New Orleans requires forging a path very different from the one most tourists take from their Canal Street hotels facing the French Quarter. It requires stepping off the rattling St. Charles street car, leaving the clamor and neon lights of Bourbon Street, deviating from Magazine Street's bustling thoroughfare of trendy boutiques and bars, and skirting Jackson Square's cacophony of steamboat whistles, street performers, and palm readers, into areas often rendered blank in Fodor's tourist maps and the city's own "New Orleans: Official Guide" website. It is a different geography than is vividly celebrated in either the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation's "Follow Your NOLA," or elegiacally recalled in Spike Lee's *When the*

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<sup>1</sup> New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, "New Orleans—You're Different Here," (2011)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzaODX3KT8M>.

*Levees Broke* and David Simon's *Tremé*. To glimpse the cooperative geography is to look both into the past and forward into the future of grassroots social protest.

### **Cooperatives and the Tourist Economy**

In many ways, cooperative New Orleans is antithetical to the image of a teeming, vibrant, and illicit city plastered across travel magazines, *American Horror Story: Coven*, *Interview with the Vampire*, and a host of other pop culture ephemera. While active before the Civil War, the cooperatives in my study emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, in tandem with the rise of New Orleans' salacious regional reputation.<sup>2</sup> For over a century, New Orleans cooperatives have consistently protested the ways in which industrial capitalism has embedded classed and raced inequality into the city's geography.<sup>3</sup> For example, in 1897, members of the cross-class and racially integrated Brotherhood of Co-operative Commonwealth resided and socialized in Tremé, close to the recently established Storyville, a lurid destination for regional tourists and residents indulging in vice and prostitution.<sup>4</sup> The cooperative denounced commercial elites who spurred economic development by systematically dismantling both urban labor unions and the system of patronage the working-class relied upon to exert political influence.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Anthony J. Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 5-11.

3 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

4 Karl F. Seidman, *Coming Home to New Orleans: Neighborhood Rebuilding After Katrina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 199; Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*, 105-106.

5 Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 44.

After World War I, as Americans tired of political, religious, and cultural conservatism that had long branded cities as licentious and dangerous, and tourism itself became democratized, New Orleans began cultivating a mass tourist-based economy in earnest.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the city paid off its Reconstruction debts and experienced a period of unprecedented economic growth; over the next 20 years, municipal government aligned with local businessmen to initiate a massive public works program that would attract outside investment and modernize the city.<sup>7</sup> Yet as New Orleans failed to secure industrial contracts on the scale of Atlanta or Dallas, it increasingly marketed its historic architecture and diverse culture as the cornerstone of its tourist economy.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, during the 1910s and 1920s, the Housewives' League, a Progressive organization of middle-class white women, attacked both the emerging tourist economy and industrial capitalist logic it felt exploited women consumers. For example, despite the city's desire to become a preeminent southern film production hub, the League helped launch a coalition of women's groups that censored movies it feared damaged viewers' moral character.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, a national consumers' movement coalesced to protest a pervasive corporate logic that had resulted in rapid inflation and

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6 Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*, 5-11.

7 Corrine M. McConaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America: A Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 2013), 187; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 236.

8 J. Mark Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of the Crescent City* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 16.

9 Isabella Jaye, "New Orleans Association of Commerce," *Media NOLA: A Project of Tulane University* (April 8, 2013). <http://medianola.org/discover/place/976/New-Orleans-Association-of-Commerce>; "Parents Condemn Movie Thrillers," *Times Picayune* (June 26, 1921): 14; Allison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1997).

ballooning consumer prices after World War I.<sup>10</sup> Middle-class women viewed themselves as ethical consumers who would reform working conditions for women and children and lobby for protective legislation that would democratize government and economic systems. To that end, the League opened a cooperative grocery store as a politicized space explicitly at odds with local commercial and government goals to attract outside corporate investment while raising consumer prices. Uniting with labor unions, Populists, Progressive reformers, and Socialists, female-run consumer cooperatives dedicated themselves to physically constructing a more ethical world.

Subsequent cooperatives have also struggled to fairly distribute economic resources within their communities, force municipal governments to respond to marginalized citizens, and equalize class, gender, and racial relations within the city. By constructing new sites of ethical production and consumption, cooperatives attempt to humanize citizens' daily encounters with each other and their built environment.

### **Argument**

The modern cooperative movement began in 1855 in Rochdale, England, when displaced tradesmen, responding to the Industrial Revolution and its proletarianization of skilled labor, opened a cooperative store to sell goods they otherwise could not afford.<sup>11</sup> The store's member-owners guided its actions and shared equally in its profits. The Rochdale model inspired thousands of Britons and Americans seeking an egalitarian

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10 Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

11 Charles Pierce LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound, 1885-1915* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 117.

corrective to economic and political inequality. Yet cooperative leagues often view the South as the last frontier of cooperative organizing, casting the region as historically impoverished, backward, and in need of external uplift. For example, writing in the 1940s, cooperative proponent Ruth Morton characterized the South as an alien country; northern activists were ill equipped to confront the “rural provincialism of the South” and “a type of poverty unknown in the industrial and agricultural North.”<sup>12</sup> In order to allow the “common man [to attain] his democratic ideal,” the national cooperative movement must “embed” cooperative principles “in the thinking of [southern] people.”

Similarly, historians generally characterize Louisiana’s cooperative movement in two ways: fractured, short-lived, and rooted in rural communities, or as a cipher for other, more established social movements. Yet my dissertation argues that the urban South, specifically New Orleans, has been integral to the U.S. cooperative movement since the Civil War, when black and ethnic New Orleanians began organizing themselves into informal cooperatives such as social aid and pleasure clubs—mutual associations that provide insurance and funeral services to impoverished neighborhood residents. Despite their invisibility, the city’s Creole of color cooperatives have long been critical advocates of black political equality and economic independence: Nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American intellectuals have relied on the support networks of European, African, and Caribbean mutual aid and secret societies, cooperative enterprise, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth A. Morton, letter to Ed Yeomans, 28 Nov. 1940, 3, folder 2, box 1, Southeastern Cooperative League Records, 1939-1952, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, North Carolina, NC. Hereafter cited as SCL Records.

utopian communalists to craft an egalitarian society embodying French democratic ideals.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, these cooperative institutions nourished democratic and participatory cultural and musical forms such as brass bands, second lines, and Mardi Gras Indian performances that constitute the backbone of the city's tourism economy. As a regional banking, shipping, legal, and intellectual center with deep cooperative roots, New Orleans represents as a cosmopolitan, not provincial, center of cooperative activism.

My dissertation investigates the development of New Orleanian cooperatives from the 1890s to the present, examining their confrontation with capitalism and its fraught connections to race, class, and gender. Whether rooted in local black benevolent associations, labor unions, or housewives' leagues, cooperative organizers have positioned New Orleans as a moral battleground on which they would vanquish callous economic individualism. Scholars such as Robin D.G. Kelley, Adam Fairclough, and Hasan Kwame Jeffries have argued that working-class black community organizations have served as recruiting and mobilization channels for a mass-based civil rights movement.<sup>14</sup> While indebted to this scholarly tradition, I contend that rather than existing as mere precursors to established social movements, New Orleans cooperatives

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13 Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2005); Gilles Vandal, "Black Utopia in Early Reconstruction New Orleans: The People's Bakery," *Louisiana History* 38, no. 4 (Autumn 1997); Jossianna Arroyo, *Writing Secrecy in Caribbean Freemasonry* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Shirley Thompson, *Exiles at Home* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

14 Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University, 2009); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

subscribed to their own project of social, economic, and political transformation that at once dovetailed with and transcended these social movements' specific demands.

I rely upon the rich archival record of cooperative organizing, oral history interviews with modern cooperatives, and discourse analysis to advance three related arguments: 1) New Orleans cooperatives have appropriated the national cooperative movement's economic, ethical, and political theories as they challenge the perceived rapaciousness of modern industrial capitalism. 2) Operating within New Orleans' unique geographic, cultural, economic, and political context, cooperatives have also drawn on home-grown ethical and religious traditions to establish their credibility and address neighborhoods' specific needs. 3) Even though they have been impacted by national economic and political trends, New Orleans cooperatives have built ethical enterprises that have concretely reshaped neighborhood and civic life in uniquely local ways.

By examining labor, political, and consumer contributions to cooperative history, my dissertation thus studies both the particularity of New Orleans cooperatives and the general characteristics of cooperative development to theorize how cooperatives adapt national imperatives to local conditions. For example, New Orleans cooperatives inspired by Edward Bellamy and Socialist communitarianism aligned with national political figures such as Jacob Coxey and Eugene V. Debs to envision egalitarian relations between labor and capital. At the same time, however, by working, socializing, and residing in racially diverse Creole of color and Cuban communities, cooperative activists were also forged out of neighborhood institutions and answerable to

neighborhood constituents. Therefore, I chart the intensely local, lived experience of social movements to understand how social change happens and the role of cooperatives in structural transformation.

I also explore the shifting and unexpected alliances upon which New Orleans cooperatives have historically depended in order to create a new moral economy. For instance, during the 1940s, Popular Front activists, black and white Freret Neighborhood residents, and unionized barbers formed a grocery cooperative that vocally critiqued corporate capitalism while participating in an international peace movement. The cooperative also looked to regional and national cooperative leagues for vital organizational support, even as it struggled to fill local patrons' needs.

At the same time, my study is cognizant of the limits of cooperative transformation. Although successive generations of cross-class and multiethnic cooperatives have coalesced around common experiences of economic and political disempowerment, most ultimately failed to bridge their members' socioeconomic differences or thrive within a deeply racist and classist society. For instance, continued economic depression and rising immigration rates dissolved the integrated 1890s Socialist cooperative as white members asserted racial privilege over their African American peers in order to claim scarce employment opportunities. Years later, during 1940s, Socialist consumer cooperatives struggled to retain working-class members most interested in cheap food, while continuing to espouse political and economic revolution. Simultaneously, white patrons fled the cooperative in the face of creeping neighborhood disinvestment and shifting



racial demographic patterns. This dissertation therefore examines the point of rupture for utopian cooperative enterprise.

While my dissertation highlights New Orleans' contribution to U.S. cooperative and social movements, it rethinks cooperative development in general. Following Henri Lefebvre's theory of dialectical social relations, I argue that the physical form cities take is shaped by the dynamic interaction between the "perceived space" of people's everyday social practices and understanding of their neighborhood, the "conceived space" of city planners' development goals, and a more transcendent "lived space" in which activists and residents creatively imagine an alternative to current land use policies. As Lefebvre and others have argued, to alter inequitable social relations and economic structures that underpin urban development plans, citizens must organize and act collectively.<sup>15</sup>

To that end, using the methodological interventions of gender studies, cultural geography, oral history, and critical race theory, I contend that a community's gender, race, and class ideologies affect cooperatives' ability to implement democratic economic alternatives, while cooperatives' moral economy is also inscribed on the physical landscape of their neighborhood. A long historical view demonstrates that cooperatives can change how citizens physically experience their neighborhood: how and where they shop, live, work, and play, and the social interactions that govern resident experiences. Studying the conduct of people's daily lives reveals an accretion of ongoing political

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<sup>15</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26; Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984); Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*; Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

activity that contributes to a genealogy of social protest and grassroots mobilization. My dissertation offers a new, on-the-ground perspective on how cooperatives have remolded communities to reflect a larger ethical project of societal transformation. Ultimately, my dissertation engages the most enduring questions about cooperative efficacy: are cooperatives a fundamental critique of markets and ownership, or are they a temporary form of resistance, subject to the caprice of economic and political forces?

### **Geographic Erasure**

Fundamentally opposed to an economy built around tourism and conspicuous consumption, cooperatives rarely survive the ravages of time. First, New Orleans bills itself on its authenticity: its heady mix of black, French, Spanish, and Anglo influences are written into architecture, food, and music waiting to be consumed and enjoyed.<sup>16</sup> As one 2013 commercial claims, New Orleans is “the most fun and authentic city in America, y’all!”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, cooperatives have largely rejected the traditions of exclusion and inequality that built the city’s economy; they have adopted both indigenous cooperative practices and modern business models as they attempt to transform political and economic structures. To black, immigrant, female, and Jewish activists, New Orleans’ traditions were built on gender, class, and racial exclusion and must be overhauled in order to create a truly egalitarian society.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, unlike popular representations of New Orleans, which, as historian Jonathan Mark Souther observes,

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<sup>16</sup> Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau, “New Orleans— You’re Different Here.”

<sup>18</sup> Louisiana Communist Party, flyer, “One City Park For All,” 14 August 1952, Vertical File: Communist Party, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

portray the city as “a relict village still basking in the glow of a bygone era,” cooperatives looked forward to a utopian future as they reformed contemporary society.<sup>19</sup> In reimagining ideal economic and political relations, cooperatives cared less about wooing investors and tourists to a city they felt was fundamentally corrupt, than about making New Orleans sustainable and responsive to its most vulnerable residents.

Second, cooperative activists are rarely nostalgic about cultural traditions and economic systems from which they have been consistently excluded. A mix of immigrants, migrants, and marginalized native New Orleanians, cooperative activists often occupied the edges of society and constantly battled accusations of communism or foreign instigation in order to successfully democratize political and economic structures. Because they addressed residents’ daily needs rather than tourists’ desire for novelty and amusement, cooperatives frequently either existed deep within low-income neighborhoods or, in the case of cooperative breweries, bakeries, slaughterhouses, laundries, and factories, occupied the outskirts of the city in its manufacturing districts. Women, poor whites, and African Americans often lacked the capital necessary to invest in anything other than converted warehouses, shabby grocery stores, or members’ homes. Already financially unstable, most cooperatives shuttered when larger conglomerates undercut sales or weakened their sponsoring unions.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> “By Way of Comment,” *Times Picayune* (November 6, 1921): 46; Ad, “A Clean Cut Non-Speculative Investment: Peoples Co-operative Laundry, Inc.,” *Times Picayune* (June 20, 1920): 11; “Peonage in Laundries,” *The Garment Worker* 21 (April 28, 1922): 8; “Heads of Laundry Plants Charged with Conspiracy,” *Times Picayune* (September 27, 1922): 1; “Consumers’ Brewery Winding Up Business,” *Times Picayune* (November 3, 1921): 2.

Given cooperatives' oppositional politics, their physical erasure reflects the constant struggle between grassroots countercultural community organizations and a capitalist regime built on racial, class, gender exclusions. For example, the three-story cooperative sewing factory that female Knights of Labor unionists opened in 1882 is now the site of the upscale Shops at Canal Place.<sup>21</sup> Further, in the 1920s, Globe Hall, the site of Cuban, European, and Afro-Caribbean cooperative organizing, was demolished along with a large swath of Tremé's historic buildings to build a civic center. It would be one of hundreds of culturally significant African American institutions, businesses, and residences that city officials and developers would raze to construct highways, segregated public housing, and other ill-funded municipal projects.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, existing on the geographic and socioeconomic margins, cooperatives occupied neither "authentic" nor aesthetically appealing structures deemed worthy of preservation.

### **Archival Invisibility**

Cooperatives' physical erasure is compounded by their archival invisibility. As enterprises formed by marginalized and often despised groups, few records of New Orleans cooperatives remain. Unlike carefully preserved government, commercial, or institutional papers, cooperative records exist on the edges of the archive, either jumbled among various actors' much larger repositories, or buried within newspaper editorials, notarial records, voting and marriage receipts, mayoral publicity photos, and lawyers'

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21 "Woman's World and Work," *Daily Picayune* (November 13, 1887): 10; Edwin Whitfield Fay and William Preston Johnson, *The History of Education in Louisiana* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898), 179.

22 Seidman, *Coming Home to New Orleans*, 199-200.

documents. They surface briefly in institutional encounters and are therefore interpreted through institutional lenses. Consequently, an entire history of grassroots organizing seems unrecoverable and unknowable.

Therefore, despite New Orleans cooperatives' persistent opposition to exploitative political and economic institutions, southern social movement historians have too heavily depended on evidence of traditional institution building. Scholars tend to overlook the influence cooperatives have had on social movement formation, even though, for example, many civil rights organizations' explicit cooperative and democratic structure framed their political goals. Others subsume cooperatives within larger social movement history rather than discuss cooperatives as separate entities with their own goals and philosophical grounding. For instance, in his analysis of Alabaman rural black mutual aid societies, social historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries argues that cooperatives served as recruiting channels for formal civil rights mobilization, thereby transforming local, informal protest into a "sustained, organized, public effort to secure freedom rights."<sup>23</sup> In contrast, I argue that preexisting New Orleanian cooperative traditions and outside forces combined to create a unique political apparatus pressing for extensive social change.<sup>24</sup>

To do so, I trace the continuity between New Orleans cooperatives, labor unions, Socialists, African Americans, and women to draw a more complete portrait of the city's legacy of cooperative economics. Scholars have paid little attention to cooperative

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 41-48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

contributions to Louisiana's labor movement.<sup>25</sup> While David Roediger examines Socialist firebrand Covington Hall's dual involvement in interracial labor organizing and cooperative labor education from the early 1900s to the 1930s, labor historians have missed the interconnections between Louisiana's Socialist and cooperative activists.<sup>26</sup>

Daniel Rosenberg and Eric Arnesen have exhaustively documented New Orleans dockworkers' unions and the racial collaboration that enabled them to organize massive strikes in the early 1900s, but they do not mention that cooperatives formed out of union benevolent societies and helped finance the labor movement.<sup>27</sup> For instance, during a series of tumultuous New Orleans brewery workers strikes in 1902 and 1907, the Consumers' Brewery Cooperative was one of the only breweries to sell union beer and employ union labor.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, between the Great Depression and World War II, the New Orleans Socialist Party collaborated with radical unions and cooperative leagues as part of a Popular Front effort to end class disparity in the city, state, and nation.

As Arnesen himself observes, the scant scholarship on urban Louisiana labor reflects both the shrinking influence of labor unions and the fact that Louisiana's labor

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25 John Curl, *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009).

26 Covington Hall, *Labor Struggles in the Deep South and Other Writings*, ed. David R. Roediger (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1999), 1; Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism 1892-1923* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1988).

27 "The Mill Hands' Strike May Result in the Interesting Experiment of a Co-operative Factory," *Daily Picayune* (March 20, 1897): 10.

28 "Seventy Saloonkeepers Give Warning That They May Seek Beer Elsewhere," *Times Picayune* (July 23, 1901): 3.

history refuses to “conform to established paradigms.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as marginal enterprises struggling to survive, cooperatives depended on surprising and sometimes confounding alliances that could be explicitly at odds with their stated ethical principles and overall mission. How does one make sense of the Brotherhood of Co-operative Commonwealth (BCC), for example, which in 1897 vigorously denounced capitalism while simultaneously courting economic leaders for employment? Likewise, cooperatives’ broad self-definition makes them difficult to historically identify and describe; in the case of the BCC, the cooperative evolved from a utopian socialist experiment into an unemployed workers’ labor union, while working with striking trade unions to establish cooperative factories to compete with former employers.

Similarly, although women were at the forefront of national consumer protest, little has been written about southern women’s cooperative organizing, much less how their campaign to purify capitalism intersected with suffrage, temperance, or progressive reforms. Casting the suffrage movement as isolated, class-bound, and racist, historians like Pamela Tyler argue that Louisiana’s female political activism dissipated after the ratification of the federal suffrage amendment in 1920.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, scholars of Louisiana overlook the diversity of female activists and concrete cross-class alliances.

In contrast, Ellen Blue and Landon Storrs examine women’s clubs beyond explicitly suffragist-identified organizations to present a more nuanced portrait of female

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29 Eric Arnesen, “The Peculiar Waterfront: The Crescent City and the Rewriting of the History of Race and Labor in the United States,” in *Working in the Big Easy: The History and Politics of Labor in New Orleans*, ed. Thomas J. Adams (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2014), 28-31.

30 Pamela Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes: Women & Politics in New Orleans, 1920–1963* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

New Orleanian economic and political cooperation. Blue argues that the Progressive settlement home movement encouraged white middle-class women to experiment in communal living, collaborate with working-class women, and eventually push for civil rights and other political reformist projects well into the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, analyzing the National Consumers' League, Storrs contends interwar southern members not only existed outside aristocratic planter-elite class governing southern social hierarchies, but they also sometimes espoused explicitly Socialist and anti-capitalist ideology.<sup>32</sup> Further, if one explores women's consumer activism and the constellation of related organizations, female political networks flourished long after 1920.

Consumer activism has been a primary site of grassroots organizing for women from a range of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> Their cooperative politics made female organizers key allies of New Deal consumer agencies, which embraced cooperative economics to control the vagaries of the market. As consumers mobilized to provide a range of cooperative utilities, financial, and medical services, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt lent consumer activists credibility by promoting cooperative grocery and retail stores to rehabilitate the plummeting economy.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, looking at the cooperative careers of individual women rather than only their cooperatives' fleeting

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31 Ellen Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans, 1865-1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011).

32 Landon Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' Leagues, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

33 Curl, *For All the People*.

34 Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).



institutional presence reveals the persistence of cooperative enterprise as a strategy for community-driven political and economic transformation.

One of the most explicit examples of the physical and historical erasure of New Orleans cooperatives is the Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association, which, between 1894 and 1967, served as a nexus for black cooperative and civil rights organizing in New Orleans' Tremé Neighborhood.<sup>35</sup> Confining its services to the Catholic Creoles of color residing in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, the Juvenile Co-operators operated within a black world bounded by religion and place. Operating during a time when African Americans had little access to reliable and affordable healthcare, the Juvenile Co-operators provided health insurance, medical care, funeral services, and pensions to black members under the age of 25.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, it strengthened the African American Seventh Ward community by improving the neighborhood's health, supporting its businesses, and promoting civil rights.

Although the Juvenile Co-operators were deeply imbedded in the economic, political, and social fabric of Tremé' for 70 years, there are few physical reminders of its presence. Historians have noted that black cooperatives like the Juvenile Co-operators largely disappeared by the late 1960s, coinciding with the rise of affordable life and health insurance for African Americans.<sup>37</sup> Yet there is another, overlooked, reason for

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35 Michael E. Crutcher, *Tremé: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 52; "Historical Notes," 2-3, box 1, Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association Records, Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana. Hereafter cited as JCFBMA Records.

36 "Historical Notes," 2, box 1, JCFBMA Records.

37 *Ibid.*, 3.

black cooperatives' decline in the 1960s: the erection of Interstate Highway 10 through North Claiborne Avenue, the main commercial thoroughfare of Tremé's independent black businesses and cooperatives.<sup>38</sup> Scholar Michael Crutcher links the broader backlash against the civil rights movement to large-scale urban renewal projects; taking advantage of inner city residents' lack of political clout, high-level transportation officials promoted public road and slum clearance projects as serving the social good, while decimating black communities across the country.<sup>39</sup> Former resident Harvey Reed argues that while Tremé residents were "waiting for civil rights, [white officials] were cutting off communities for commerce."<sup>40</sup>

Prior to the interstate's construction, hundreds of oak trees lined the neutral ground dividing Claiborne Avenue, from St. Bernard Avenue to Orleans Avenue.<sup>41</sup> In addition to functioning as a vibrant social and economic hub, the wide street also enjoyed speedy and efficient mass transit, connecting Tremé to the rest of the city. However, in 1956, the Department of Transportation and Bureau of Governmental Research and the New Orleans Central Area Committee proposed building a raised highway along the Mississippi River connecting the Central Business District to the outer suburbs.<sup>42</sup> Part of the highway would run along Claiborne Avenue, bisecting Sixth Ward black

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38 Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 23.

39 Crutcher, Tremé, 50, 58; Reed, interview with author.

40 Reed, interview with author.

41 Crutcher, Tremé, 52-53.

42 Ibid., 59.

communities.<sup>43</sup> Officials argued that the plan would curb urban decay and its attendant social evils by demolishing pockets of inner city black neighborhoods, and promoting free-flowing transportation and commerce in and out of the city. After the highway proposal was approved in 1957, the city and developers began acquiring property along Claiborne without consulting affected Tremé citizens.<sup>44</sup> Reed recalls that on a Sunday morning on August 1, 1966, city workers finally began uprooting 500 oak trees along Claiborne “while everyone was in church. It was like a military operation.”<sup>45</sup>

The result of the highway, Reed remembers, was the swift decline of his community.<sup>46</sup> The interstate was completed in April 1968, but not before demolishing 125 buildings and displacing 170 residents and 50 businesses.<sup>47</sup> Long-term construction closed off access to Claiborne’s black-owned businesses, and residents were forced to shop at Canal Street after these businesses relocated or were shuttered for good. Further, integration of businesses and public spaces also encouraged black consumers to shop downtown, which sped the dispersal of black commercial districts. While national citizen protest eventually led to the passage of the Federal Highway Act of 1968, which banned highways from displacing residents without providing replacement housing, the damage to the Sixth and Seventh Ward black community was irrevocable. Their inability to

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43 Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape of New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 201-210.

44 Crutcher, *Tremé*, 60.

45 Ibid.; Reed, interview with author.

46 Reed, interview with author.

47 Crutcher, *Tremé*, 60-64.

effectively protest the highway clearly revealed to black residents the extent of government neglect and the need for community action to redress systemic inequity.

While the Juvenile Co-operators' offices no longer dot Tremé, the legacy of cooperative organizing lives on in residents its support network deeply touched. Indeed, as historian Jessica Gordon Nembhard argues, post-Civil War mutual aid and benevolent societies offering social welfare services to fellow African Americans directly influenced citywide consumer cooperatives dedicated to black self-determination, and, eventually, civil rights organizations pressing for national political and economic justice.<sup>48</sup>

### **Cooperatives and Urban Protest**

Examining the working-class African American neighborhood of Central City and its cooperative history is akin to slicing an onion to reveal its separate but multi-layered membranes; over the course of 50 years, Central City's public housing has been a locus for creative and cooperative innovation to ensure community survival. Black music cooperatives link New Orleans' heritage of innovative, egalitarian cultural production to the principles of the national cooperative movement so that vulnerable citizens can assert economic and political power.

For example, growing up in the Magnolia housing project in the 1940s and 1950s, jazz musician Harold Battiste often snuck into the seminal black entertainment venue Dew Drop Inn at Washington Street and La Salle Avenue to hear local and national

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<sup>48</sup> Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

rhythm ‘n’ blues and rock ‘n’ roll acts.<sup>49</sup> Converting to the Nation of Islam in the mid-1950s, Battiste would apply its theory of black cooperative economics both to a racially discriminatory record industry and the New Orleans’ black community in general.<sup>50</sup> Despite its vibrant music scene, Central City was in dire need of community-led revitalization. In 1960, the New Orleans Consumer League and Oretha Castle Haley boycotted white Central City businesses that refused to hire African Americans.<sup>51</sup> Most white businesses closed rather than employ black staff, leaving storefronts vacant.

To stimulate the neighborhood’s shrinking economy, in 1961 Battiste incorporated All For One Records (AFO) and At Last Publishing. He explicitly connected community economic cooperation and black musical creativity, identifying with Elijah Muhammad’s speeches “that often spoke to the need for our people to create wealth through ownership. It seemed that every ethnic group was identified with a product or service that they owned and controlled, and it seemed that the product generally attributed to us was music: jazz, blues, R&B, gospel.”<sup>52</sup> Battiste recruited New Orleans luminaries like Barbara George and Prince Lala, “the then current crop of...world class musicians who might [otherwise] go unheard of among all the tasty flavors in the Gumbo.”<sup>53</sup>

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49 David Kunian, “Dew Drop Inn” (March 28, 2103), KnowLA, <http://www.knowla.org/entry/1465/>; John Sinclair, “Harold Battiste: Prophet with Honor in His Own Land,” (1 February 2006), John Sinclair, <http://johnsinclair.us/writings/20-features/751-harold-battiste-prophet-with-honor-in-his-own-land.html>.

50 Ibid.

51 Clyde Woods, “Katrina’s World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (September 2009): 442.

52 Harold Battiste, *Unfinished Blues: Memories of a New Orleans Music Man* (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2010).

53 A.F.O. Records (All For One), email, [n.d.], folder 17, box 4, Harold Battiste Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

AFO cooperative members waived payment for sessions but became co-owners of their recordings and received percentage of the company's earnings.<sup>54</sup> The policy was much better than flat rate American Federation of Musicians session fee of \$45, regardless of the musician's contribution and the record's success. At Last Publishing also supervised recording sessions' musical arrangements, orchestrations, musicians, and studio set-up.<sup>55</sup> AFO hoped to create a black "conglomerate entertainment enterprise" that included recording, theater bookings, and management services.

Nonetheless, when AFO folded in 1963, Central City continued to decline. White flight to the suburbs accelerated urban decay, as did manufacturing companies' exodus to surrounding parishes.<sup>56</sup> In response, black liberationist collectives joined traditional social aid and pleasure clubs and the civil rights movement to cultivate black self-reliance.<sup>57</sup> For example, Black Panthers criticized capitalism and strove for economic and political self-determination within African American communities.<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, Black Panthers' economic empowerment programs established free clinics, community centers, and free breakfast programs as cooperative social services in the Ninth Ward's Desire

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54 Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 255-256.

55 "Tentative Brochure," 17 October 1961, folder 10, box 4, Battiste Papers.

56 Amy Liu and Bruce Katz, "Katrina is Everywhere: Lessons from the Gulf Coast," in *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis*, ed. Pavel, M. Paloma (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 81-94.

57 Wright, "New Orleans"; Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).

58 Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.

Housing Projects.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, despite police surveillance and a state congressional probe into black Muslims' "subversive" activities, New Orleanian chapters in the Ninth Ward and in Central City near the Magnolia Housing Project owned a cooperative bakery, fish market, and a restaurant, as they strove to achieve greater neighborhood self-sufficiency.<sup>60</sup> As George Mariscal observes, by forging a collective identity in response to local and external pressures, 1960s and 1970s grassroots activists created a "diffuse movement" devoted to a "wide range of social projects, from ethnic separatism to socialist internationalism, from electoral politics to institutional reform and even armed insurrection."<sup>61</sup>

Further, cooperatives continued to organize black musicians and cultural performers living in public housing projects and low-income neighborhoods. For example, between 1963 and the mid-1970s, the cultural liberationist Free Southern Theater Collective (FST) wedded radical communal performance to political action.<sup>62</sup> The cooperative provided professional development for black New Orleans creative

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59 Arend, *Showdown in Desire*; Rosemary C.R. Taylor, "Free Medicine," in *Co-ops, Communes and Collectives: Experiments in Social Change in the 1960s and 1970s*, eds. John Case and Rosemary C.R. Taylor (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 21.

60 The Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities, State of Louisiana, *Report No. 3: "Activities of 'The Nation of Islam' or the Muslim Cult of Islam, in Louisiana"* (January 9, 1963), 84; Priscilla McCutcheon, "Community Food Security 'For Us, By Us': The Nation of Islam and the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge 2013), 574; "The History of the Nation of Islam in New Orleans," NOI New Orleans, accessed on October 1, 2014, [http://noineworleans.org/news/back\\_issues/history.html](http://noineworleans.org/news/back_issues/history.html).

61 George Mariscal, *Brown Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 3-9.

62 Samori Sekou Camara, "'There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters in New Orleans': The Black Power Movement in the Crescent City from 1964-1977" (PhD diss, The University of Texas at Austin, 2011); Jan Cohen-Cruz, "'Comforting the Afflicted and Afflicting the Comfortable': The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater," in *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies*, eds. James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

writers and playwrights and collaborated with like-minded black collectives to perform and publish their work.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in 1969 FST directors organized BLCKARTSOUTH, a writing lab for southern black writers headquartered across the street from the Ninth Ward's Desire Housing Project.<sup>64</sup> It published members' works in its literary journal and workshopped their poetry and plays for the FST and national theater companies to perform. By enabling performers to retain creative control over their art, the FST pushed New Orleans to the vanguard of the Black Arts movement.<sup>65</sup>

Across the city, community cooperatives and civil rights organizations continued to work together to reverse the effects of white flight and urban decay. For example, Office of Equal Opportunities (OEO) administrator J. Baker believed that "the only solution for poor folk was to [establish] co-ops with competent management."<sup>66</sup> Over white conservative politicians' objections, the OEO organized urban credit unions throughout New Orleans as community-led antipoverty measures.<sup>67</sup>

While War on Poverty administrators celebrated self-help cooperatives as tools to achieve broad-scale political and economic change, in New Orleans, young black and white civil rights organizers also embraced cooperatives as integral to achieving a

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63 Pamphlet, "Dashiki Project Theatre," (1972), 1, folder 10, box 188, Tom Dent Papers 1861-1998,

Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. Hereafter cited as Tom Dent Papers.

64 Free Southern Theater, press release, "BLCKARTSOUTH Workshop Organized in New Orleans," 1 Jul. 1969, folder 28, box 4, Nkombo Publications Records, 1968-1974. Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. Hereafter cited as Nkombo Records.

65 Free Southern Theater, Basic Program Guidelines (December 1976), folder 42, box 26, John O'Neal Papers, 1927-1999, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. Hereafter cited as O'Neal Papers; Pamphlet, "Dashiki Project Theatre," (1972): 1.

66 Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 308.

67 "Credit Unions to Have Program," *Times Picayune* (January 6, 1967): 16.



beloved community.<sup>68</sup> For instance, moving to New Orleans after assisting desegregation efforts in rural Louisiana, VISTA volunteer Robert Ferris started a countercultural commune and cooperative school for impoverished African Americans in order to “effect major change in our society...in my own backyard.”<sup>69</sup> Many white New Left collectives sympathized with women’s liberation, labor union strikes, anti-imperialist struggles in developing countries, as well as “the people of the black and brown and red communities within the U.S.” organizing “to seize control of their own communities.”<sup>70</sup> By the 1970s, countercultural cooperatives studded the city, ranging from community bookstores and alternative presses, to food co-ops and childcare centers.

However, by the 1970s, New Orleans’ demographic patterns again shifted as growing numbers of professionals were drawn to new finance, real estate, and insurance jobs and inexpensive housing in the city center.<sup>71</sup> African American enclaves in the Central Business District, the lower Garden District, and Old Algiers became sites of white preservation activism and simultaneously, gentrification.<sup>72</sup> While revitalizing

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68 Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23.

69 Robert M. Ferris, *Flood of Conflict: the New Orleans Free School Story* (Roslyn Heights, NY: Alternative Education Resource Organization, 2012), 36.

70 Revolutionary Youth Movement, pamphlet, “Rising Up Angry,” vertical file, political organizations, Revolutionary Youth Movement, Howard Tilton Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. For a history of Louisiana cooperative and civil rights organizing, see Greta de Jong, *Invisible Enemy: The African American Freedom Struggle After 1965* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); John Zippert, interviewed by Greta de Jong, 28 June 1998, Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

71 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 38.

72 Beverly Hendrix Wright, “New Orleans: A City That Care Forgot,” in *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 56; Lawrence Knopp, “Some Theoretical Implications of Gay Involvement in

disinvested communities can certainly benefit neighborhoods by diminishing crime, increasing city services, and refurbishing aging housing stock, New Orleans boosters often had shallow aims: to develop amenity-adjacent neighborhoods and spur tourism at the expense of low-income residents of color.<sup>73</sup> Redevelopment not only raised property values, but increased neighborhood service rates and rental prices, consequently displacing renters, poor and elderly residents, and minorities.<sup>74</sup>

At the same time, community opposition to redevelopment stalled as the Housing Authority of New Orleans and the Department of Housing and Urban Development began demolishing low-income housing projects under the HOPE VI Program to eradicate crime in impoverished neighborhoods.<sup>75</sup> In Central City, the St. Thomas Housing Project was almost entirely razed by the late 1990s. The George W. Bush administration further accelerated gentrification and displacement in Central City.<sup>76</sup> Despite community efforts to place the Magnolia Housing Project on the national historic register and attract tourism and investment to the nearby Dew Drop Inn historical site,

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an Urban Land Market,” *Political Geography Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (October 1990): 337-352; Mark Gottdiener and Leslie Budd, *Key Concepts in Urban Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

73 Community Affairs Offices of the Federal Reserve System and the Brookings Institution, “Austin, Texas: The East Austin Neighborhood,” in *The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America: Case Studies from Communities Across the U.S* (2006): 93. [http://www.frbsf.org/community-development/files/cp\\_fullreport.pdf](http://www.frbsf.org/community-development/files/cp_fullreport.pdf).

74 Gottdiener and Budd, *Key Concepts in Urban Studies*, 33-34; Richard Campanella, interview with author, July 9, 2012.

75 Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana, 2008), 183.

76 Campanella, interview with author.

Republican campaign contributor McCormack Baron Salizar nonetheless bulldozed the complex and erected mixed-income units housing a minority of its previous residents.<sup>77</sup>

### **Tourism and Gentrification After Hurricane Katrina**

Today, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the city's tourist economy is more powerful than ever, rewriting the historical narrative of the city and remolding its physical geography. The representation of New Orleans broadcasted to outside markets is one of nostalgia, erotic desires, and perpetual leisure, while the daily practices of the city's denizens are rendered invisible. For example, in the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation's 2014 commercial, "Follow Your NOLA," images of iconic fleur-de-lis-shaped waffles and snowballs flash on screen, portraying New Orleans as a site of colorful consumption that can literally be devoured.<sup>78</sup> Black New Orleans r'n'b, jazz, and brass band music provide a cheerful, decontextualized soundtrack for French Quarter tourists' commodified pleasure. However, what the commercials skillfully elide is one of the greatest horrors of Hurricane Katrina: its brutal exposure of systematic racism and classism imbedded in the legacy of economic and political policies that structure residents' lived experiences. Ironically, New Orleans boosters celebrate the city's black cultural traditions while rhetorically and physically obscuring the legacy of racial and class inequality and segregation that still shapes practitioners' daily lives.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 18; Sally Stevens, interview with author, June 27, 2012. Cooperative Oral History Project.

<sup>78</sup> GoNOLA, Follow Your NOLA—Discover Your New Orleans, video, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIBYy0ntWak>.

<sup>79</sup> Eric Porter and Lewis Watts, *New Orleans Suite: Music and Culture in Transition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 28.

Critics charge that City rebuilding efforts have concentrated primarily on improving the tourist and service industry by expanding shopping centers, rehabilitating high trafficked tourist areas, and redeveloping the Mississippi riverfront rather than rehousing vulnerable residents.<sup>80</sup> Further, the City continues to drastically reduce its affordable housing stock where performers and service workers largely reside. Finally, expanding gentrification into black working-class neighborhoods threatens to displace low-income renters. For example, the Felicity Group, Garden District investors, has been drawing affluent residents into Central City for several years.<sup>81</sup> Community activist Damia Khanboubi observes that as the neighborhood began to feel safer, it became a magnet for artists, non-profit organizations, and upscale development. Consequently, gentrifying neighborhood rental prices have jumped 25 percent, and because New Orleanians' average income is a third lower than the national average, more than half of the city's population cannot afford the inflated housing rates.<sup>82</sup>

Central City cooperative activists and public housing organizers argue that city administrators and developers evince a profound narrowness of vision when they tout the city's creative potential while ignoring that performers can rarely live off their creative efforts.<sup>83</sup> Second line parades and brass bands are sites of musical and performative expression that reaffirm black working-class communities and strengthen their political,

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80 Kristina Ford, *The Trouble with City Planning: What New Orleans Can Teach Us* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

81 Maureen O'Hagan, "Post-Katrina: Will New Orleans Still Be New Orleans?" The Institute for Southern Studies (April 10, 2014). <http://www.equalvoiceforfamilies.org/post-katrina-will-new-orleans-still-be-new-orleans/>.

82 Ibid.

83 Stevens, interview with author.

social, and economic networks.<sup>84</sup> For example, an entire cooperative entrepreneurial and social system of black-owned bars and other small businesses rely on the second line parades to generate reliable commerce. Cooperative activist Sally Stevens notes that “most people you see at second lines and BBQ lines, come Monday they work at catering in a hotel. They dream to get out of the hotel, they know what they want to do...and who they want to do it with. That’s what cooperation is all about.”<sup>85</sup> Consequently, cooperative organizers have easily recruited public housing residents dissatisfied with low-wage service and hospitality jobs.

Simultaneously, city administrators decry public housing residents’ supposed lack of marketable skills and conveniently conflate black musicians with the “criminal underground economy” driving violence in many New Orleans communities.<sup>86</sup> For example, although the TBC Brass Band had been continuously playing on the corner of Bourbon Street and Canal for the past nine years, in 2010 city officials barred their performances, citing noise curfew violations.<sup>87</sup> Band member Joseph Maize Jr. exclaimed, “no one is in danger out here. Everyone is having fun.” He connected the strict policing of black residents in his home, the St. Bernard Projects, to musicians’ surveillance within the French Quarter. “We are at war with ourselves,” he stated grimly. As historian Joel Dinerstein argues, the post-Katrina repression of second line parades

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84 Joel Dinerstein, “Second Lining Post-Katrina,” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (September 2009): 615-616.

85 Stevens, interview with author.

86 Ibid.

87 Gambit Weekly, “TBC Brass Band Protest” (June 16, 2010), youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn2gESJMGuc>.

and Mardi Gras Indians constitutes “aesthetic racism” by threatening not only the creative expression of working class black communities, but the possibility of rebuilding these neighborhoods as well.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast, as a form of communal expression and social critique, music cooperatives have mobilized public housing and low-income residents against underemployment, affordable housing shortages, gentrification, and other issues stemming from neoliberal economic policies. For example, in 2007 McCormack Baron Salizar formed the non-profit organization Urban Strategies to help locate and provide social services and job training for former Magnolia Public Housing residents “involuntarily displaced throughout Louisiana and neighboring by Hurricane Katrina” and now residing at the newly opened Harmony Oaks.<sup>89</sup> It neglected to note, however, that by eliminating the majority of low-income units in 2008, the developer itself provided a strong disincentive for many needy families to return to Central City.<sup>90</sup>

Simultaneously, when developers announced plans to demolish 4,600 public housing units, a coalition of community groups paraded from City Hall to the St. Bernard Public Housing Project in peaceful protest.<sup>91</sup> The “Party with a Purpose” second line danced to the Hot 8 Brass Band, and demonstrators sang, “I need my home/We need our homes/Don’t take my home away.” While police broke up the demonstration and arrested protestors after they entered the St. Bernard property, brass bands and second

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88 Dinerstein, “Second Lining Post-Katrina,” 615-616.

89 “Locations,” Urban Strategies, accessed July 9, 2014, <http://urbanstrategiesinc.org/by-location/>.

90 Stephens, interview with author.

91 “New Orleans Police Attack Peaceful March at St. Bernard,” (December 16, 2007), youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GPjNhVUzqk>.

lines, as indigenous cooperative institutions, continue to operate as a significant site of black working-class resistance.

In contrast, community-based cooperatives like Rhythm Conspiracy model how predominantly black cooperatives can help marginalized residents demand government services and direct equitable neighborhood investment.<sup>92</sup> The cooperative bridges social aid and pleasure clubs and second lines with the national cooperative movement to advocate a living wage for city musicians. In 2006, musicians from Central City's former public housing projects Magnolia, St. Thomas, and Calliope created the Rhythm Conspiracy workers cooperative to legitimize their art while also advocating affordable housing and job training in non-performing aspects of the music business, such as merchandizing, event booking, and production management. Additionally, Rhythm Conspiracy performers tour the nation to export New Orleans music to new markets.

Stevens has also formed the New Orleans Cooperative Development Project, a consortium of university professors, small business owners, economic and workforce development administrators, social aid and pleasure clubs, and citizens who democratically discuss how to expand the city's cooperative economy.<sup>93</sup> The Project mobilizes laborers across the city's service and tourist industry to press for better working conditions. Ultimately, the cooperative believes, if "significant cultural services and products are coming out of the most marginalized neighborhoods, they can't become

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<sup>92</sup> Stevens, interview with author.

<sup>93</sup> Sally Stevens, "Urban Innovation No 4: New Orleans Cooperative Development Project," Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, October 27, 2013, <http://www.icic.org/connection/blog-entry/blog-icisummit-urban-innovation-no.-4-new-orleans-cooperative-development>.

gentrified in ways that similar neighborhoods are being gentrified in cities around the country.”<sup>94</sup> By establishing a local and national framework through which public housing residents can influence economic and urban development, Rhythm Conspiracy offers a potentially transformative model for citywide cooperative development.

### **Chapter Organization**

My first chapter argues that turn-of-the-century New Orleans cooperatives, specifically, the Brotherhood of Cooperative Commonwealth (BCC), were sites of exchange and conflict between indigenous and immigrant activists. While historians have claimed that explosive racial tensions had decimated the city’s interracial labor movement in the mid- to late 1890s, the BCC bridged moments of integrated protest by providing an outlet for impoverished multiracial citizens to reclaim influence over corrupt political and economic institutions. Cuban-American Eugene Bacarrise and German August Graf co-founded the BCC in 1897 at the end of a four-year-long national depression. After organizing the Laboringman’s Protective Association as its direct action arm, the Socialist cooperative mobilized blacks, ethnic whites, and immigrants to demand unemployment benefits from the city. The BCC countered an exploitative New Orleans industrial system by promoting a Socialist society free from capitalistic competition and labor demagoguery. Drawing on Richard White’s (1991) concept of the “middle ground,” I demonstrate that black Creole, Caribbean, and European BBC

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<sup>94</sup> Stevens, interview with author.



officials used a language of inclusion and cooperation that briefly transcended racial and ethnic barriers to citywide labor organizing.

However, I also contend that persistent unemployment, a yellow fever outbreak, and lack of public legitimacy shattered BCC's nascent multiracial and multiethnic cooperative movement. By the end of 1897, the BCC had renamed itself the White Laboring Men's Protective Association, ousted its black members, and proposed barring Sicilian immigration to protect "home labor." In studying the BCC, I analyze the true cost of Southern radicals' decision to abandon their racially egalitarian "cooperative commonwealth" to instead address unemployed white laborers' short-term needs.

Chapter two examines cooperatives' sorely overlooked contributions to female political institution-building during New Orleans' interwar years. In the wake of World War I demilitarization, Americans' cost of living skyrocketed as the federal government removed wartime price controls, and expanding chain grocery stores shuttered small businesses. I argue that in response, female activists in New Orleans allied with the state apparatus and strategically deployed a rhetoric of white women's superior morality in order to demand a national cooperative economy.

Specifically, I analyze three female cooperators' efforts between 1919 and 1921 to simultaneously establish a women-owned cooperative grocery store and launch a Southern cooperative movement. New Orleans Housewives League members Inez MacMartin Meyers, Edna Egleston, and Ida Weis Friend collaborated with the Chamber of Commerce, city government, and wartime food administrators to construct a state-

supported network of ethical enterprises. At the same time, they allied with leftist organizations like the Cooperative League of America, the National Consumers League, and labor unionists to foster a new moral economy that would revive civic engagement and community cooperation. However, I also uncover the corrosive racial and class assumptions undergirding the Housewives' League's cooperative economy undermined their endeavors to engineer a national moral revolution. While middle-class white female cooperators largely avoided interracial organizing in the early 1920s, by the Great Depression, the city experienced a resurgence of interracial cooperative as a means to end racial and class inequality.

Chapter three charts Socialist barber Henry Hermes's 50-year cooperative career. Between 1936 and 1987, Hermes spearheaded a multi-ethnic, biracial, and gender-inclusive cooperative movement. Fervently believing that public control over industry and government would revitalize Democracy and eradicate political repression, institutionalized racism, and corporate capitalism, Hermes established the Consumers' Co-operative Union (CCU) in 1941 as the physical manifestation of his utopian vision. For ten years, the CCU not only functioned as a cooperative grocery store for working-class Freret Neighborhood residents, but as a conceptual space for discussing economic cooperation, racial justice, and political reform. Hermes depended on a far-reaching New Deal support network that transcended his neighborhood and bridged political, racial, gender, and class divides.

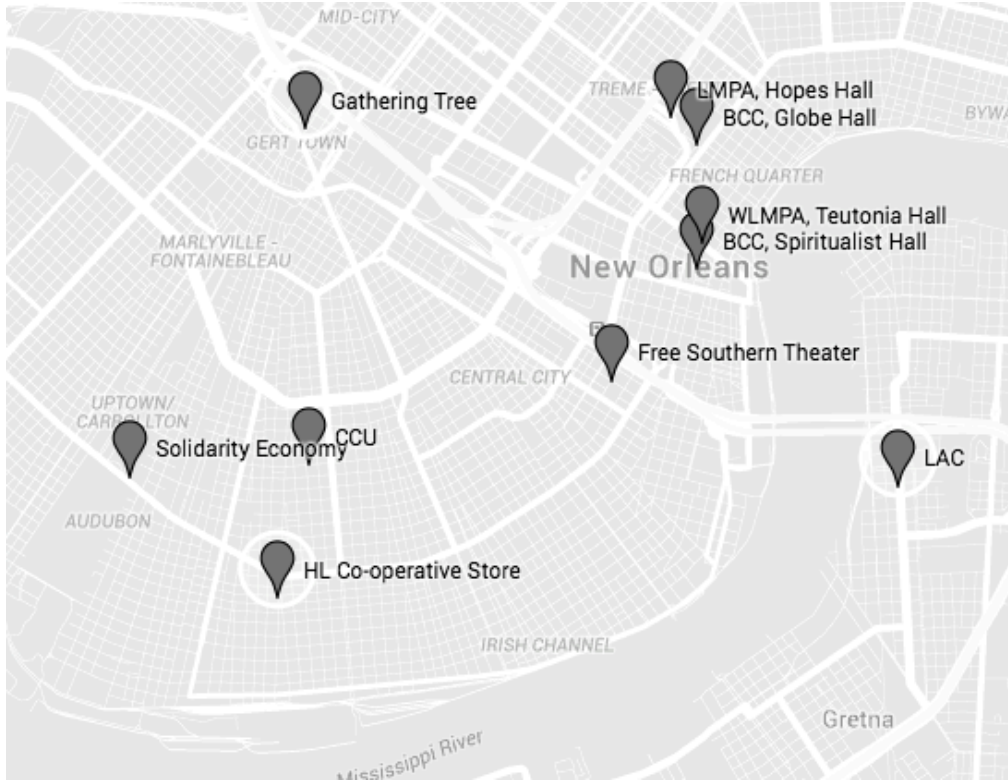
However, this coalition disintegrated in the face of white flight, anti-Communist hysteria, and urban economic decline in the 1950s. Consequently, Hermes joined mainstream cooperatives like the Louisiana Credit Union League, whose social and economic policies reflected the Great Society's moderate civil rights and anti-poverty programs. After spending 30 years advocating credit unions to ameliorate racialized poverty, Hermes allied with anarchist and socialist cooperatives in the 1980s to assert public control over the city's utilities company. This radical contingent of cooperatives would revitalize the city's flagging cooperative movement and defined cooperative organizing until Hurricane Katrina disrupted its fragile ecosystem. Although integrated cooperatives enabled African American members to participate in and even direct the organizations, persistent segregationist thought within Louisiana cooperative movement, and southern society more generally, hampered integrated cooperatives' ability to fully address black constituent's economic and political needs.

My fourth chapter highlights the cooperative careers of Dillard University president Albert W. Dent and his son, Thomas Dent, to examine the long history of black cooperative activism and its connections to racial justice organizing in New Orleans between the 1930s and 1980s. Albert Dent formed the Flint-Goodridge Medical Cooperative in 1936 to provide New Orleans' black residents access to hospitalization services. Writer and playwright Tom Dent joined the Free Southern Theater (FST) in 1965, a radical black theater collective serving New Orleans and the Deep South from 1963 to 1980. While historians have studied FST's contributions to the Black Arts

Movement and black identity politics, I consider 1) the centrality of FST's cooperative structure to its ethical worldview, 2) its deep ties to black cooperative traditions, and 3) its commitment to fostering a network of black Southern cooperatives. In essence, the Flint-Goodridge Hospital cooperative and FST are anchors in a civil rights story that examines ruptures and continuities in cooperative organizing across time and place.

My fifth chapter links historical grassroots strategies to those that still inform cooperative and community response to urban land use today. It discusses cooperatives' role in post-Hurricane Katrina land-use debates, specifically their utopian project to rebuild New Orleans while transforming its racial, gender, class, and geographic dynamics. Simultaneously, New Orleans collectives affiliate with national cooperative leagues to critique neoliberal economic and political policies they feel perpetuate systemic inequality both locally and nationally. At the same time, I argue that veteran New Orleanian cooperators form the backbone of the contemporary cooperative movement, firmly linking current cooperatives to the city's legacy of civil rights and cooperative activism. Drawing on cooperative oral history interviews, I analyze how three long-time New Orleans residents have used past cooperative experiences to form post-Katrina cooperatives advocating for racial justice in neighborhood, city, and regional food systems. Specifically, Macon Fry's Gathering Tree Growers Collective, John Clark's Solidarity Economy, and Harvey Reed's Louisiana Association of Cooperatives seek to democratize food production, distribution, and consumption systems to expand vulnerable Louisianan's access to inexpensive, healthful foods. However, they must also

negotiate the unanticipated consequences of their actions, such as gentrification, community disinterest, and City opposition.



**Figure 1.** *Map of Featured Cooperatives.*

Although cooperatives have been integral to advancing the aims of labor unionists, suffragists, consumer organizers, and civil rights activists, they are largely invisible in social movement history. Part of cooperatives' historical erasure is rooted in their lack of a satisfying narrative arc. Often ephemeral, contradictory, and stolidly concerned with members' day-to-day existence, cooperatives invite dismissal. While frequently informal, small enterprises with a few committed leaders, cooperatives continually spring up in New Orleans neighborhoods, only to vanish as economic and political conditions shift.

They are both intensely local and citywide phenomena, addressing constituents' economic hardship and political disempowerment. However, as expressions of neighborhood customs, affiliation, gender, race, class, and religion, cooperatives are integral to understanding how people's lived experiences undergird larger social movement history. Indeed, working in sympathy with established social movements, cooperatives are dedicated to fulfilling members' most fundamental needs: food, shelter, and basic employment, while also propelling broader social change and social justice.

## **Chapter 1: “To the Very Danger Line of Incendiarism”: Labor, Race, and Place in the New Orleans Cooperative Movement**

Throughout July 1897, New Orleans’ unemployed laborers had circulated mysterious “flaming red hand bills” amongst themselves, inviting all to participate in a mass march proceeding from Congo Square’s Globe Hall to Lafayette Square, where the amassed workers would demand Mayor Walter Flower address the lingering national depression.<sup>1</sup> On July 16, the appointed day, a “motley crowd from seventy-five to a hundred men, who needed no credentials as to their being out of employment” amassed on the hot square. They milled about with “no center, head, nor tail to them.” Hours later, there was still no sign of an organizer, and the meeting hall remained locked tight. Fearful that the restless gathering would devolve into an angry mob, police quickly dispersed the men. Finally, two figures emerged from the crowd to claim responsibility for the march: Eugene Bacarisse and August Graf, leaders of the New Orleans Brotherhood of Cooperative Commonwealth, a Socialist, multi-racial cooperative and unemployed workers union. The would-be agitators could neither afford the two dollar rent for Globe Hall nor the event permit fee, and the morning culminated in their arrest by the sweating and “corpulent form of Sergeant Gabriel Porteous.”<sup>2</sup>

Back at the police station, Police Chief Dexter Gaster sternly lectured Bacarisse and Graf on the futility of their cause: Rather than stir up trouble in New Orleans, why

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<sup>1</sup> “Ready to Solve the Great Problem of Finding Work for All the City’s Unemployed,” *Daily Picayune* (July 16, 1897): 3; “The Unemployed Organized Now, But Call Themselves the Laboring Men’s Protective Association,” *Daily Picayune* (July 26, 1897): 7.

<sup>2</sup> “Ready to Solve the Great Problem,” 3.

didn't the Cuban-born Bacarisse help his fellow countrymen "lick" the Spanish colonizers? For his part, Graf was surely a "Dutchman, and an anarchist: that's a dead easy guess." Gaster denounced Bacarisse and Graf as "foreigners over here out of employment" who should not presume to "teach the American people anything." He conceded, "there is a great deal of distress because of men not being able to secure employment, but they are never going to obtain any relief from such fellows as you."<sup>3</sup> Yet Graf disavowed any radical tendencies, stating that far from advocating violent revolution, the Brotherhood was forming a labor protective association to peacefully resolve worker-employer conflict. With that, the two men were summarily dismissed.

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This small scene, portrayed in the local color section of the *Daily Picayune*, symbolizes the promise and the failure of cross-racial organizing in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Historians point to the late 1890s as the nadir for labor and civil rights activism in the city.<sup>4</sup> While cooperation among working-class blacks and whites was common during the 1880s, and culminated in a general strike in 1892, the labor movement's commitment to racial solidarity crumbled in the face of the 1893 to 1897 economic depression and violent waterfront riots between 1894 and 1895. Simultaneously, in 1896, Louisiana disenfranchised 90 percent of black voters, while the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* upheld "separate but equal" public

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 121.



accommodations, further eviscerating Reconstruction's equal rights legislation.<sup>5</sup> Against such disheartening events, meaningful interracial collaboration seemed impossible.

Yet the story of the New Orleans chapter of the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth (BCC) decenters this declension narrative. Cuban-American Eugene Bacarisse and German-born August Graf co-founded the BCC as a multiracial Socialist cooperative to galvanize working-class blacks, ethnic whites, and immigrants to demand unemployment benefits from city and state officials. Although short-lived, the Brotherhood is significant for two reasons: first, formed out of the ashes of the 1894 longshoremen's riots and the Populists' electoral defeat in 1896, the BCC occupies a transitional moment in multiethnic collaboration before radical, sustained interracial union organizing reemerged in 1901. Secondly, the BCC briefly transcended class and racial antagonisms to capitalize on a revolutionary municipal public works system that would employ not just the Brotherhood's constituents, but also thousands of workers across the city in the decades to come. Very quickly, however, the BCC's progressive politics fell victim to a conservative, segregationist populism that eventually eclipsed these organizers' potentially transformative, firebrand politics.

This chapter examines three distinct periods in the Brotherhood's ten month history: the BCC's activities between February and July 1897; the formation and dissolution of its operational arm, the Laboringmen's Protective Association (LMPA), between July and October 1897; and the emergence of a splinter group, the White

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 147.

Laboringmen's Protective Association (WLMPA), in October 1897. These successive organizations embody three competing intellectual trajectories within the cooperative: While Christian Socialist Eugene Bacarisse used the BCC as a mouthpiece for espousing French republicanism and universal brotherhood, Creole of Color activists in the LMPA tied economic security for black workers to a larger campaign for social and political equality. Finally, August Graf's leadership within the WLMPA reflected a theatrical working-class Socialism that prized craft unionism, direct action, and white ethnic identity. The convergence of Cuban, Creole of color, and European intellectual and political currents breathed life into the BCC; however, the cooperative ultimately did not survive the philosophical contradictions such conflicting worldviews posed.

While the Brotherhood existed for less than a year, its vision of an integrated workers' rights program captures the city's labor movement in flux, before Jim Crow laws and the demonization of racial justice activists stultified New Orleans's impulse toward radical organizing. Indeed, the Brotherhood's utopian vision of cooperative economics and democratic Socialism coincided with a moment of profound social, economic, and political transformation both in New Orleans and nationally. For example, Graf and Bacarisse mobilized ethnically diverse workers in response to: a yellow fever epidemic that paralyzed the city's waterfront economy; diminishing black voting rights; Italian immigration's destabilizing effect on Louisiana's labor distribution; and an expanding transnational solidarity and democratic movement among Cuban revolutionaries, émigrés, and disenfranchised African Americans prior to the 1898

Spanish American War. However, the Brotherhood's alliance with American Federation of Labor (AFL) trade unionists presaged the larger labor movement's abandonment of racial and class equality and its embrace of racially divisive "bread and butter" organizing around higher wages and worker benefits for white New Orleanians. Essentially, this chapter analyzes how narrowing definitions of whiteness and racial formation contained a potentially revolutionary social movement.

### **Organizational Structure of the BCC, LMPA, and WLMPA**

Structurally, the Brotherhood modeled cooperative governance.<sup>6</sup> Until October 1897, the organization was open to any man, black or white, and all members voted democratically on directors during regular elections.<sup>7</sup> The cooperative also decided on its plan of action as a group during long, often contentious, monthly meetings. The men, save Bacarisse, were solidly working-class; many were bartenders, machinists, dockworkers, and day laborers. They lived along the Mississippi waterfront, or in the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Wards, home to residents of German, Irish, Cuban, and Creole (a mixture of African, French, and Spanish) heritage.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on the Christian Socialist theory that the "Christian principle of cooperation [would] improve industrial relations," Eugene Bacarisse offered Brotherhood members an intangible glimpse into the future: by working together, people of all classes and races could achieve a new, harmonious society free from the evils of individualistic

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene Bacarisse, "Socialism Set Forth by a Socialist," *Daily Picayune* (June 6, 1897): 16.

<sup>7</sup> "Co-operative Commonwealth," *Daily Picayune* (February 13, 1897): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006), 373.

competition and corporate capitalism.<sup>9</sup> The Brotherhood had two goals: to advance Socialism and end rampant unemployment among the city's working class. To that end, it helped establish worker cooperatives, hosted prominent political figures, staged unemployment marches, wrote editorials in local papers, and met with city leaders.

The Brotherhood also formed a direct-action organization, the LMPA that worked in tandem with the cooperative to mobilize laborers to demand unemployment relief from the city. While the BCC concentrated on public education, the LMPA became the public face of Bacarisse and Graf's cooperative program; after July 1897, it increasingly held rallies, public meetings, and liaised with government officials. The LMPA was a cooperative labor union; it embraced cooperative organizational principles while uniting unemployed workers across industrial lines rather than specific trades.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the differences between the LMPA and the BCC were largely rhetorical; in the face of fierce public and government opposition to black and immigrant Socialists, Bacarisse and Graf strategically positioned the LMPA's radical political and economic activities as traditional labor organizing. Indeed, the two groups shared members, and like the BCC, the LMPA had democratically-run meetings, consensus decision-making, and regular elections featuring boisterous interjections from members and spectators alike. However, when the LMPA collapsed in October 1897 under the weight of conflicting ideologies

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9 "Bishop Sessums Called Upon by the Co-operative Commonwealth," *Daily Picayune* (March 12, 1897): 11.

10 Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Lost Ways of Organizing: Reviving the AFL's Direct Affiliate Strategy," *Industrial Relations* 36, no. 3 (July 1997): 290.

and mounting white supremacy, its successor, the WLMPA, rejected a cooperative structure to instead emulate mainstream craft unions.

### **The Roots of the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth**

The Brotherhood, the LMPA, and the WLMPA were the projects of two impetuous and outspoken personalities who, despite their common desire for Socialist governance and economic equality, often competed with each other to control the cooperative's philosophy and direction. While Eugene Bacarisse believed America would gradually and peacefully evolve into a Socialist society, 27 year-old August Graf imagined he was part of an impending workers' revolution. Born in Berlin in 1870, Graf immigrated to the United States in 1889 and moved to New Orleans in the 1890s.<sup>11</sup> Living with his father, a machinist, at the edge of the French Quarter in the Marigny, Graf quickly joined the city's German Catholic community, participating in cooperatively run benevolent associations such as the Ninth Ward Protective and Improvement Association.<sup>12</sup> However, Graf became interested in formal cooperative and Socialist organizing after he lost his streetcar conducting job during the 1893-1897 national depression; for months in 1896 he fruitlessly searched for work to support his family.<sup>13</sup>

Eventually, like many German immigrants, Graf became a bartender. Contemporary Germans owned and operated hundreds of saloons, hotels,

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11 "August Graf Dead," *Times Picayune* (Dec 29, 1915): 9.

12 "Graf, Arabella Meade," *Times Picayune* (February 27, 1939): 2; "Graf, August," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1901), accessed through Ancestry.com.

13 Ad, "A Young German," *Daily Picayune* (May 30, 1896): 6; Ad, "A Young German," *Daily Picayune* (June 1, 1896): 5.

boardinghouses, and restaurants in New Orleans.<sup>14</sup> They also monopolized beer production and distribution: platform workers, drivers, salesmen, bartenders, drummers, stable keepers, and day laborers were virtually all German during this period.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Graf worked at C. Aimes's saloon and boardinghouse in the "immigrant belt" of the Central Business District.<sup>16</sup> He and his Irish-American wife Arabella Buras Meade began managing the saloon in 1901 and attracted a loyal German and Austrian clientele.<sup>17</sup>

Foreshadowing Graf's enthusiasm for cooperative organizing, saloons were prominent sites of ethnic community cooperation, racial integration, and working-class political organizing. First, labor historian Daniel Rosenberg notes that even after the collapse of the city's interracial labor movement in 1894, saloons remained "startling examples of continued integration and so-called social equality," which echoed Graf's initial support of multiracial labor unions.<sup>18</sup> Second, as historian John Frederick Nau argues, because German restaurant-boarding houses served as "places of recreation and rest [and] also as rendezvous, especially for the newly arrived German immigrant," they fostered strong communal bonds among patrons and staff.<sup>19</sup> Third, white ethnic bar owners served crucial political roles as Democratic political machine precinct captains. By dispensing jobs, financial aid, and other charity to loyal party members, they fostered

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14 John Frederick Nau, *The German People of New Orleans, 1650-1900* (Hattiesburg: Mississippi Southern College, 1958), 55.

15 *Ibid.*, 63, 68.

16 *Ibid.*, 55.

17 "Graf, August" *Soards*, 1901; "August Graf Dead," 9; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "August Graf," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 257.

18 Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 213.

19 Nau, *The German People of New Orleans*, 55.

tight-knit neighborhood communities necessary to maintaining the Democratic Ring's control over city politics.<sup>20</sup> For example, Graf was arrested several times for registering non-citizens to vote and selling illegal lottery tickets to support the Democratic machine.<sup>21</sup> In return, like many working-class voters, he expected his active campaign work to be rewarded with political patronage.<sup>22</sup>

Because Graf's saloon was a center of German working-class sociability, he easily recruited fellow German bartenders and patrons to the Brotherhood. His commitment to his German working-class brethren had distinct political ramifications, however. Despite Graf's allegiance to Socialist political transformation, he was also active in the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union, an AFL affiliate. As historian Matthew Josephson argues, the craft union was emblematic of AFL's disavowal of radical politics to focus instead on winning wage increases for skilled white workers.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Graf's dual allegiance to mainstream trade unions and his white ethnic identity would lead him to repudiate cooperative formation and racial justice activism for traditional labor organizing and moderate capitalist reform.

### **Eugene Bacarisse and Tremé Neighborhood**

In contrast, Eugene Bacarisse believed the Brotherhood should peacefully transform society into a cooperative commonwealth through public education, political

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20 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 11.

21 "The Goebel Faction Charges the Opposing Faction in the Fourth Ward with False Registration, and Causes the Arrest of One of the Suspected," *Daily Picayune* (November 24, 1897), 7; "Lottery Peddlers," *Daily Picayune* (June 18, 1898): 14.

22 "That Mass Meeting" *Daily Picayune* (June 8, 1897): 3.

23 Matthew Josephson, *Union House, Union Bar: The History of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, AFL-CIO* (New York: Random House, 1956), 173.

action, and government cooperation. Unlike Graf, whose cooperative inclinations were fostered by his participation in craft unions and immigrant benevolent association, Bacarisse was inspired by the overlapping cooperative culture of the Cuban independence movement, national Socialist and religious utopian experiments, and New Orleans' Creole of color civil rights campaigns.

While Eugene Bernard Bacarisse was born in Havana in 1867 to Cuban natives Charles Bacarisse and Antoinette Baraliere, his Roman Catholic family had deep roots in New Orleans.<sup>24</sup> Eugene's paternal grandmother, Lise Augustine Cohen, was born in Cuba to French and Dutch parents, but she grew up in New Orleans.<sup>25</sup> As a young clerk of 22, Eugene's paternal grandfather Louis Gerome Charles Bacarisse emigrated from Bordeaux, France to New Orleans in 1839.<sup>26</sup> He married Cohen a year later.<sup>27</sup>

Involved in Gulf Coast mercantile trading, the Bacarisses frequently moved between Cuba and New Orleans.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, the Bacarisses' lives and finances were

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24 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacarise," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Batarisse," *Daily Picayune* (November 19, 1919): 2.

25 "Lise Augustine Cohen Bacarisse," Orleans Death Indices 1894-1907, 3:141, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Augustine Bacarisse," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Lise Bacarisse," New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

26 "Bacarisse," (February 2, 1839), Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1820-1902, accessed through Ancestry.com; Amadee Ducatel, "Bacarisse, Lise Augustin Cohen," Notarial Act Index (June-December 1867), 3:2, [http://www.notarialarchives.org/aducatelindexes/ducatel\\_amedee\\_vol\\_90.pdf](http://www.notarialarchives.org/aducatelindexes/ducatel_amedee_vol_90.pdf); Max Henríquez Ureña, "Poetas Cubanos de Expresion Francesa," *Inicio* 3, no. 6 (May 1941): 6, <http://revista-iberoamericana.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/Iberoamericana/article/view/1031/1265>.

27 "Augustine Lise Cohen," Alabama, Select Marriages, 1816-1957 (October 19, 1840), Ancestry.com.

28 "C. Bacarisse," Work Projects Administration Transcript of Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1813-1849 (July 29, 1841), accessed through Ancestry.com; "Chas. Bacarisse," Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1820-1902 (April 23, 1865); 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacarise," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Batarisse," 2.



directly touched by Cuba's unstable political climate, as well as America's evolving expansionist policies and diplomacy with Spain. For example, the growing tobacco trade and the establishment of cigar factories in New Orleans, New York, and Key West drove Cuban immigration to the United States in the mid-1870s.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, after weathering Cuba's economic crisis in 1867 and a sugar planters' political revolt that sparked the Ten Years War (1868-1878), the Bacarisse family relocated to the relative safety of New Orleans in 1869.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, the Bacarisse family's slippery racial and ethnic identity may have made Eugene sensitive to the ways in which race and class privilege reproduced inequality. For example, while the 1870 United States Census labeled the Bacarisses as "mulatto," the 1880 census classified most of the family, including Eugene, as "white."<sup>31</sup> Some, however, like his grandmother and aunt, continued to be classified as black well into the 1900s. Adding to the confusion, the Bacarisses lived alongside Cuban, French, black Creole, and mixed race Fifth and Sixth Ward residents well into the 1900s.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, the Bacarisses chose to remain in Tremé's multiethnic neighborhood even as white Fifth Ward white Creoles moved to newly drained suburban

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29 Evan Matthew Daniel, "Cubans," in *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-class History*, ed. Eric Arnesen (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1: 332.

30 José Cantón Navarro, *History of Cuba: The Challenge of the Yoke and the Star* (Havana: Union Nacional de Juristas, 2000), 43-44; John D. Ribó, "Cubans and Cuban Americans, 1870-1940," in *Immigrants in American History: Arrival, Adaptation, and Integration*, ed. Elliott Robert Barkan (Santa Barbara: ABC-CIO, LLC, 2013), 309.

31 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacaris," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Charles Bacarrisse," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

32 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacarrisse," New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; S. Augustus Mitchell, map, "Plan of New Orleans," (1878) Louisiana Digital Map Library, Accessed on November 3, 2013, <http://usgwararchives.org/maps/louisiana/citymap/neworleans1878.jpg>.

plots along Lake Pontchartrain during the 1890s. While the 1893-1897 economic depression forced the affluent Bacarisses to downsize from their elegant five-bedroom French Quarter townhouse to a modest Tremé shotgun house less than a mile from Congo Square, they remained ensconced in a diverse Cuban and Creole of color cultural milieu.<sup>33</sup> Their neighbors were a mix of white and black Creole stenographers, teachers, slaters, grocery merchants, and streetcar conductors.<sup>34</sup> While Cubans would have simply labeled Eugene a “Creole” for his European ancestry, his Cuban heritage and residence in ethnically heterogeneous neighborhoods confounded New Orleans’ census takers.<sup>35</sup>

Enjoying a comfortable, middle-class lifestyle, the Bacarisses resided within the burgeoning Cuban expatriate community in Tremé, home to the city’s large population of French- and Spanish-speaking Creoles of color.<sup>36</sup> Cuban nationalists were drawn to New Orleans: As an outgrowth of manifest destiny rhetoric that sought to expand American influence, New Orleans’ political and commercial interests supported Cuba’s long struggle for independence, funding Cuban revolutionaries’ filibusters and liberation campaigns.<sup>37</sup> Radical Cuban revolutionary and poet José Martí observed that the Tremé Cuban community was comprised primarily of educated exiles: veterans of the Ten Years’ War and their relatives, as well as lawyers, reporters, pharmacists, and cigar

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33 “Eugene Bacarisse,” *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards’ Directory Co., 1898): 86, accessed through Ancestry.com; “A Positive Sale,” *Daily Picayune* (October 10, 1891): 9.

34 1900 United Census, s.v. “Albert Bacarisse,” New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 215.

35 Daniel, “Cubans,” 333.

36 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 76.

37 Henry A. Kmen, “Remember the Virginius: New Orleans and Cuba in 1873,” *Louisiana History* 11, no. 4 (Fall 1970): 313-330.

manufacturers.<sup>38</sup> Exiles published journals, newspapers, and literature supporting Cuban liberation, and they also helped organize and fund the Cuban separatist movement leading up to the 1898 War of Independence.<sup>39</sup>

The Bacarisses were well aware of their fellow Cuban émigrés' political activity in Tremé. For his part, Charles Bacarisse, Eugene's father, supported Cuban liberation, composing romantic odes to both France's Bastille Day and Cuba's Tenth of October, the beginning of the Ten Year's War.<sup>40</sup> Not only did Cuban political and social organizations hold banquets, street parades, and balls throughout the neighborhood, but their headquarters were also located at cigar manufacturer and Cuban patriot José Echezabal's residence, close to the Bacarisses' home.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Charles Bacarisse also lived near, worked with, and socialized with Cuban nationalist Dr. Juan G. Hava.<sup>42</sup> Hava and his followers ardently supported Cuban liberation and believed that to avoid American annexation, Cuba must maintain socioeconomic stability following a Cuban-

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38 Otto Olivera, "Jose Marti, Cuba y Nueva Orleans," *Guaracabuya*, <http://www.amigospais-guaracabuya.org/oagoo002.php>.

39 Ribó, "Cubans and Cuban Americans," 309.

40 Ureña, "Poetas Cubanos de Expresion Francesa."

41 "Personal and General Notes," *Daily Picayune* (January 28, 1892): 4; "An Entertainment by the Circulo Cubano-Americano," *Daily Picayune* (February 11, 1894): 6; "Eugene Bacarisse," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory*, 1898, 86; "Joseph Eschezabel," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1897): 981, accessed through Ancestry.com; "The Auroras," *Daily Picayune* (October 20, 1890): 2; "La Aurora: The Cuban Benevolent Association," *Daily Picayune* (October 22, 1888): 3.

42 "Charles Bacarisse and J.G. Hava," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co, 1870): 50, accessed through Ancestry.com; Jazmin Smith, "1' Athénée Louisianais Records, 1834-1987: Collection Overview," Louisiana Research Collection, <http://specialcollections.tulane.edu/archon/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=125&q=Natalie+Scott>; 1870 United States Census, "John Ava," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

directed military victory over Spain.<sup>43</sup> Economic health could only be secured through gradual emancipation of slaves, financial compensation to slaveholders, and labor reform.

Against this background of heady revolutionary rhetoric, Eugene Bacarisse blossomed into a self-described “thinker, philosopher, poet, sociologist and humanitarian,” and, along with the Cuban intelligentsia, became active in various associations celebrating French intellectual and political thought.<sup>44</sup> For example, in the Club of French Democracy, he honored the French Republic of 1792, advocated French democratic ideals, and adhered to the organization’s motto “Liberte, Egalité, Fraternity, Solidarite.” Fittingly, Bacarisse spoke on “Universal Social Progress” at a Club event in the early 1890s.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, l’Athénée Louisianais society strove to preserve the French language in Louisiana and promote literature and scholarly research.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, as a stenographer, Bacarisse joined the Stenographic Association, which was indebted to French scholarly, philosophical, and aesthetic traditions.<sup>47</sup> The organization not only promoted shorthand but also provided a forum for discussing academic writings, debating contemporary social problems, and staging creative performances.<sup>48</sup> These organizations

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43 J.G. Hava, “La Propaganda Política,” A Los Habitantes de Cuba. La Indemnización [pamphlet] (New Orleans, 1870), cited in Gerald E. Poyo, *With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898* (Durham: Duke University, 1989), 37.

44 “The Unemployed Organized Now, But Call Themselves the Laboring Men’s Protective Association,” *Daily Picayune* (July 26, 1897): 7.

45 “Personal and General Notes,” *Daily Picayune* (March 20, 1892): 6.

46 Smith, “l’Athénée Louisianais Records.”

47 United States Office of Education, “Shorthand Societies,” *Circular[s] of Information* 19, no. 1-4 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1893), 200-201; “Association News,” *The National Stenographer* 1, no. 1 (January 1890): 398; “Thanksgiving In Shorthand,” *Daily Picayune* (November 25, 1897): 3; “The Stenographers’ At Home,” *Daily Picayune* (October 29, 1893): 7.

48 “Shorthand Societies,” 200-201.

exposed Bacarisse to the egalitarian, democratic principles he would advocate as a Brotherhood spokesperson in 1897.

Growing up in an integrated neighborhood among radicalized Cubans and Creoles galvanized Bacarisse into rebuilding an interracial labor movement fostering harmonious class and racial relations. Tremé was host to a long tradition of intellectual and cultural exchange among its black and Cuban populations. As a child, Bacarisse lived among French-speaking Creoles of color who worked as shoemakers, dressmakers, brick masons, coopers, and plasterers.<sup>49</sup> These skilled craftspeople, along with dockworkers, formed the forefront of New Orleans' equal rights movement as the advances of Radical Reconstruction rapidly eroded during the 1880s and 1890s. Significantly, New Orleans' Creoles of color, like Cuban-Haitian activist Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, saw Cuba's liberation as part of a larger Caribbean and American movement for political justice, even noting Cuban political events in his radical black newspaper, *The Crusader*.<sup>50</sup> Specifically, Bacarisse's geographic proximity to politicized black and Cuban cigar makers had a particularly radicalizing effect on the young man.<sup>51</sup>

Working alongside each other in cigar factories, prominent Cuban and Creole of color activists nurtured extensive and productive political alliances between the two Tremé communities. For example, Desdunes' family owned a tobacco plantation and

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49 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacaris"; "Charles Bacarisse," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co, 1870): 5, accessed through Ancestry.com.

50 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 75, 76-77; Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, eds. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 255, 256.

51 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Eugene Bacarisse"; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Charles Bacarrisse."

cigar factory, while black medical insurance cooperative organizer Walter L. Cohen originally worked as a cigar maker.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the separatist club Los Intransigentes (The Intransigents Club) worked closely with revolutionary Juan Martí's Cuban Revolutionary Party and was led by Andrés Alpízar, a cigar manufacturer and veteran of Cuba's first war of independence in 1868.<sup>53</sup>

As a result, even as they supported liberation struggles in their home country, many Cuban tobacco workers in New Orleans also supported the cause of enfranchisement-seeking Creoles of color.<sup>54</sup> When Desdunes and Martinet formed the radical Citizens Committee in 1891 to reclaim black enfranchisement, they invited Cuban revolutionary and Cigar Makers Union president Ramón Pagés to speak at its subsequent meetings.<sup>55</sup> While Pagés was a "stranger by his language," Martinet noted he was "heart and soul" with the Citizens Committee's objectives: "The sun did not divide off a portion of its rays for one class and a portion for the other, a part of the whites and a part for the blacks; but shone equally for everybody."<sup>56</sup>

Littering the Brotherhood's membership rolls, Tremé cigar workers and their family members directly influenced the cooperative's egalitarian organizational structure.

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52 Smith, *Footprints of Black Louisiana*, 54; Jack Rummel, *African-American Social Leaders and Activists* (New York: Fact on File, Inc., 2003), 55; Turry Flucker and Phoenix Savage, *African Americans of New Orleans* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2010): 28.

53 Juan Marrero, "Martí in New Orleans," Granma Daily Online, last modified on September 7, 2005, [https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/misc.activism.progressive/qrymDoRi\\_SM](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/misc.activism.progressive/qrymDoRi_SM); Miguel Cabrera Peña, "Harriet Beecher Stowe in José Martí's 'The Black Doll,'" *Islas* 4, no. 13 (December 2006): 56, <http://www.angelfire.com/planet/islas/English/v4n13-pdf/50-58.pdf>; Olivera, "Jose Marti, Cuba y Nueva Orleans"; "Alpizar, Andrew," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards' City Directory, 1895): 72, accessed through Ancestry.com.

54 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 76-77.

55 Ibid., 76-77; Logsdon and Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," 255, 256.

56 Louis Martinet, *The Violation of a Constitutional Right* (New Orleans: Citizens' Committee, 1893): 17.

Future BCC member and German-American John J. Baltz's sister worked as a bunchmaker in a cigar factory, while Henry J. Desalles, a black Creole and LMPA member, had many cigar-making relatives in the Seventh Ward.<sup>57</sup> In line with the BCC's cooperative ideology and union sympathies, Cuban cigar workers, galvanized by lecturers reading political treatises, tended to support anarchist and collectivist ideology. In New York and Key West, Cubans even formed workers cooperatives and political discussion groups.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in 1901, cigar packers in New Orleans joined a citywide strike along with black and white brewer, painter, and carpenter unions and a union-sympathetic brewery cooperative.<sup>59</sup> Long committed to cooperative principles and cross-union collaboration, the Brotherhood's cigar worker members facilitated lasting alliances with the local Cigar Makers' Union, the AFL, and many other unions to pressure the Louisiana government to implement emergency relief measures for the unemployed.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the city's nineteenth-century Socialist, cooperative, and labor movements, while separate entities, frequently supported each other's aims and adopted elements of each other's organizational structure. For example, historian John Curl argues that between 1877 and 1898, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance embraced the industrial

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57 1850 United States Census, s.v. "Louis Desolles," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Felix Dessalles," New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com, "Desalle, Henry J," Soards' New Orleans City Directory (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1899): 248, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "John J. Baltz," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States, s.v. "John Baltz," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

58 Daniel, "Cubans," 333-334.

59 "Strikers Fill Exchange Alley," *Daily Picayune* (July 26, 1901): 3.

60 "The Governor Asked to Appeal for a Modification of Quarantine Rigors," *Daily Picayune* (September 25, 1897): 7; "Ninety Cases, Eight Deaths," *Daily Picayune* (October 1, 1897): 8.

labor movement's commitment to working-class revolution; after achieving state control, it envisioned transforming modes of production into a national system of cooperatively-owned factories organized at the union level.<sup>61</sup> The BCC would also embrace both the cooperative and labor union movements as it campaigned for worker justice.

The factor that most directly defined Eugene Bacarisse's faith in cooperatives' ability to achieve political and economic transformation, however, was his father and brother's employment as stenographer and clerk, respectively, in the nascent Farmers' Union Commercial Association of Louisiana (FUCA) in 1890.<sup>62</sup> Part of a Populist self-help economic initiative, the organization was a wholesale and retail cooperative that enabled small farmers to ship produce to a dozen Farmers' Union retail stores throughout the state.<sup>63</sup> In the face of rising debt and dropping crop prices, the cooperative believed that monopolistic corporations were starving independent farmers; it therefore strove to eliminate the exploitative middleman and compete with powerful agrarian operations by organizing large-scale, profitable cooperative networks. FCUA head John Tetts believed cooperative economics was the apogee of civilization; Bacarisse would echo this social evolutionary theory as he organized the BCC.<sup>64</sup>

The cooperative organization was part of a broader Populist political movement, in which reformist Democrats, African Americans, Republicans, farmers and laborers

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61 Curl, *For All the People*, 121.

62 "Bacarisse, Antone" and "Bacarisse, Charles," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co, 1890): 132.

63 William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 155-156.

64 Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 121-122.



united to eliminate political corruption and improve working conditions and education for poor Louisianans.<sup>65</sup> In 1891, Populists organized the People's Party, an integrated coalition of farmers, sharecroppers, and New Orleans Knights of Labor unionists, to elect a governor and legislature sympathetic to currency, land ownership, and income tax policy reform.<sup>66</sup> Although the Farmers' Union headquarters and its retail cooperatives failed by 1893, Eugene remained involved in Populist political campaigning; indeed, People's Party would be a key Brotherhood and LMPA ally over the course of 1897.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, the Panic of 1893 pushed Bacarisse into labor organizing. He could not find a job with a "living salary," despite being a "competent stenographer and correspondent, having a fair knowledge of the English, French and Spanish languages."<sup>68</sup> Bacarisse finally quit a low-paying stenographic job to form the BCC.<sup>69</sup> Billing itself as the first chapter of the Socialist National Union of the Brotherhood of Co-operative Commonwealth on February 13, 1897, the 40-member BCC convened in Spiritualists' Hall to ratify its charter and elect directors.<sup>70</sup> Attendees were serenaded by bartender Paul Banch's violin stylings, while the blustery Bacarisse held forth on "The Solution of the Human Problem and the Advantages of Socialism and Communism." Against a

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65 Clyde Woods, "Katrina's World: Blues, Bourbon, and the Return to the Source" *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (Sept 2009): 436.

66 Hair, *Bourbonism and Agrarian Protest*, 215-217.

67 "People's Party," *Daily Picayune* (November 30, 1897): 7.

68 "Bacarisse Will Resign: Neither Capital Nor Labor Will Give him Food," *Daily Picayune* (August 14, 1897): 3.

69 "Eugene Bacarisse," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co, 1895).

70 "Co-operative Commonwealth," *Daily Picayune* (February 13, 1897): 3.

background of incredible intellectual foment, radical activism, and repressive politics, the BCC combatted government corruption and unscrupulous corporate interests.

### **The Intellectual Origins of the New Orleans BCC**

It was not coincidental that 1897 was the year that the BCC coalesced. That year, both utopian Socialists and Theosophists, the primary intellectual influences on Bacarisse's cooperative philosophy, had launched an ambitious educational and political campaign to transform society.<sup>71</sup> For example, Theosophists believed that the world had experienced a 5,000-year period of chaos, and they prophesied that a new age would dawn between 1897 and 1898.<sup>72</sup> Founded by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky in 1875, the non-sectarian Theosophist Society was dedicated to fostering a class, race, and gender-inclusive "Universal Brotherhood of Humanity." To that end, the organization studied ancient and contemporary religion, science, philosophy, and art in order to better understand the "laws of nature" and the "divine powers in man."<sup>73</sup> To prepare for the new world and make manifest the universal brotherhood, in 1896 the Theosophical Society mounted an educational "crusade," touring the nation and advocating social reform and cooperation over individualistic self-improvement.<sup>74</sup>

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71 Charles L. Easton, "A Backward Look At a Utopian Plan: Equality Colony Near Bow, 1896-1906," *Seattle Times* (November 25, 1962), <http://www.skagitriverjournal.com/WestCounty/NW/Colony/EastonCL3-Equality1962.html>; LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 58-59; John Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), 264.

72 Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, 264.

73 Helena Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press [1946, 1889]), 39.

74 "Theosophists to Make a Crusade," *Daily Picayune* (November 22, 1896): 20; Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, 264; "The Theosophists," *Daily Picayune* (February 28, 1897): 11.

Interestingly, Bacarisse was tied to the New Orleans' Theosophical Society by its members' Cuban heritage, geographic proximity, and interest in Cuba's spiritual wellbeing. Sixth Ward residents Dr. Charles J. Lopez, a Cuban physician, and Joaquin Parra, a French-American cigar dealer, headed the New Orleans Theosophical Society.<sup>75</sup> Lopez was intimately involved in the Society's Cuban activities after the Spanish-American War. He headed the New Orleans branch of the Society's International Brotherhood League, which provided humanitarian aid to war-torn Cuba.<sup>76</sup> Believing Cuba was an ideal proving ground to implement its program for racial harmony and utopian communitarianism, the League arranged for orphaned Cuban children to be educated at the national Theosophical Society's school in Point Loma, California. Lopez even visited the school to personally welcome the Cuban students.<sup>77</sup>

On February 1897, the same month the BCC formed, the New Orleans Theosophist Society began proselytizing to French, German, and English-speaking clubs to prepare them for the impending new age.<sup>78</sup> Bacarisse may have met future BCC members at these outreach events, or at the Society's frequent classes and lectures, held at its Central Business District offices on 316 Baronne Street.<sup>79</sup> For example, BCC secretary Carl Hyldahl joined the local branch of the Universal Brotherhood and

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75 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Joaquin Parra," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Charles Lopez," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "The Theosophists," February 28, 1897, 11.

76 Thorn, *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, 265.

77 "Banquet to Cuban Guests," *The New Century* 6, no. 3 (November 13, 1902): 19.

78 "The Theosophists," February 28, 1897, 11.

79 *Ibid.*; "The Theosophists," *Daily Picayune* (May 27, 1892): 3; "Theosophical Society," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards' Directory Co., 1897); 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Joaquin Parra"; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Charles Lopez."

Theosophical Society in 1899, which sought to return society to its naturally cooperative state.<sup>80</sup> The organization also donated money, meal tickets, clothing, and other assistance to charities serving New Orleans' indigent populations.

While Theosophists distinguished their "common brotherhood" from Socialism, Bacarisse felt Christian Socialism and Theosophy were analogous in their pursuit of "truth."<sup>81</sup> Rejecting the racist antebellum science of polygenesis in favor of monogenesis, Theosophists believed that humans had a common origin and were bound by the principle of universal harmony.<sup>82</sup> Specious religious education fostered individualistic competition, which hindered society from realizing its cooperative utopia. Similarly, Eugene Bacarisse argued that capitalists' "survival of the fittest" mentality merely justified their continued exploitation of the poor.<sup>83</sup> Society had surely matured to a point in which no one was "humiliated [or] brutalized" by eking out a "mere physical existence." Rather than using the animal kingdom as a model for social organization, Bacarisse suggested economists and reformers alike turn to "cooperative sociology."

In his discussion of the BCC's aims, Bacarisse echoed New Orleans Theosophist Charles Lopez, who claimed, "Christianity is in its highest and truest

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80 Hyldahl remained a lifelong utopianist. He joined the Southern Division of the Esperanto Association of North America, founded in 1908 to promote world peace through a politically neutral language. Socialists embraced Esperanto as a means to achieve international worker unity, world democracy, and utopian governance. Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 188, 396; "Correspondence," *Amerika Esperantisto Magazine* 4, no. 3 (October 1908): 76; Joseph H. Fussell, *Incidents in the History of the Theosophical Movement* (Point Loma: The Aryan Theosophical Press, 1920), 17; "A Fair for the Poor," *Daily Picayune* (March 20, 1899): 3.

81 "Theosophists to Make a Crusade," 20.

82 Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 39-41.

83 Eugene Bacarisse, "The Problems of Industrial Life," *Daily Picayune* (June 30, 1897): 6.

sense...theosophy.”<sup>84</sup> They believed that society’s laws and commerce had embraced “the habits of cheating, lying, etc., [which] have become part of our lower nature.” To achieve the universal brotherhood—to evolve—society must return to its Christian origins. Likewise, Bacarisse argued that Socialism would reclaim society’s communal, cooperative roots embodied in early Christianity and would distribute the nation’s resources equitably among citizens, regardless of background.<sup>85</sup>

At the same time, the New Orleans chapter of the BCC was an outgrowth of utopian Socialist visions of the “cooperative commonwealth.” In 1887, Socialist Edward Bellamy published *Looking Backward*, a wildly popular treatise on a futuristic “cooperative commonwealth” that featured state-owned industry and community cooperation as the basis of government and economic structure.<sup>86</sup> *Looking Backward* and its sequel, *Equality*, inspired readers to form “Bellamy Clubs” in cities around the country, including in Louisiana. The clubs not only advocated Bellamy’s vision of a Socialist society but formed their own cooperative colonies during the 1890s and 1900s.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, in October 1895, Populist Normal Wallace Lermond organized two Bellamy-inspired utopian colonies in Maine.<sup>88</sup> Writing in the New York publication *Commonwealth*, he implored Populist and Socialist readers to form their own locals and to affiliate into a national cooperative organization. The national headquarters, itself a

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84 “Theosophists to Make a Crusade,” 20.

85 Bacarisse, “The Problems of Industrial Life,” 6.

86 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 6.

87 Ibid.; Sue Eakin and Manie Culbertson, *Louisiana: The Land and Its People* (Gretna: Pelican Company, 1998), 361.

88 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 55-57.

vast colony, would financially and materially support a constellation of pioneer settlements. After two years of agitating, in early 1897, Lermond founded the National Union of the Brotherhood of Cooperative Commonwealth out of the ashes of a fractured Socialist Party. The organization's goals were to educate Americans about Socialism, to unite all Socialists into one cooperative society, and finally, to establish a cluster of cooperatives that would eventually colonize Washington State, converting government, then the nation, to socialism.<sup>89</sup> Initially situating itself within the Christian Socialist movement, the National Union declared that its colonization program would result in "Mutualism or the Kingdom of Heaven Here and Now."<sup>90</sup> In response, Populist and Socialist publications advertised the Brotherhood's activities, and radicals across the country donated thousands of dollars to the cooperative project.

New Orleans Socialists were similarly swept up in the National Union's utopian vision of a peaceful Socialist revolution. While scholars have characterized the National Union as a single, ill-fated Equality Colony in Skagit County, Washington, it had clear intellectual ties to New Orleans. National Union President Reverend Myron W. Reed began his career as a prominent Christian Socialist preaching in 1870s New Orleans; he advocated cooperation and education as the means by which Socialists and laborers would create a new, egalitarian society.<sup>91</sup> For decades, Reed's controversial speeches,

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89 Ibid., 58-59; Easton, "A Backward Look At a Utopian Plan."

90 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 100.

91 "National and State Organizations of the Churches," *The Congregation Quarterly* 16 (1874): 209.

including one pronouncing Jesus an anarchist, were published in the city's papers.<sup>92</sup> Reed directly inspired New Orleans Socialists to create their own labor organization.<sup>93</sup>

Months before the Skagit County colony was formally established in November 1897, New Orleans had announced the formation of its own local Brotherhood branch. In practice, however, the BCC chapter hardly resembled the Equality Colony's agrarian commune.<sup>94</sup> Equality's rural colonists lived together in apartments or campsites, worked in groups, and ate in common dining halls. They grew and processed their own food and educated their children in the colony's schoolhouse. In contrast, New Orleans BCC members lived and worked across the city and represented a cross-section of its diverse labor and ethnic landscape.

The BCC not only hosted educational lectures and flirted with mass marches, but it also functioned as a consulting service for labor organizations interested in forming cooperative businesses to help members regain control over their livelihood. For example, disgruntled workers organized the Mill Hands Union after lumber mill owners forced employees to work ten hours a day without compensation during the off-season.<sup>95</sup> With the support of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, the mill hands struck in March and April 1897.<sup>96</sup> At a Screwmen's Hall union meeting, Eugene Bacarisse

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92 "Christ Called an Anarchist," *Daily Picayune* (July 16, 1894): 8.

93 James A. Denton, "Reed, Myron (1836-1899)," *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David Wishart. <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.pd.046>; "Graf Acts Coxey Just for One Day," *Daily Picayune* (June 4, 1897): 3.

94 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 92.

95 "Mill Hands' Strike Explained by Them," *Daily Picayune* (April 2, 1897): 3.

96 "The Mill Hands' Strike May Result in the Interesting Experiment of a Co-operative Factory," *Daily Picayune* (March 20, 1897): 10.

pledged his support of the mill workers' cause. Bacarisse also proposed opening a cooperative lumber mill in the lower Ninth Ward to compete with non-unionized rural and New Orleans mills. The mill would operate less than nine hours a day and pay laborers high wages.<sup>97</sup> The plan enjoyed broad support from "every class of labor" in the building trades and the Mill Hands Union sold stock exclusively to mill workers at \$25 a share. While the mill never materialized (perhaps due to its high stock price) it reveals the BCC's role in popularizing union cooperatives in turn-of-the-century New Orleans.

### **Philosophical Differences Within the BCC**

Despite the BCC's acceptance within the city's labor movement, persistent internal conflict hampered its ability to set clear goals and strategies: would the cooperative cater to the New Orleans working-class, as August Graf wished, or strive for a total transformation of society, as Eugene Bacarisse desired? Its struggle to reconcile various members' political platforms mirrored the National Union's own debates over industrial workers' role in the cooperative commonwealth. While imprisoned after leading the ill-fated American Railway Union's Pullman Strike in the spring of 1894, industrial unionist Eugene V. Debs decided Socialism was the best means to achieve economic parity for the working-class.<sup>98</sup> Impressed by Debs' commitment to the labor struggle, the National Union hired him as its national representative in the spring of 1897.

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97 Ibid.; "Mill Hands' Strike Explained," 3; "The Striking Mill Hands Refuse Aid," *Daily Picayune* (March 21, 1897): 3.

98 Ibid., 57; "Gene Debs and the American Railway Union," *Illinois Labor History Society*, <http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/articles/224-gene-debs-and-the-american-railway-union.html>.



However, Debs viewed Equality as a refuge for aging or ailing railway unionists, rather than as a colonization project to systematically remodel society.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, the National Union rejected the industrial system, professing an abiding faith in agricultural communal labor. They also strove to organize middle-class professionals and cooperative sympathizers as well as the working-class. The National Union and Debs' ideological differences could not be bridged, so Debs left the organization before the Equality Colony was established. While Equality overcame Debs' defection and flourished until 1907, the New Orleans BCC could not resolve the differences between Bacarisse's genteel intellectualism and communitarian ideals and Graf's commitment to working-class unionism.

The BCC's ambivalent gender politics also reflected the cooperative's division between white ethnic unionists and utopian Socialists. Bacarisse, for one, was an outspoken suffragist, a conviction perhaps fostered by his Cuban heritage. Historian Louis A. Pérez argues that gender roles in revolutionary Cuba were highly complex; women as well as men demonstrated their commitment to Cuban nationalism by advocating military action against the Spanish government.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, as Cuban radical and poet Juan Martí traveled through New Orleans in the 1890s, he noted the singular courage and revolutionary zeal of female Cuban expatriates.<sup>101</sup> For example, the League of Cuban-American Ladies participated in Cuban demonstrations and collaborated with

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99 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 60-61.

100 Louis A. Pérez, *To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2005), 103.

101 Jose Marti, "Un Cubano en New Orleans," *Obras Completas* 1, no. 584 (May 8, 1893).

prominent Cuban societies to raise American financial support for Cuban independence.<sup>102</sup> Many Cubans believed that female insurrectionists provided the necessary moral framework necessary to build and sustain a revolution.<sup>103</sup>

Bacarisse also supported women's political equality as the logical extent of his Socialist beliefs.<sup>104</sup> He was therefore sympathetic to the National Union's program of gender equity. At Equality Colony, both female and male adults enjoyed full voting privileges, and women earned same wages as their male counterparts.<sup>105</sup> Further, in 1896, National Union representative Eugene Debs traveled to New Orleans to demand female enfranchisement as a requirement for a just society.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, as floodwaters threatened to breach New Orleans' levees in April 1897, Bacarisse composed a politically conscious poem that argued if women had been enfranchised, they would have voted for "herculean levees," averting disaster.<sup>107</sup> Unless women received the vote, he predicted, future calamities were inevitable.

Yet Bacarisse's counterpart August Graf ultimately controlled the BCC's stance on women's equality. Unlike Bacarisse, August Graf ardently opposed women's presence in the public sphere; accordingly, the local BCC's was entirely male and was dedicated to securing employment for unemployed men, not women. For example, in

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102 "A Cuban Meeting to Be Held at Washington Artillery Hall on Tuesday Evening," *Daily Picayune* (August 3, 1896): 10; "The Cuban Concert," *Daily Picayune* (January 15, 1896): 7; L'Abeille, (September 24, 1895), 2.

103 Eusebio Saenz y Saenz, *La Siboneya, o Episodios de La Guerra de Cuba*, 3rd ed. (Madrid, 1891), 141.

104 Eugene Bacarisse, "The Lesson of the Flood," *Daily Picayune* (April 21, 1897): 9.

105 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 34.

106 "Debs Talks Before the Woman's Club," *Daily Picayune* (May 28, 1896): 9.

107 Bacarisse, "The Lesson of the Flood," 9.

June 1897, Graf opined that employers only hired women to cut labor costs, which effectively depressed wages for all workers.<sup>108</sup> To hire one woman was to take “the bread out of the mouth of an entire family.” Indeed, employing women encouraged child labor; children supported parents who had lost their jobs to single women desiring “pin money.”

Graf’s line of reasoning stemmed not only from contemporary labor union rhetoric, but his bartending experience as well. The AFL viewed women as potential strikebreakers and competition, although the labor organization did not explicitly exclude women from union membership.<sup>109</sup> As a bartender, Graf was wary of woman’s rights advocates who were also at the vanguard of the temperance movement. In 1907, when radical Woman’s Christian Temperance Union leader and suffrage supporter Carrie Nation demanded that Graf debate her on the ethics of alcohol consumption, he flatly responded that he would never debate a woman, “especially not one I think is crazy.”<sup>110</sup>

Two highly publicized Brotherhood events more clearly illustrate the ideological divides between Graf and Bacarisse’s particular brands of Socialism: Jacob S. Coxey’s BCC sponsored talk and Bacarisse’s meeting with Bishop Davis Sessums. Graf modeled his labor organizing on Coxey’s Army and advocated direct action to dramatize the plight of New Orleans’ unemployed. In 1894, Coxey had assembled 2,000 unemployed men and women into the United States Industrial Army to march on Washington, D.C.<sup>111</sup> The

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108 “Coxey’s Army,” 12.

109 Phillip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement from Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 214.

110 “Carrie Nation’s Second Day Here,” *Daily Picayune* (December 21, 1907): 11.

111 “Coxey’s Army,” *The Oregon Encyclopedia*,  
[http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/coxey\\_s\\_army/](http://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/coxey_s_army/).

BCC incorporated his demands that Congress reduce the 18-percent national unemployment rate by placing all unemployed workers, regardless of race, in a national public works program. Yet while he embraced Coxe's political platform, Bacarisse avoided direct action; he believed public education campaigns would persuade New Orleanians to join the cooperative commonwealth. Graf and Bacarisse never reconciled these two tactics and publicly attacked each other's Socialist pedigrees, which the press gleefully exploited to undermine the BCC's credibility.

A longtime admirer, Graf persuaded Coxe to discuss his 1894 Non-Interest-Bearing Bonds Bill at the BCC's first public event in late February 1897.<sup>112</sup> During a nearly two hour-long speech on the benefits of Socialism, Bacarisse breathlessly enthused that the Ohio gubernatorial candidate initiative would enable the "masses" to "earn an honest living" and deliver society from poverty-created "tramps and criminals."<sup>113</sup> Finally, one man "tugged violently and frequently at the...speaker's coat tails" to allow Coxe to speak.<sup>114</sup> After thrilling the audience with exploits of Coxe's Army, the guest of honor declared that the "non-interest bond" was the "sole and only remedy for the diseased condition of the American people."

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112 "Religious," *Daily Picayune* (May 3, 1896): 9; "Coxe Talks to the Co-operative Commonwealth and its Guests," *Daily Picayune* (February 27, 1897): 10; Joseph Patterson Smith, ed., *History of the Republican Party in Ohio* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1898), 1: 664.

113 "Coxe to Talk," *Daily Picayune* (February 28, 1897): 10.

114 "Coxe Talks to the Co-operative," 10.

In order to improve the country's public infrastructure, Coxey proposed that the federal government establish a \$500 investment plan.<sup>115</sup> The U.S. Treasury Department would loan non-interest-bearing bonds in paper currency to municipal and state governments to establish public works projects and employ thousands of out-of-work laborers. Rejecting both gold and silver currency standards, Coxey lambasted Democrats, Republicans, and Populists alike for serving corporations, which he claimed had profited from each party's economic plan.<sup>116</sup> His fiery talk galvanized Graf to stage two (abortive) mass parades to demand that Mayor Walter Flower borrow money from the state or federal government to fund public works projects for the city's unemployed, replicating Coxey's non-interest-bearing bonds program.<sup>117</sup>

To secure legitimacy among respectable New Orleanians, Bacarisse also cultivated allies among public intellectuals in the city. For instance, Bacarisse and the BCC closely followed the Christian Socialist career of Bishop Davis Sessums of the Protestant Episcopal Church of Louisiana.<sup>118</sup> Sessums was a controversial figure: he believed in the capacity of the "Christian principle of cooperation to improve industrial

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115 H.W. Brands, *The Reckless Decade: American in the 1890s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 162; Jacob S. Coxey, *The Coxey Plan* (Massilon, OH: Jacob S. Coxey, 1914), 62.

116 "Coxey Talks to the Co-operative," 10.

117 "Coxey's Army: To Have an Imitation in a Parade and Meeting Here," *Daily Picayune* (June 3, 1897): 12; "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

118 "In Connection," *The Dawn* 6, no. 11 (November 1894): 1; "Sessums, Davis," Louisiana Historical Association, <http://lahistory.org/site36.php>.

relations” and solve modern social ills.<sup>119</sup> His unabashedly Socialist sermons sparked the ire of ministers nationwide who decried Sessums’ “heterodox” religious views.<sup>120</sup>

Hoping that Sessums would endorse the Brotherhood’s cooperative ideals and thereby garner the new organization much needed respect, in March 1897 Bacarisse visited Sessums to discuss Socialism and the labor movement.<sup>121</sup> Since Sessums believed a cooperative economy could improve society, Bacarisse hoped he would also see that a labor movement instituting a national cooperative political and economic system would eliminate “unnatural human miseries and social anxieties.” However, Sessums rejected political action, “as that pertained more to the province of statesmen and lawmakers of the country.” Ultimately, social “evolution was the law, not revolution.” Sessums’ assumption that the Brotherhood advocated “revolution” was one that dogged the cooperative throughout its existence.

### **The Spatial Politics of Race**

One moment in particular best distills how the cooperative grappled with the thorny entanglements of radical protest, racial antagonism, and oppositional grassroots performance in late nineteenth-century New Orleans. Determined to replicate Coxey’s Army in New Orleans, Graf called on unemployed men to assemble at Globe Hall in Congo Square on June 4, 1897.<sup>122</sup> Citing the great desire for economic relief among

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119 “Bishop Sessums Called Upon by the Co-operative Commonwealth,” *Daily Picayune* (March 12, 1897): 11.

120 “Wells Without Water,” *Catholic Champion* (July 1897): 180; “Bishop Sessums Breaks Silence,” *Boston Evening Transcript* (May 11, 1897): 12.

121 “Bishop Sessums Called Upon,” 11.

122 “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7.

unemployed laborers, he invited the Carpenters' Union and other trade organizations to march "in a peaceful column" from Congo Square in Tremé to Lafayette Square and address Mayor Flower on "how to remedy existing evils."<sup>123</sup> Additionally, the Brotherhood would present a petition to Louisiana Governor Foster to borrow from the state or federal treasury in order to create an emergency work relief fund.

Graf strategically raised the specter of massive, integrated labor unrest to dramatize the seriousness of the cooperative's mission. To that end, he traded on Congo Square's notoriety as a politicized space for black labor organizers. While Graf assured the public that the event would be a "peaceful parade," he predictably "aroused some uneasiness" among city officials "in the face of disturbances in other cities when meetings of a somewhat similar kind had been or were attempted to be held."<sup>124</sup>

Selecting Globe Hall and Congo Square for the site of the BCC's integrated protest was not just provocative; it also embodied the tumultuous confluence of the cooperative's European, Creole of color, and Cuban intellectual currents. Since the 1700s, Congo Square had been the site of a heady convergence of Afro-Creole cultural practice, religious ritual, and political organizing.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, white tourists and New Orleans officials viewed it with a mixture of fascination and disapproval. Until the 1880s, visitors to Congo Square on Sunday evenings might observe or participate in African diasporic musical and dance performances using percussive instruments from

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123 "The Picayune's Telephone," *Daily Picayune* (June 2, 1897): 6; "Coxey's Army," 12.

124 "Coxey's Army," 12.

125 Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011): 73-74.

Africa and the West Indies. These weekly performances of Afro-Cuban and Caribbean percussive music influenced early jazz musicians who also continued to perform at Congo Square on Sundays. Additionally, constructed in 1851, Globe Hall was an important entertainment venue and meeting space for African Americans: Jazz originators Buddy Bolden and Manuel Perez, a Creole of Color cornetist, regularly performed for black audiences at Globe Hall at the turn-of-the century.<sup>126</sup>

Further, Congo Square was also an important site of political drama of all kinds: organizers of all ethnicities held political events, union meetings, and campaign rallies at Congo Square throughout the 1800s.<sup>127</sup> The square also harbored less savory, extralegal meetings under its dusty, whitewashed trees. In 1891, after 19 Sicilian Americans were acquitted of the murder of Police Chief David Hennessy, a vigilante mob of 10,000 people, including many of the city's leaders, dragged 11 Italians from the Orleans Parish Prison near Congo Square. The crowd shot or clubbed nine men to death, before hanging one man from a lamppost and another from a tree in Congo Square.<sup>128</sup> Graf himself clumsily referenced the atrocity in June 1897 when he argued that the BCC's protest march did not need a parade permit because like the vigilante mob, organizers were exercising their freedom of expression and assembly. Graf ambiguously referred to the riot as a "meeting of the people," who "had no permit to hold a meeting, yet...were not

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126 Ibid., 30, 35-36.

127 Ibid., 19.

128 Keith Weldon Medley, *We as Freeman: Plessy V. Ferguson* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2003), 34; "The Scene at the Prison," *Times Democrat* (March 15, 1891); Humbert S. Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981): 62.



interfered with” by the police.<sup>129</sup> In contrast to the tragic, violent scene, the BCC promised to observe all laws. Yet critics cited Graf’s nod to the Sicilian massacre as further evidence of the BCC’s lawlessness and its members’ “inflamed passions.”<sup>130</sup>

Graf’s proposed mass demonstration and calls for public works projects provoked outrage from the public, city officials, and members of the BCC. One *Daily Picayune* editor howled that Graf’s plan revealed his scant knowledge of American politics.<sup>131</sup> Because immigrant agitators like Graf had been “ruled over [by] emperors or other autocrats” in their home country, they erroneously believed that American municipalities could employ “at a moment’s warning an army of [unemployed] men.” Further, Louisiana was powerless to lend money to cities in need, and the federal treasury could not print more money without devaluing the national currency and plunging the country deeper into debt. Finally, the editor propounded that a Socialist government was one in which “the government owns everything and the people nothing...A rich man is an impossibility.” True reform could only come at the behest of Congressional leaders; Graf’s vision of government welfare was an economically ruinous “fantasy.”

In any case, the demonstration was postponed and eventually canceled because Mayor Flower and Acting Mayor Abraham Brittin refused to grant the organization a parade permit on the grounds that the event was “unnecessary and calculated to cause harm.”<sup>132</sup> The city leaders argued that New Orleans had no money to provide relief; the

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129 “Coxey’s Army,” 12.

130 Excelsior, “Women and the Labor Question,” *Daily Picayune* (June 6, 1897): 16.

131 “As to the Unemployed,” *Daily Picayune* (June 3, 1897): 4.

132 “That Mass Meeting” *Daily Picayune* (June 8, 1897): 3.

event's "incendiary" speeches would incite unemployed participants; and if Graf wanted to address city officials, the BCC should form a committee rather than disturbing "the peace and quiet of New Orleans."<sup>133</sup> Not only were New Orleans' elite wary of the BCC's working-class and multiracial membership, but its status as a member-owned cooperative committed to democratic decision-making and economic equality was also deeply threatening to conservative city and business interests.

Worse yet, Graf's contentious meeting with city officials jeopardized any possibility of a working relationship with the Flower administration. When Brittin refused to give Graf a demonstration permit, Graf "made himself so objectionable that he was finally ordered out of the office."<sup>134</sup> As Graf was hustled out of the room, Brittin advised the labor organizer that city police would closely monitor future Brotherhood meetings. Brittin was true to his word; subsequent events hosted by the BCC and its offshoot organization, the LMPA, were attended by police officers all too eager to arrest "unruly" cooperative members.<sup>135</sup> Officers forced labor organizers to refrain from discussing inflammatory subjects such as political revolution, peaceful or not.<sup>136</sup> Police presence undoubtedly had a chilling effect on the cooperative's activities.

### **Mounting Tension Within the Brotherhood**

In addition to close city surveillance, negative newspaper coverage also exacerbated tensions within the BCC, whose members already tacked between

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133 "Graf Acts Coxe Just for One Day," 3.

134 "That Mass Meeting," 3.

135 "Ready to Solve the Great Problem," 3; "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

136 "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

demanding militant direct action to advance the interests of the working-class, and gently encouraging employer-employee cooperation through education and peaceful dialogue. Initially, Bacarisse and Graf eagerly exploited the New Orleans press to inform the public about the righteousness of the BCC's aims and the benefits of Socialism in general. The two men were fervent believers in the democratic power of the press, and to that end they granted many interviews with the *Daily Picayune* and invited reporters to their organizational meetings. The BCC believed that print media was a forum through which "plain people" could discuss and resolve the city and nation's social, economic, and political ills.<sup>137</sup> In order to return society to "more Christian foundations," Bacarisse theorized that a free press would spark a peaceful revolution without spilling a "single drop of brotherly human blood." Yet Graf's unsanctioned mass march fed already fraught internal debates over the BCC's origins, philosophies, and organizing strategies.

Fearing reprisals from anti-labor opponents, the BCC immediately distanced itself from Graf's public protest and insisted that it rejected class antagonism. In a missive printed in the *Daily Picayune*, Bacarisse and Hyldahl stated that they were confounded by Graf's blatant mischaracterization of the BCC's ideological foundation and organizational goals.<sup>138</sup> For example, in one interview, Graf had stated that the National Union was headed by Eugene V. Debs and was based out of the Ruskin Colony, a utopian Socialist community in Tennessee.<sup>139</sup> In actuality, however, Debs served only briefly as

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137 Bacarisse, "The Problems of Industrial Life," 6.

138 "Graf Acts Coxey Just for One Day," 3; Eugene Bacarisse, "Socialism Set Forth by a Socialist," 16.

139 "Graf Acts Coxey Just for One Day," 3.

the National Union state representative; Reverend Myron W. Reed was its president. Further, the Ruskin Colony and the National Union were decidedly separate entities. Named after John Ruskin, a British social theorist, the Ruskin Colony believed that a network of rural communes would rival and eventually displace the American industrial system.<sup>140</sup> While National Union organizers had visited Tennessee in the hopes of establishing their own agrarian commune, by June 1897, they had settled on Washington State as the cooperative's home.<sup>141</sup> Most significantly, while Ruskin colonists advocated communitarianism and Progressive reform as merely one avenue for improving American society, the National Union proposed a nationwide Socialist colonization plan.

After explaining the BCC's origins, Bacarisse and Hyldahl stifled any whiff of anarchism or incendiary rabble-rousing. Hyldahl, a staid, middle-aged Danish bookkeeper, reassured readers that "demonstrations of the kind contemplated by Mr. Graf are not on the programme of the Brotherhood."<sup>142</sup> Further, soothing fears that the BCC consisted of hundreds of angry black and white laborers, the men insisted that the cooperative's membership rolls were quite small.<sup>143</sup> Contrary to Graf's claims, no unions had requested a mass protest, nor had the BCC proposed petitioning the governor and mayor for unemployment relief. In short, the two men argued that their organization was

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140 William Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia in the New South: The Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, 1894-1901* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 9.

141 LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound*, 61; Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia in the New South*, 8.

142 Ibid.; "Hyldahl, Carl," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards' Directory Co., 1898), Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Carl Hyldahl," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

143 "Graf Acts Coxey Just for One Day," 3.

eminently respectable; Graf had portrayed the BCC as a volatile mob set on overthrowing the city or state government to advance his own self-aggrandizing interests.

Although the proposed mass protest was quashed, Bacarisse continued to write to the *Daily Picayune*, imploring readers to understand the organization's "official" perspective on the labor situation. On June 6, 1897, Bacarisse explained that Graf had betrayed the peace-loving BCC by attempting to organize a public, potentially violent, demonstration, and damaging the Brotherhood's reputation in an act of shameless self-promotion.<sup>144</sup> Rather than whipping the unemployed into murderous revolution, the Brotherhood's goal was the "patient education of the people" to popularize "universal co-operative socialism, both national and international" over competitive capitalism.

Most irksome to Bacarisse was that Graf was organizing BCC events without the consent of the cooperative as a whole. Although Graf was "only a simple member," he had circumvented the BCC's referendum policy rather than formally consulting other members. Given that much of the nation remained plunged in an economic depression, staging a mass unemployment protest had far-reaching implications beyond the confines of New Orleans, and therefore needed to be carefully organized. Graf should have proposed the event to the appropriate committee, which would have then formally presented it to the "entire order throughout the country" for their approval. Instead, by speaking for the cooperative, Graf had seized authoritative control, rejecting Socialism's commitment to the "dissipation of all autocratic powers--whether vested in individuals or

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144 Bacarisse, "Socialism Set Forth by a Socialist," 16.

in the body politic.” His individualistic and selfish behavior perpetuated the “social conditions that so goes to make of this world ‘such a hell on earth.’” In short, Graf was invested in the very power structure Socialism was attempting to eradicate.

Bacarisse and Graf’s disagreement over tactics and philosophy persisted throughout the Brotherhood’s lifespan.<sup>145</sup> When Graf again organized a protest march from Congo Square to City Hall on July 16, 1897, the parade collapsed because cooperative members refused to coordinate with each other. Bacarisse refused to address the confused crowd, claiming that Graf had organized the event on his own. Worse, no one arranged parade permits or rented Globe Hall. The event finally dispersed when both Graf and Bacarisse were arrested, and the BCC dissolved shortly thereafter.

The BCC’s reluctance to define its philosophical framework and ultimate purpose hampered its members’ demands for institutional change and would spell the cooperative’s demise after a mere eight months. The BCC was caught between two contradictory intellectual impulses that divided radicals at the local and national level: whether to mobilize industrial workers for militant political action or to instead embrace communitarian ideals. Graf identified with working-class men, while Bacarisse considered himself an intellectual wedded to harmonizing labor relations, broadly defined. While the BCC adapted cooperative, labor, and Socialist principles to suit local economic, political, and social imperatives, it did not resolve the fundamental contradictions and questions concerning the place of race, class, and radical action in the

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<sup>145</sup> “Ready to Solve the Great Problem,” 3.

labor movement. However, the BCC's last radical action prompted the formation of the Laboringmen's Protective Association (LMPA), the cooperative's operational arm charged with realizing its vision of a "universal brotherhood of man" in practical terms.<sup>146</sup>

### **The Laboringmen's Protective Association**

The LMPA formed as the Populist movement disintegrated and political rights for African Americans and poor whites evaporated. Louisiana's integrated Populist movement had, until the 1896 defeat of William Jennings Bryan and the People's Party, seriously threatened the Regular Democratic stranglehold over state politics.<sup>147</sup> The party's loss had wide-reaching ramifications. That year, legislators required voters to reregister after January 1897 and barred electoral officials from assisting illiterate voters, effectively disenfranchising 50 percent of the white population in New Orleans, and 90 percent of the black population.<sup>148</sup>

Many LMPA members had been active within this now rapidly unraveling grassroots coalition of progressive Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, and Populists.<sup>149</sup> Joseph T. Faust and R.D. Wilde were AFL chapter secretaries and People's Party members, while Jacob Lang belonged to the Socialist Labor Party.<sup>150</sup> Still others were vocal Republicans, like August Graf and black longshoreman R.W.B. Gould, while black

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146 "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

147 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 156.

148 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 147.

149 "The Unemployed Miss Their Dinners," *Daily Picayune* (August 9, 1897): 3.

150 *Ibid.*; "Mayor and Unemployed" *Daily Picayune* (September 18, 1897): 3; "Local Populists," *Daily Picayune* (October 3, 1897): 12.

publisher Julius W. White was a reformist Democrat.<sup>151</sup> As the diversity of political allegiances can attest, LMPA members constantly debated which worldview best encapsulated the cooperative's goals.

Nonetheless, the LMPA's historical significance lies in its ability to negotiate with city officials and private businessmen to ensure New Orleans' black and white laborers' employment within an emerging municipal public works system. The LMPA was also an important refuge for radicals hoping to repair the city's broken cross-racial labor and political alliances. However, when a yellow fever epidemic froze trade and increased unemployment, the LMPA repudiated ethnic and racial collaboration in order to preserve "home labor" contracts. This section will examine the political and economic factors contributing to LMPA's short-lived success and demise.

On July 17, 1897, the day after the BCC's abortive mass march on City Hall, a large group of men again gathered around Globe Hall, waiting for the LMPA to convene its first meeting. An offshoot of the BCC, the LMPA functioned as an integrated lobbyist organization advocating for workers' rights.<sup>152</sup> By the time Graf and Bacarisse called the meeting to order, nearly 400 people swelled the auditorium of Globe Hall, about 50 of who were black. Despite heavy police supervision, the *Daily Picayune* worried that

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151 "The Republican State Convention," *Daily Picayune* (January 30, 1896): 8; "Out in the Country Democrats Shout for White Supremacy," *Daily Picayune* (March 13, 1896): 9; "Colored Democrats," *Daily Picayune* (May 16, 1897): 15; "White, Julius," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1898), Ancestry.com; "Louisiana Politics," *Daily Picayune* (February 4, 1892): 2.

152 "Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience," *Daily Picayune* (July 18, 1897): 16.



LMPA meeting would break out into a “race riot.”<sup>153</sup> Instead, Bacarisse clearly outlined the new organization’s priorities. Shelving his ponderous lectures on Socialist philosophy, he informed members that the LMPA was working with Populists and the AFL to negotiate drainage contracts for unemployed workers.<sup>154</sup>

Until 1895, New Orleans’ crushing debt had stalled public works projects such as dock renovations, and new drainage, sewage, or water treatment systems.<sup>155</sup> The city’s repayment of its Reconstruction debt and the creation of the nonpartisan and reformist Citizens League dramatically altered New Orleans’ political landscape. Opposed to the entrenched Democratic Ring, which had been sympathetic to labor and rewarded loyal white working-class constituents with city patronage jobs, the Citizens League was comprised of prominent businessmen and lawyers who ran on a platform of commercial investment, balanced budget, and improved schools.<sup>156</sup> Elected to office in 1896, Mayor Flower and Acting Mayor Brittin rejected the old political patronage system. Instead, they funded massive public works projects to generate jobs and reinvestment in the economically depressed city. For example, as a member of City Council, Brittin created a single city agency, rather than various private corporations, to oversee public works projects that would dramatically modernize New Orleans’s drainage and sewerage system and public infrastructure.<sup>157</sup> City politicians now funded vast civic improvement programs

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153 “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7.

154 “Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience,” 16.

155 Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 53-54.

156 *Ibid.*, 37-44.

157 Henry E. Chambers, *A History of Louisiana* (Chicago: The American Historical Society, 1925), 2: 101-102.

in order to appease New Orleans voters.<sup>158</sup> The LMPA was perfectly poised, then, to demand the unemployed be included in the city's infrastructure redevelopment.<sup>159</sup>

## Demographics

There was significant overlap between the BCC and the LMPA's membership rolls.<sup>160</sup> Their rank-and-file consisted primarily of unemployed men, while officers were a mix of white-collar workers and skilled laborers. Most members were German, Irish, and black or white Creoles, and a majority were bartenders or dockworkers. Members' geographic locations were tied to their ethnicity and occupations. Mirroring the city's demographics, LMPA's working class white Creoles, Germans, and Irish lived in Bywater and along the city's docks.<sup>161</sup> For example, the organization's four office clerks were German-American or white Creoles who lived in the French Quarter, Tremé, and the Seventh Ward.<sup>162</sup> Likewise, the LMPA's German bartenders worked in the Central Business District's "immigrant belt" serving working-class immigrants.<sup>163</sup>

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158 Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 54.

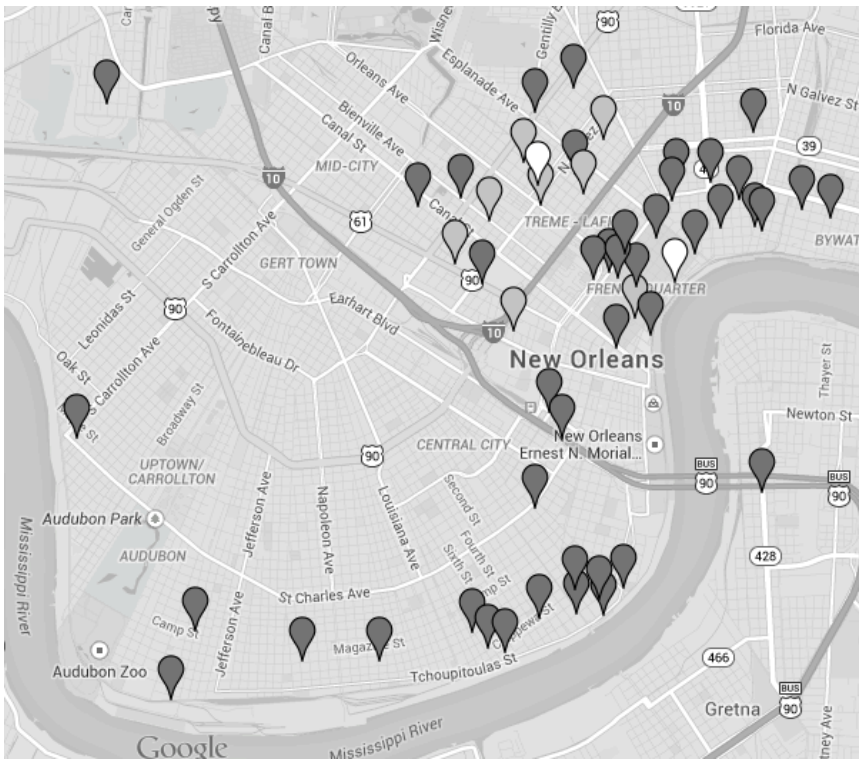
159 "Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience," 16.

160 "The Governor Asked to Appeal," 7.

161 Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 249.

162 "Demanade, Simon Thelesmar," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards' City Directory, 1895), Ancestry.com; 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Demanade, Simon," Thibodeaux, Lafourche Parish, Louisiana; accessed through Ancestry.com; "Wetzel, William," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1895), Ancestry.com; "Zander, Henry Louis," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1898), Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Joseph Abel Favret," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

163 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 38.



**Figure 2:** Demographic map of BCC and LMPA members' residences. White dots are Latin American members; light gray are African American, and dark gray are white.

Unlike the Brotherhood, which only had one black officer for all its racially inclusive talk, at least nine African Americans were LMPA directors or committee members.<sup>164</sup> Black LMPA members lived in predominantly Creole of color neighborhoods in the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Wards. They worked at a variety of occupations, including plasterers, drivers, day laborers, slaters, sugar weighers, and

<sup>164</sup> Three African Americans, including Rudolph Charles, served as sergeant-of-arms, another man was first vice-president (A.J. Holmes), and one served on the finance committee (Victor Joachim). Lafayette Tharpe and R.W.B. Gould, influential black dockworkers, spoke at a LMPA meeting. J.W. White served on the Ways, Means, and Employment Committee. "The Unemployed Miss Their Dinners," 3. Additionally, Caleb Yancey and Henry Desalles served on a committee to meet with Mayor Flower. See "A Labor Meeting," 6.

newspaper publishers.<sup>165</sup> With two longshoremen and a black screwman, however, waterfront workers members predominated.<sup>166</sup> Significantly, black membership shaped the spaces the LMPA occupied. For several months, for instance, the LMPA met at Globe Hall and the Hall of the Friends of Hope Society, an important dance hall and meeting space for black and white organizations on Tremé Street, bordering Congo Square.<sup>167</sup> For example, protesting the 1890 Separate Car Act, which legalized the segregation of public accommodations, the Citizens Committee regularly met at Hopes Hall to draft its Supreme Court lawsuit, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*.<sup>168</sup>

### **Black Activists in the LMPA**

While the LMPA was open to African Americans, its contentious second meeting was the turning point for sustained black leadership. Echoing Populist rhetoric, Bacarisse's welcoming speech gestured vaguely (and emptily) to cross-racial cooperation when he declared that both white and black workers, enslaved to monopolistic corporations, must unite to overthrow their capitalist oppressors.<sup>169</sup> Yet white members erupted in protest when two men, Paul Galatas, a white painter, and A.J. Holmes, a black

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165 1880 United States Census "Desalles, Henry," New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Desalle, Henry J.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1899): 248, Ancestry.com.

166 "Charles, Rudolph" *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1898), Ancestry.com; 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Rudolph Charles," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

167 "Imported Contract Laborers," *Daily Picayune* (August 19, 1897): 3; Medley, *We as Freeman*, 33; "A Labor Meeting," *Daily Picayune* (September 23, 1897): 6.

168 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 76, 88, 200; Martinet, *The Violation of a Constitutional Right*, 9.

169 "The Unemployed Miss Their Dinners," 3.

customs house employee, were nominated for vice president.<sup>170</sup> Finally, Graf declared in “fractured English” that as a Socialist he felt Holmes should be permitted to run for office, while an unnamed Northerner argued that the city labor movement suffered from “dissension with the negro and refusing to organize with him.” Swept up in racial solidarity, the LMPA elected Holmes as first vice president, and later president.<sup>171</sup> Subsequently, Creoles of color and English-speaking African Americans formed the backbone of the LMPA and competed with the AFL for control over its direction. They demanded respect from white peers: black members and directors “insisted upon having the floor” at meetings, served on committees, gave keynote speeches, and met with city officials and business leaders.<sup>172</sup>

The LMPA’s black members were well acquainted with the potentially explosive racial dynamics of segregated New Orleans. To them, the lack of equitable working conditions and political rights jeopardized their very lives. For example, LMPA member Rudolph Charles, a slater, was murdered by a drunken police officer in 1905.<sup>173</sup> Charles and his three friends, Creole of color cotton screwmen, had just finished a long day working on the levee. They were playing cards in a Tremé bar catering to African Americans when Officer Matthew J. Fredericks walked up to Charles and slurred, “Hello, big nigger, what are you doing here?” After a few heated words were exchanged, Fredericks shot Charles in the chest.

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170 “Galatas, Paul,” *Soards’ New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards’ Directory Co., 1895), Ancestry.com; “Custom House Notes,” *Daily Picayune* (October 27, 1892): 3.

171 “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7; “A Labor Meeting,” 6.

172 “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7.

173 “Officer Fredericks is Accused of Murder,” *Daily Picayune* (December 16, 1905): 4.

Given the high stakes of securing black economic and political security, it is unsurprising that the LMPA's African American members were veterans of biracial and black political and labor organizing. Black members tended to be politically engaged and active in the labor movement. For example, black LPMA invited guest R.W.B. Gould was an important Republican organizer; at the 1896 Republican state convention, Gould represented the city's Tenth Ward, alongside Louis Martinet and Rodolphe Desdunes, who advocated a Populist-planter fusion ticket.<sup>174</sup> Gould was also a committee member at an all-black Republican convention held at Longshoreman's Hall in New Orleans.<sup>175</sup>

Similarly, first vice president A.J. Holmes was a U.S. Custom House sugar weigher at a time when the federal building was a hotbed of black leadership.<sup>176</sup> Former Republican governor Henry Clay Warmoth was appointed Commissioner of Customs for the Port of New Orleans in 1890 and appointed many loyal Republican Creoles of color to the Custom House during the early 1890s. Holmes' fellow employees included assistant weigher R.W.B. Gould, cooperative organizer Walter Cohen, as well as Citizens Committee founders Martinet, Desdunes, and Paul Trévigne.<sup>177</sup> Holmes' Port of New Orleans position exposed him to the lasting effects of the depression on dockworkers,

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174 "The Ebony Brother as a Statesman," *Daily Picayune* (August 16, 1896): 10; "The Republican State Convention," *Daily Picayune* (January 30, 1896): 8; Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 202; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 88.

175 "The Ebony Brother as a Statesman," 10.

176 "Custom House Notes," 3; Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 230.

177 "Gould, R.W.B.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1901), Ancestry.com; Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 230; Flucker and Savage, *African Americans of New Orleans*, 28; Smith, *Footprints of Black Louisiana*, 54.

while enabling him to cultivate relationships with public works and city officials to negotiate favorable labor contracts for the unemployed.

Other black LMPA leaders aligned with Democratic and Populist parties in their pursuit of political equality for African Americans. For example, a former Populist, Julius W. White was an active black Democrat.<sup>178</sup> In 1897, his publication, *Weekly News*, organized a state convention for African American Democrats, and White served on its executive committee.<sup>179</sup> He urged black voters to unite to protect their “future political welfare” against the unrelenting movement for disenfranchisement. A year later, White formed a committee of black Democrats urging legislators to retain black voting rights.<sup>180</sup>

One African American LMPA member in particular, Louis Henry Mathieu, was intricately connected to Republican politics, Creole of color and Cuban community life, and cooperative politics. A plasterer, in the late 1890s Mathieu lived in Tremé within blocks of LMPA members Eugene Bacarisse and Ernest Stoltz, as well as prominent Cuban émigré and liberationist José Echezabal.<sup>181</sup> His mother, Marie Adele Gomez, was herself Cuban-American, and the Mathieus lived alongside Cubans in the Fifth and Sixth

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178 “Louisiana Politics,” *Daily Picayune* (February 4, 1892): 2; “Colored Democrats,” 15.

179 “Colored Democrats,” 15.

180 “The Suffrage Committee,” *Daily Picayune* (February 25, 1898): 14.

181 1900 United States Census, s.v. “Ernesto Stoltz,” New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; “Bacarisse, Eugene,” *Soards’* (1898), 86; “Mathieu, Louis H.” and “Mathieu, Felix,” *Soards’ New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards’ Directory Co., 1895), Ancestry.com; “An Entertainment by the Circulo Cubano-Americano,” *Daily Picayune* (February 11, 1894): 6; “Joseph Eschezabel,” *Soards’ New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards’ Directory Co., 1897): 981, Ancestry.com.

Wards.<sup>182</sup> Louis' father and uncle had also been free people of color and worked as cigar makers in the 1870s.<sup>183</sup>

Within the context of an increasingly repressive political climate set on denying black civic participation, Louis Henry Mathieu and his family's involvement in Creole of color political and associational life is significant. Mathieu's father was a black Republican appointed to supervise the 1888 presidential elections in the Sixth Ward.<sup>184</sup> He also supported *The Crusader*, the radical mouthpiece of the Citizens Committee.<sup>185</sup> Also, foreshadowing Mathieu's interest in cooperative politics, his uncle was a founding member of the Franc-Amis Benevolent Association and the secretary of a Masonic Fusion Lodge, a Scottish Rite temple with prominent black Creole leaders.<sup>186</sup>

Committed to safeguarding the welfare of black residents, community-based social clubs, mutual aid societies, and benevolent associations equitably distributed goods and services otherwise unavailable to impoverished African Americans, while also serving as a launching ground and recruitment channel for more formal political activity for Tremé's black and Cuban residents. For example, the Citizens Committee depended on the black organizations notary public Louis Martinet incorporated to support its

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182 1870 United States Census, s.v. "Felix Mathieu," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1910 United States Census, s.v. "Adele Mathew, Adele," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

183 1860 United States Census, s.v. "Felix Mathieu," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

184 "Supervisors of Election," *Daily Picayune* (October 27, 1888): 8.

185 "Some of Our Patrons," *The Crusader* 2, no. 23 (July 19, 1890): 3.

186 "An Act," *Weekly Louisianan* (July 6, 1871): 3; "Advertisement," *New Orleans Tribune* (December 24, 1867): 1; "Attorney Rene Calvin Metoyer (1858-1937)," CreoleGen, <http://www.creolegen.org/2012/09/15/attorney-rene-calvin-metoyer-1858-1937/>.



campaign to overturn the 1890 Separate Car Act.<sup>187</sup> Martinet would even incorporate Mathieu's medical insurance cooperative in 1897.<sup>188</sup>

Louis Mathieu developed an abiding interest in cooperative principles as a means of providing medical and funeral benefits to New Orleans' black residents. As early as 1889, he had served as the secretary of the Senior Co-operators' Benevolent and Fraternal Association, a medical insurance cooperative that provided black Creoles affordable access to doctors' visits, prescription drugs, and burial services.<sup>189</sup> It also held social events for its members at Congo Square's Globe Hall. Similarly, Mathieu was a member of the Co-operators Companions Debating Social Circle, which held spirited debates and threw picnics and brass band concerts in Loeper's Park, an important site for the evolution of New Orleans jazz.<sup>190</sup>

However, Mathieu's most important contribution to the city's cooperative movement was his role in forming the Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association in 1894. Juvenile Co-operators was a Seventh Ward medical insurance cooperative for black Catholic youths and their families that operated under the auspices of the Senior Co-operators.<sup>191</sup> After turning 25, members could transfer their membership to the Senior Co-operators. As president, in 1897, Mathieu formally

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187 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 88, 200; "Louis A. Martinet Records," New Orleans Notarial Archives, <http://www.notarialarchives.org/martinet.htm>.

188 "Advertisement," *New Orleans Tribune* (December 24, 1867): 1; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 75; "Louis A. Martinet Records."

189 "Notes About Town," *Weekly Pelican* (November 16, 1889): 3; "Attorney Rene Calvin Metoyer," CreoleGen; "Scope Notes," box 1, JCFBMAA Records.

190 "The City," *The Crusader* 2, no. 23 (July 19, 1890): 3; Daniel Hardie, *Exploring Early Jazz: The Origins and Evolution of the New Orleans Style* (Lincoln: Writers Club Press, 2002): 26.

191 "Journal of Minutes," (July 8, 1894), 2, box 1, folder 2, JCFBMAA Records.

incorporated Juvenile Co-operators as a state-recognized organization and defined much of its organizational structure.<sup>192</sup> Although politically disenfranchised, within the cooperative, members democratically voted on directors, a committee supervising individual cases to ensure proper medical care, and service providers.<sup>193</sup> Mathieu no doubt lent his ten years of cooperative experience to the budding LMPA.

### **Interracial Organizing and Waterfront Workers**

While Graf and Bacarisse's Socialist beliefs compelled at least lip service to racial inclusiveness, militant waterfront laborers within the cooperative's ranks may have encouraged the LMPA to remain integrated, despite opposition from some members. At least five veterans of 1880s and early 1890s biracial waterfront unionizing efforts lent their organizing expertise to the nascent cooperative. Three prominent black longshoremen and screwmen union leaders, R.W.B. Gould, Lafayette Tharpe, and Victor Joachim were all early LMPA members.<sup>194</sup> Similarly, the Acadian George Webster Delesdernier was a member of the Screwmen's Benevolent Association, where his brother served as first vice president.<sup>195</sup>

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192 "Historical Notes," 2, box 1, JCFBMAA Records; "Journal of Minutes," (September 9, 1897), 51, folder 2, box 1, JCFBMAA Records.

193 Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*, 140-141; "Journal of Minutes," (January 22, 1895), 10, folder 2, box 1, JCFBMAA Records.

194 "The Unemployed Miss Their Dinners," 3; "Colored Bishops," *Daily Picayune* (January 23, 1897): 2; Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 119, 129, 151; "Case of the Steamship Agents Against the Screwmen," *Daily Picayune* (May 10, 1903): 16.

195 1880 United States Census, s.v. "Leon Lacoste," New Orleans, Orleans, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Leon Lacoste," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "George W. Delesdernier," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "The Screwmen March on Labor Day," *Daily Picayune* (November 26, 1897): 8.

New Orleans dockworkers' possessed an unusually progressive ethic of racial collaboration. Labor historians Daniel Rosenberg and Erik Arnesen argue that New Orleans' cosmopolitanism fostered the dockworkers' unusual race relations at the end of century. An influx of European trade unionists influenced native dockworkers' sense of class solidarity.<sup>196</sup> Many organized waterfront laborers were also militant black Sixth Ward Creoles who ardently fought for both social and political equality during the 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>197</sup> The multiethnic atmosphere fostered less restrictive racial relations. Finally, because work was seasonal, laborers often belonged to more than one union, which promoted cross-union cooperation. The result was a tradition of interracial collaboration across and within waterfront unions.<sup>198</sup>

Although many New Orleanians were under- or unemployed, the depression hit the dockyards particularly hard. Competition for work between black and white longshoremen and screwmen unions ignited months of racial violence in 1894 and 1895 as white longshoremen attacked black dockworkers. The longshoremen riots left a legacy of racial antagonism and temporarily destroyed the powerful, biracial dock unions in New Orleans. It took six years for union organizers to repair interracial relations.

During the 1894 levee riots, future LMPA member R.W.B. Gould narrowly avoided death when, on March 12, two white longshoremen fired shotgun rounds into black cotton screwmen loading the steamship *Engineer*, docked at Harrison Wharf.<sup>199</sup>

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196 Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 6-8.

197 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*.

198 Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 7.

199 "Sensations in the Levee Riot Trial," *Daily Picayune* (July 26, 1895): 3.

That foggy morning, Gould hid between two bales of cotton as a mob of 200 to 300 white longshoremen stormed the surrounding wharves.<sup>200</sup> While he escaped with a flesh wound to his calf, one African American man, John Payne, was murdered. Eventually, Dave Burke and John Cullen were arrested, and at the subsequent trial, Gould served as state witness, along with many other waterfront workers. Tempers ran high; one white man cornered Gould during a court recess as he allegedly spoke to other witnesses and, cursing, accused Gould of colluding with his fellow black laborers.

Despite Gould's brush with death, he and other LMPA dockworkers were committed to repairing interracial alliances damaged during the riots. For example, Lafayette Tharpe, a leader of the Colored Longshoremen's Benevolent Association, declared that because Democrats oppressed blacks and poor whites alike, they must create an independent party.<sup>201</sup> Consequently, he and 25 black unionists joined the integrated Independent Workingmen's Political Club in 1894.<sup>202</sup> While soundly defeated in 1895, the club aimed to reform politics by electing "good men to office" and "place principle above party, patriotism above politics." Tharpe also was president of the Colored Laboringmen's Alliance, and, in concert with other black dockworkers unions, began to negotiate with white unions to set work rates and wages.<sup>203</sup> One meeting between white and black cotton screwmen and longshoremen resulted in both parties agreeing to boycott particular companies if they refused to hire union men, regardless of

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200 "Levee Riot Case a Record Breaker," *Daily Picayune* (June 21, 1895): 3.

201 "The Workingmen Now Taking Part," *Daily Picayune* (September 21, 1894): 3; "The Independents Have Organized," *Daily Picayune* (September 28, 1894): 10.

202 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 150.

203 "Levee Labor," *Daily Picayune* (August 17, 1896): 8.

race.<sup>204</sup> By 1896, waterfront workers were tentatively repairing ties with their black and white compatriots. Unionized dockworkers' may have therefore viewed their work within the LMPA as part of a larger effort to rebuild their shattered coalition.

### **Moderation and Compromise**

However, while the LMPA served as a temporary refuge for racially progressive dockworkers, its single-minded devotion to securing public works contracts would soon alienate black and politically radical members. Under fire from the press, police, and other labor organizers, the LMPA immediately began to divest themselves of their Socialist roots and pursued mainstream business, city, and labor alliances. Monitored by the police, the LMPA avoided outright polemics. Indeed, in keeping with the AFL's conservative craft unionism, any member using "inflammatory or revolutionary remarks or speeches" was fined \$1 and required to apologize to the LMPA body. LMPA officials also promised to expel members for a second offense.<sup>205</sup> Consequently, Bacarisse's rhetorical methods became increasingly subtle; Bacarisse often skirted the "very danger line of incendiarism" before "[tacking] back by declaring he was not advocating violence and bloodshed...The American people are now too enlightened for that."<sup>206</sup>

Additionally, the New Orleans press disparaged radical politics and the labor movement, which forced the BCC to first moderate its Socialist ideology before discarding it altogether.<sup>207</sup> For example, *The Daily Press* and *The Daily Picayune*

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204 "Levee Labor," *Daily Picayune* (September 1, 1896): 8.

205 "Bacarisse Resigns from Laboring Men" *Daily Picayune* (August 30, 1897): 3.

206 "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

207 Bacarisse, "The Problems of Industrial Life," 6.

portrayed Bacarisse as naïve and long-winded, given to obtuse pontifications about Socialism and the city's economic ills.<sup>208</sup> Consequently, Bacarisse became circumspect about describing the “socialistic metamorphosis throughout...the world” to avoid being “combated and antagonized” by newspaper staff.<sup>209</sup> Evading accusations of class warfare, Bacarisse broadened the definition of “laboringman” to encompass “the legitimate, honest rich man all the way gradually down to the lowest class or wage earners.”<sup>210</sup> Finally, the LMPA was careful to elect only respectable men as officers, barring divisive or unsavory characters to prove the organization's goodwill.

Eugene Bacarisse's August resignation as LMPA president vividly illustrates how the AFL's growing influence over the LMPA eviscerated its commitment to radical economic change and racial equality and led to its dramatic collapse.<sup>211</sup> In the 1880s, AFL head Samuel Gompers asserted, “working people must organize irrespective of creed, color, sex, nationality or politics” and organized integrated state and regional assemblies.<sup>212</sup> However, in the wake of intensifying supremacist ideology and expanding craft unionism nationally, the AFL began to charter segregated local chapters before limiting the organization to skilled white laborers. By the 1893 to 1897 Depression, Gompers had dispensed with racial inclusionary rhetoric entirely.

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208 “Coxey Talks to the Co-operative,” 10; “The Unemployed Miss Their Dinners,” 3.

209 Bacarisse, “The Problems of Industrial Life,” 6.

210 “Bacarisse Resigns from Laboring Men” 3.

211 “Bacarisse Will Resign: Neither Capital Nor Labor Will Give him Food,” *Daily Picayune* (August 14, 1897): 3.

212 Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 15.

Although a contingent of Socialists within the AFL remained dedicated to interracial and industrial organizing, Bacarisse felt increasingly pressured to moderate his political ideology to conform to conservative trade union ideals. After the LMPA threatened to oust August Graf for his bravado and political posturing, Graf also felt compelled to distance himself from his former revolutionary rhetoric; denying accusations that he was anarchist, Graf asserted that while his actions were “at certain times...a little excited,” he was “a man of family” who only wished to ensure his loved ones’ economic support.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, even as Socialists urged the AFL to fundamentally reject competitive capitalism by ushering in a national “cooperative commonwealth,” the craft union increasingly shunned radicalism and redoubled its reformist resolve.<sup>214</sup>

While Bacarisse had become a cooperative organizer to protest shoddy wages and subpar working conditions for all New Orleanians, he was dismayed to discover that the LMPA and AFL now rejected his Socialist platform. He characteristically proclaimed that he was “pushed to the very brink of starvation” by both the “plutocrats” unwilling to hire a Socialist union organizer, and “the stupid masses of the people” who refused to compensate him for his organizing efforts.<sup>215</sup> Further, Bacarisse felt stymied by capitalists’ fears that he wished to “stir up the masses to discontent, strife, and strikes.” Instead, he hoped to promote mutual understanding between capital and labor: peace, not revolution. Therefore, Bacarisse reluctantly stepped down as president. Furious that he

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213 August Graf, “Graf Not an Anarchist,” *Daily Picayune* (August 18, 1897): 7.

214 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 189; Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 15; William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 22-23.

215 “Bacarisse Resigns from Laboring Men,” 3.

had publicly criticized the organization, the LMPA gladly accepted his resignation and continued to censor any remaining radical activists. Ultimately, as pressure mounted to secure precious labor contracts from the city, LMPA organizers rejected the utopian ideal of the Socialistic cooperative commonwealth as a dangerous liability.

### **LMPA, the AFL, and Public Works Projects**

The LMPA's demand for municipal drainage and levee work for the unemployed was especially timely because New Orleans' underdeveloped infrastructure was ill equipped to accommodate the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain's frequent flooding. Mr. Michinard, Eugene Bacarisse's Tremé neighbor, remembered that excess water from Lake Pontchartrain would often overflow nearby Bayou St. John, Old Basin, and New Basin, and other levees during the 1890s.<sup>216</sup> He recalled, "The cry would go out that the Old Basin was overflowing" and residents would rush with "casks of mud and sand to bolster up the banks and try and stop the water coming over." Poor drainage also caused local flooding, which required residents to travel by canoe or skiff until the water subsided. Tremé and Mid-City could be under water for up to a week, and floodwaters spread disease, damaged house foundations, and ruined merchandise "unprotected against the ravages of the scummy and dirty waters." Bacarisse and his fellow working-class New Orleanians' livelihoods were thus regularly imperiled by rising floodwaters.

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<sup>216</sup> Michinard, "Floods and Overflows in New Orleans During the 1890s," Works Progress Administration (1930), 1. State Library of Louisiana, <http://cdm16313.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/LWP/id/8833>.



Just that spring, in fact, a deluge of rainwater had opened thirty-eight crevasses in Louisiana and New Orleans's levees.<sup>217</sup> New Orleans historian John Kendall notes that the high water persisted between March and May 1897, and "at no time in its history was the city in such grave peril of inundation."<sup>218</sup> While the newly created Levee Board hired over 2,500 men to feverishly build emergency embankments along the riverfront and 20 miles of levees, strong winds nonetheless swept water over the Canal and Bienville Street embankments, flooding stores. In response to the continued flooding, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Mississippi River Commission aggressively campaigned to rebuild levees at a grade of two feet higher than the floodwaters, confident that a comprehensive levee system would permanently eliminate the risk of flooding.<sup>219</sup> However, when the Levee Board could not afford to hire enough workers, City administrators were forced to reevaluate their inadequate levee measures and financial inability to respond to city emergencies.<sup>220</sup> The LMPA was in an ideal position to lobby for public works projects that would both redress poor infrastructural design and end chronic unemployment.

To that end, the LMPA aligned with the local AFL, a powerful but conservative labor organization in the city. Formed in 1886 out of disaffected Knights of Labor unions, the AFL sought to unionize master craftsmen, pressing for higher wages and a

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217 Donald W. Davis, "Historical Perspective on Crevasses, Levees, and the Mississippi," in *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change*, ed. Craig E. Colten (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000): 92.

218 John Kendall, *History of New Orleans* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1922), [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/America/United\\_States/Louisiana/New\\_Orleans/\\_Texts/KENHNO/33\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/America/United_States/Louisiana/New_Orleans/_Texts/KENHNO/33*.html).

219 Robert M. Brown, "The Mississippi River Flood of 1912," *American Geographical Society of New York Bulletin* 44, part 2, no. 9 (1912): 652.

220 Kendall, *History of New Orleans*.

shorter workday.<sup>221</sup> During the 1893 to 1897 depression, new chapters fanned out across the country, and AFL membership exceeded one million by 1910.<sup>222</sup> During the summer and fall of 1897, the LMPA co-wrote AFL and People's Party petitions demanding drainage commissioners award levee and drainage contracts with a fixed minimum wage to unemployed New Orleanians.<sup>223</sup> Additionally, German-American draftsman and LMPA member Henry Zander used his professional connections with the Drainage Commission to enable the LMPA and later, the WLMPA, to receive drainage contracts.<sup>224</sup>

However, the LMPA's efforts to acquire city labor contracts as a palliative to the lingering depression were complicated by increasingly fierce job competition with Sicilian immigrants, as well as a yellow fever outbreak that shut down city commerce in the summer and fall of 1897. Collaborating with the stolidly apolitical AFL, the LMPA embraced a limited agenda of attaining high wages for "home labor."<sup>225</sup>

### **Home Labor v.s. Sicilian Immigration**

Integral to the LMPA and AFL's campaign to win city drainage and levee work for union members were their demand that Sicilians immigrants be excluded from such municipal benefits. Their objection to Sicilian immigration was spurred by the stagnating waterfront economy, the unstable sugar industry, and Populist political consolidation,

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221 William C. Roberts, ed., *American Federation of Labor: History, Encyclopedia, Reference Book* (Washington, DC: American Federation of Labor, 1919), 6.

222 Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 14-15.

223 "Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience," 16; "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7; "Local Populists," 12; "The Conference on Wages," *Daily Picayune* (July 23, 1897): 7.

224 "Zander, Henry L," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1900); 1900 U.S. Census, s.v. "Henry L. Zander," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana.

225 Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth-Century South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 151.

which recruited poor voters within Louisiana's sugar districts. During the 1890s, Louisianan Republicans advocated sugar tariffs to protect sugar parishes from cheap Cuban imports flooding the American market.<sup>226</sup> Their actions garnered broad support from unlikely allies; for example, in 1895, reform Democrat Walter Flower would briefly vote Republican to support the sugar tariff.<sup>227</sup> Simultaneously, Knights of Labor and Populist organizers attempted to unionize black and white agricultural sugar workers. When Populists united with National Republicans in 1896, these potential voters, as well as urban laborers, formed the foundation of their electoral power.<sup>228</sup>

As Populists and Republicans constructed their fragile political alliance, key Populists within the AFL and LMPA worried that growing numbers of seasonal Sicilian sugar workers in would snatch precious jobs from black and white unionists. Drawn to the sugar industry by a high demand for cheap labor as well as labor bureaus, company labor agents, and established family and friends' promise of quick cash, 30,000 Sicilians had funneled into Louisiana's sugar parishes and New Orleans' dockyards by the late 1890s.<sup>229</sup> Italian migrants labored alongside black field hands or worked in New Orleans' sugar refineries and warehouses along the Mississippi Rive between Canal Street and Toulouse Streets.<sup>230</sup> Although most Sicilians returned home after a few seasons, many

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226 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 156.

227 Kendall, *History of New Orleans*.

228 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 157.

229 Joseph Maselli and Dominic Candeloro, *Italians in New Orleans* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 13.

230 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 158; "To Try to Keep Out Italians," *The Sun* (August 20, 1897): 9; "A Civic-Minded Man in an Uncivil World: A Profile of Isaac Delgado," Delgado Community College,

permanently settled in the French Quarter, starting wholesale businesses and expanding the New Orleans-Sicily import-export trade.<sup>231</sup>

Further, the LMPA and AFL's anti-Sicilian policies reflected Populist's growing suspicion that Louisiana's sugar barons cared little for their impoverished black and white employees.<sup>232</sup> Rather, rich planters were invested in a Republican-Populist coalition for their own economic gain. Initially, the AFL and LMPA argued, unions had tolerated sugar plantations' circumvention of immigration laws because the economic depression compelled cheap labor.<sup>233</sup> In 1897, however, President McKinley instituted the Dingley Tariff, which imposed high duties on sugar imports, and planters had sufficiently recovered.<sup>234</sup> Nonetheless, the sugar industry continued to enrich itself by hiring itinerant Sicilians at reduced wages, consequently driving down wages for both black and white workers.<sup>235</sup>

The LMPA and AFL argued that as Sicilians displaced black field hands on sugar plantations, New Orleans experienced an influx of rural black and white workers "in direct competition with our city labor."<sup>236</sup> As "pauper labor" flooded the city, they

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last modified November 11, 2011, <http://delgado90.blogspot.com/2011/11/civic-minded-man-in-uncivil-world.html>.

231 Maselli and Candeloro, *Italians in New Orleans*, 13; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 152-154.

232 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 158-159.

233 "To Try to Keep Out Italians," 9.

234 Ibid.; Frank A. Fetter, *Economics In Two Volumes* (New York: The Century Co., 1922), 11: 220.

235 "The American Federation of Labor," *Forest Republican* (October 6, 1897): 1; "To Try to Keep Out Italians," 9.

236 "Imported Contract Laborers," 3.

“gradually crowd[ed] the negroes out of the sugar districts of New Orleans.”<sup>237</sup> As a result, unscrupulous city contractors capitalized on widespread unemployment by slashing wages to the point “at which no honest resident laborer could subsist.”<sup>238</sup> The net effect was “starvation” wages for all New Orleans workers, as well as rampant “crimes and deprivations” across the city as indigents overburdened charitable institutions. Worse, officials were forced to hire more police to monitor vagrants and “keep in order this foreign element,” which taxed the city’s already depleted municipal funds.

To halt Sicilian and migrant job competition, the LMPA and AFL demanded strict enforcement of laws against contract labor at the city, state, and federal level.<sup>239</sup> At the national level, they commended the “noble and patriotic” U.S. Senator Samuel McEnery, a virulent white supremacist, for introducing legislation to strengthen the country’s immigration laws.<sup>240</sup> At the local level, the groups argued that public works contracts would ameliorate job shortages while protecting home labor’s livelihood from “a vast army of unemployed.”<sup>241</sup> As an efficient and cost-effective drainage system was of enormous import to all New Orleanians, the AFL and the Municipal Improvement Association implored the Board of Drainage Commission to mandate that contractors only hire resident New Orleanians at “living wages.”<sup>242</sup> To that end, in July, an official joint AFL-LMPA committee met with Acting Mayor Brittin, at his request, to discuss the

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237 “Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience,” 16; “The American Federation of Labor,” 1.

238 “Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience,” 16.

239 “The American Federation of Labor,” 1.

240 “Imported Contract Laborers,” 3.

241 “Home Labor’s Plea,” *Daily Picayune* (July 19, 1897): 10.

242 “Graf Gets a Hall and an Audience,” 16.

city's proposed drainage contract for unemployed laborers.<sup>243</sup> The white representatives praised Britten for his efforts to assist "home labor" and to mandate fixed, fair wages for workers at \$1.50 a day. Acquiescing to the committee's demands, Brittin presented their proposal to the Drainage Board the same day.

The LMPA's promotion of "home labor" contracts had serious ramifications for its black members. For example, the organization successfully persuaded the National Contracting Company of New Orleans to promise that "drainage work be given to home labor."<sup>244</sup> However, the company also required potential employees to have poll tax certificates, indicating the applicant was eligible to vote. The requirement disqualified African Americans from obtaining drainage contracts because few could afford the poll tax fee. While poll tax laws as a means of disenfranchising blacks and poor whites were not passed in Louisiana until 1900, the National Contracting Company nonetheless reflected a growing association between "home labor" and "white labor."<sup>245</sup> Further, while Mayor Flower advocated giving drainage and levee contracts to "home labor without regard to color," in actuality he did little to secure black employment.<sup>246</sup> Given New Orleans' narrowing definition of "home labor," it was but a short step for LMPA to reject its multiracial origins and pursue an explicitly white supremacist labor platform.

### **Yellow Fever and Quarantine Measures**

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243 "The Conference on Wages," *Daily Picayune* (July 23, 1897): 7.

244 "The Unemployed Organized Now," 7.

245 "Eliminates Negro Vote," *New York Times* (October 19, 1900).

246 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 148; "Administrations of the Mayors of New Orleans: Walter Chew Flower (1850-1900)," Louisiana Division New Orleans Public Library.  
<http://www.neworleanspubliclibrary.org/~nop1/info/louinfo/admins/flower.htm>.

Depressing laborers' wages even further, a yellow fever outbreak in August 1897 ravaged the South and paralyzed New Orleans for months.<sup>247</sup> Despite state efforts to quarantine southern ports in the fall of that year, the illness spread throughout nine states, with 4,000 cases and 500 deaths reported. Regional trade stagnated in the face of states' conflicting regional public health and security measures. New Orleans, which had recently experienced a large population growth of non-immune residents, suffered inordinately, with 300 deaths that season.<sup>248</sup>

The LMPA and a resurrected BCC participated in an interracial regional movement to force federal officials to institute national coastal quarantine measures and to better regulate trade in the midst of the epidemic.<sup>249</sup> Both organizations, along with the American Federation of Labor, and the Cigar Makers Trade Union, the Cotton Yardmen's Benevolent Association, the Boiler Maker's Union, and the Pressmen's Union, argued that yellow fever worsened economic conditions for the workingman because quarantine measures froze trade and shut down New Orleans ports.

The LMPA committee urged local businesses, city officials, and state government to modify the state's "numerous and cowardly quarantines" of commercial shipping and cooperate with the integrated Central Trade and Labor Assembly, a labor body

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247 Margaret Humphreys, *Yellow Fever in the South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 115.

248 *Ibid.*, 137.

249 "Laboring Men Call a Conference to Urge Quarantine Modification," *Daily Picayune* (October 1, 1897), 8.

representing the city's unions, to speedily resume commerce.<sup>250</sup> Recalling the LMPA's previous demands, the coalition requested that public health funds provide public works and sanitation jobs for the unemployed. Additionally, in September, the LMPA's African American president A.J. Holmes presented Mayor Flower a petition from the city's unemployed workers that demanded he remove state quarantine centers from low-income, densely populated residential areas because they jeopardized citizens' health, stifled trade, and compounded long-term unemployment.<sup>251</sup>

Claiming that Louisiana had abandoned New Orleans in "her hour of need," unionists also lobbied Governor Murphy Foster and other southern governors to permit the shipment of goods out of the city after the U.S. Marine Hospital Service fumigated and disinfected merchandise.<sup>252</sup> Finally, the coalition insisted that interstate commerce commissioners regulate imports and exports during future public health crises rather than allowing city or state officials to prescribe safety measures that impoverished laborers.

In response, Mayor Flower assured the LMPA that the Board of Health would be happy to listen to the LMPA alliance's recommendations. Further, the Commissioner of Public Works was already hiring unemployed workers and private sanitary squads would soon pay men to patrol neighborhoods. The coalition's employment campaign was successful, largely because it dovetailed with Citizen League administrators' recognition

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250 Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 40; "The Governor Asked to Appeal," 7.

251 "Laboring Men Call on Mayor Flower," *Daily Picayune* (September 25, 1897): 7; "List of Secretaries," *Cigar Makers' Official Journal* 22 (Chicago: June 1898): 15; H.M. Mayo, "Yellow Fever and its Terrors," *Leslie's Weekly* 86 (January 20, 1898): 42.

252 "The Governor Asked to Appeal," 7.



that the severity of the yellow fever outbreak clearly indicated that the city urgently needed a comprehensive drainage, sewerage, and water supply system as a matter of public health.<sup>253</sup> For a brief moment, then, Holmes' strategy of moderate consensus building realized the LMPA's vision of black and white labor unions working collectively to protect New Orleans' most vulnerable citizens.

Ultimately, however, the LMPA failed to reconcile Bacarisse's idealistic Socialism, Creole of color equal rights activism, and white populist trade unionism. These competing ideologies consequently stalled the organization's public health campaign, and with it, the hope for a sustained interracial and cooperative labor movement. Locked in stalemate, by October the LMPA had imploded. For all of Eugene Bacarisse's speechmaking about protecting unemployed workers regardless of their "color, race, creed, and previous condition," Bacarisse, Graf, and other white members split from the LMPA to form a new, segregated unemployed workers' union, the White Laboring Men's Protective Association (WLMPA).<sup>254</sup>

### **The Roots of the White Laboring Men's Protective Association**

Bacarisse and Graf's renunciation of integrated labor organizing is not as confounding as it may at first appear. First, Graf was always more interested in advancing the interests of his German unionist brethren over those of his ethnically and racially diverse peers. Indeed, while Germans had always been active in the Brotherhood

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<sup>253</sup> Kendall, *History of New Orleans*.

<sup>254</sup> "Laboring Men: Draw up a Memorial with Reference to City Emergency Employ," *Daily Picayune* (October 25, 1897): 3; "A Mysterious Orator," *Daily Picayune* (October 24, 1897): 8; "Laboring Men: Approve the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Plan of Relief," *Daily Picayune* (October 31, 1897) 3.

and the LMPA, their visibility within the WLMPA is striking. At least twelve WLMPA members were working class German or German-Americans.<sup>255</sup> Notably, while they were a mix of skilled craftsmen and industrial workers, WLMPA's members were predominantly German American bartenders. One BCC member, John Baltz, clearly reflects the close associational, ethnic, and occupational ties German WLMPA members shared. Like Graf, Baltz was also a German-American bartender who worked in the Central Business District.<sup>256</sup> He was also active within the Bartenders Union alongside fellow WLMPA members Graf and Ernest Stoltz in the early 1900s.<sup>257</sup> Graf and Baltz were also members of the Fraternal Order of Eagles, which hosted annual festivals featuring contests, baseball, and horse racing.<sup>258</sup> At one memorable event, Baltz tended the bar while Graf was on "donkey patrol." Graf exploited his German identity, union affiliation, and associational memberships as recruitment channels for the WLMPA.

Intriguingly, the spaces the WLMPA frequented are indicative of its German identity, as well as its spiritual and political shift away from the internationalism of

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255 German BCC members were John J. Baltz, Jr., Paul Banch, Charles Bapp, Jacob J. Fox, August Graf, George Herrle, and Jacob Lang. German LMPA members were Chris Bruder, Edward J. Burkhardt, Charles F. Dietz, August Graf, Robert Groth, Frederick Kraus, Jacob Lang, John Nies, H.C. Teunis, Joseph William von Sachs, William F. Wetzel, and Henry Louis Zander. Joseph T. Faust and R.D. Wilde were also probably German-American. German WLMPA members were Jacob Bernstein, Edward J. Burkhardt, Charles F. Dietz, Charles Gaiser, Joe George, Augustus Graf, Robert Groth, Adolph Meyers, Ernest Stoltz, T. Voight, William F. Wetzel, and R.D. Wilde.

256 "Baltz, John J.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards' Directory Co., 1897), Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Census, s.v. "John J. Baltz."

257 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Stoltz, Ernesto," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "John J. Baltz"; "Bartenders' Union," *Times Picayune* (February 17, 1907): 2; "Co-operative Commonwealth," 3.

258 "Eagle Plans Complete," *Times Picayune* (May 24, 1914): 33.

Tremé.<sup>259</sup> Most notably, the WLMPA abandoned the integrated Hopes Hall and Globe Hall and relocated to Teutonia Hall in the Central Business District immigrant belt.<sup>260</sup> Located at the corner of Exchange Place and Customhouse Street, at the epicenter of ethnic union organizing, Teutonia Hall hosted German social and political functions.<sup>261</sup> German sites of consumption and socializing were part of a rich geographic network that nurtured not just ethnic or occupational solidarity, but cooperative organizing.

Second, although New Orleans Socialists promoted mobilizing both skilled and unskilled workers to advance an egalitarian cooperative society, the party chapter was renowned for its particularly politically conservative and racist views.<sup>262</sup> After the Socialist Party of Louisiana was founded in 1903, for example, the national party refused to grant it a charter until it admitted black members. Even so, the state chapter clung to the conviction that “each race [should] have charge of its own affairs”; accordingly, blacks and whites should be organized into separate, segregated locals.

Further, while Bacarisse was more racially progressive than his segregationist Socialist peers, he promoted black economic equality rather than political enfranchisement or racial integration.<sup>263</sup> For example, Bacarisse argued that although African Americans were no longer property, both black and white workers were “in a

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259 “Laboring Men: Approve the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Plan of Relief,” 3.

260 Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 257; “Laboring Men: Draw up a Memorial with Reference to City Emergency Employ,” *Daily Picayune* (October 25, 1897): 3; “A Mysterious Orator,” 8; “White Laboring Men Object to Negroes Getting Preference in Levee Work,” *Daily Picayune* (November 25, 1897): 3.

261 “German-American Republicans,” *Daily Picayune* (September 30, 1896): 9.

262 Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South*, 23; Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers*, 97.

263 James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 95.

worse condition of bondage” as industrial wage slaves.<sup>264</sup> Given their common exploitation, it was imperative to “organize to liberate themselves” from dehumanizing capitalism. However, although Bacarisse connected racial subjugation with class oppression, he never explicitly advocated black voting rights. Further, Bacarisse still engaged in the casual racism of the day. At the Stenographers Association’s 1892 Thanksgiving party, for example, he shared the stage with the Thespian Dramatic Club’s “farce” entitled “Darkey Wood Dealer.”<sup>265</sup> Always ambivalent about the implications of black equality, Bacarisse retreated to white supremacist politics a mere six months after launching his Socialist campaign to foment an interracial worker movement.<sup>266</sup>

Bacarisse’s racial politics mirror that of Covington Hall, a Socialist agitator who, rejecting the Louisiana Socialist Party’s entrenched racism, created a radical industrial unionist organization in 1905.<sup>267</sup> Between 1907 and 1913, Hall and his allies fervently organized black and white brewery and timber workers. Nonetheless, despite working alongside New Orleans’ black union and political organizations, Hall never endorsed black social equality for fear of splintering his fragile interracial coalition. Hall and Bacarisse reflect what historian David Roediger describes as a “persistent, if often defeated and compromised impulse to antiracism” that prevented the U.S. labor movement from achieving comprehensive social change.<sup>268</sup> Bacarisse’s support of an

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264 “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7.

265 “Thanksgiving in Shorthand,” 3.

266 “A Mysterious Orator,” 8.

267 David Roediger, introduction to Covington Hall, *Labor Struggles in the Deep South and Other Writings*, ed. David R. Roediger (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1999), 22.

268 Ibid.

increasingly segregationist Populist Party and his growing identification with white Cuban nationalism further alienated him from his former multiracial allies.

### **Populists and Race**

The case of the AFL's Richard David Wilde provides further insight into why the LMPA's white members rejected their integrationist goals. R.D. Wilde's trajectory from publicly espousing racial integration to just as vocally disavowing interracial political organizing illustrates the LMPA's complicated relationship to black Louisianans' struggle for public rights and social equality. While the Federal Labor Union secretary did not support the Brotherhood's Socialist aims, he was active in the WLMPA's campaign to divest black laborers of work contracts. In fact, as the Populist Party crumbled, in February 1897, Wilde and fellow Populist J.T. Faust bemoaned that civic discontent and lingering economic depression were responsible for the rise of the competing New Orleans Socialist Party.<sup>269</sup> Fearing that organization would siphon off precious votes from the Populists' precarious electoral position, the men were wary of cooperating with Socialists of any stripe, including BCC members.<sup>270</sup> While Wilde and Faust joined the LMPA later that summer, their trepidations foreshadowed the vicious ideological battles that would fracture the association along racial and political lines.

Further, while for decades both Republicans and Democrats had courted black voters to retain political power, by 1896, Louisiana's organized parties had begun

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269 R.D. Wilde and J.T. Faust, "Hon. H.L. Brian, Chairman People's Party State Committee, Natchitoches, La, open letter." *Louisiana Populist* (February 19, 1897): 2.

270 *Ibid.*; Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 90.

abandoning black voters. Contending that universal suffrage would inevitably lead to a black-controlled state, white Democrats began lobbying for a revised Louisiana constitution that would eliminate the black and poor white franchise.<sup>271</sup> R.D. Wilde's commitment to protecting black and poor whites' political power likewise waned in the face of mounting white supremacy. While Wilde had helped build the 1896 state Fusion campaign that united Louisiana Populists, Republicans, and some Democrats in a cross-racial alliance against conservative Democrats and the proposed suffrage amendment, he soon grew wary of such political organizing.<sup>272</sup>

By October 1897, Wilde and fellow WLMPA members J.T. Faust and Eugene Bacarisse publicly denounced black political equality.<sup>273</sup> At a parish committee meeting of the city's Populist ward clubs, Wilde and Faust helped draft platform recommendations to present to the state party convention in November. Bacarisse took shorthand notes for the committee. The ward clubs rejected universal manhood suffrage because it perpetuated ballot-box stuffing and the buying of "ignorant and corrupt" black and white votes to maintain corporate and governmental control over low-income white Louisianans. According to the ward clubs, such an electoral system would ensure Republican domination under President William McKinley's campaign advisor Mark Hanna and his "sable allies." Instead, Populists recommended that when the Louisiana Constitution Committee convened in 1898, it should "eliminate any danger of negro

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271 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 153-165.

272 Ibid., 156; "Alexandria Conference," *Daily Picayune* (November 27, 1895): 1; "Near and Yet So Pharr," *Daily Picayune* (January 24, 1896): 1, 6.

273 "People's Party," 7.

supremacy” by disenfranchising black voters. Reflecting the complex interrelationship of racial politics and international diplomacy, Bacarisse may have supported Populists because Hanna was one of the few senators to oppose U.S. intervention in Cuba.<sup>274</sup>

### **Spanish-American War**

The Spanish American War was another racially divisive flashpoint that exacerbated the LMPA’s ideological friction and sped its dissolution. Although Cuban-American Eugene Bacarisse self-identified as white, his claim to “whiteness” became increasingly tenuous in the years leading up to the 1898 Cuban War of Independence. While Bacarisse prided himself in his European heritage and intellectual influences, “simple whiteness” was not enough to grant Cubans’ social and political equality according to America’s narrowing racial logic.<sup>275</sup> As historian Amy Kaplan argues, during the Spanish American War, journalists contrasted “lazy, inefficient, hungry Cuban bodies with the spectacle of [white] American manhood.”<sup>276</sup> The United States feared Cuban self-determination would jeopardize its Anglo-Saxon right to secure Latin American and Caribbean markets, thereby exporting millions of dollars in goods, stimulating the U.S. economy, and relieving labor-capital tensions.<sup>277</sup> In the face of such racial animosity, Bacarisse claimed a white identity by distancing himself from his

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274 William T. Horner, *Ohio’s Kingmaker: Mark Hanna, Man and Myth* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 245.

275 Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 206.

276 Amy Kaplan, “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill,” in *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 225.

277 Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 41, 43.

ethnically heterogeneous, and therefore suspect, past. After the war, for example, he continued to maneuver between his American and Cuban national identity while avoiding the question of race. In ship passenger lists to and from Cuba, Bacarisse labeled himself as “Cuban,” “Cuban-American,” or simply, “American.”<sup>278</sup>

On the other hand, African Americans argued that enlisting in the Spanish American War would illustrate their fitness as citizens. However, black military participation was based on racialist belief that black soldiers were immune to yellow fever and could withstand Cuba’s tropical climate.<sup>279</sup> Accordingly, when President McKinley ordered the formation of black “immune regiments,” black New Orleanians were particularly desirable; they joined Louisiana’s Ninth U.S. Volunteer Infantry. Former LMPA member Lafayette Tharpe not only recruited black soldiers to this regiment but also was Company E’s second lieutenant and chaplain.<sup>280</sup>

However, by May 1898, Louisiana legislators revised the state’s constitution to disenfranchise black voters, effectively eliminating military engagement as a strategy to regain political power.<sup>281</sup> Further, African American soldiers were denied commissioned officer status, and their white commanding officers strictly enforced the color line. Finally, the war ended ten days before the Ninth Infantry was deployed in August 1898, so Louisiana’s “immune troops” never demonstrated their valor in battle. Instead,

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278 “Bacarisse, Eugene” and “Bacarisse, Eugenio,” Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1903-1945, Ancestry.com; “Bacarisse, Eugenio,” Florida Passenger Lists, 1898-1951, Ancestry.com.

279 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 166-167; Kaplan, “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill,” 232.

280 Ibid., 167; William Hilary Coston, *The Spanish-American War Volunteer* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1899), 102.

281 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 166-172.



infantrymen tended the sick and wounded in eastern Cuba, part of a national public health movement to eradicate yellow fever.<sup>282</sup> U.S. officials believed that once the military “sanitized” Cuba, yellow fever outbreaks spread through the southern export and import trade would cease to plague the mainland.

Ninth Infantry soldiers were immediately embroiled in political controversy. Louisiana Democrats pointed to racial tension between American and Cuban troops as evidence of black soldiers’ inherently brutal nature. National public discourse similarly reasserted racial hierarchies. Media representations of African Americans aided both Cuban colonization and domestic white supremacy.<sup>283</sup> The press either memorialized black soldiers as faithful servants to white masculinity, or castigated them as savage and cowardly. In Tharpe’s case, the federal government denied his pension request, forcing him to depend on mutual aid societies and religious institutions to survive.<sup>284</sup>

In contrast, the discourse around the Spanish-American War and American imperialism enabled LMPA’s white ethnics to enjoy a broadening definition of whiteness. Prior to the formation of the WLMPA, for example, public officials contested ethnic white BCC and LMPA members’ “Americanness,” and by extension, the soundness of their political critique. While Graf had lived in the U.S. for eight years and became naturalized in 1891, *The Daily Picayune* persistently emphasized the Graf’s “foreignness,” claiming that he spoke with a thick “foreign accent” and was unable to

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282 Humphreys, *Yellow Fever in the South*, 115.

283 Kaplan, “Black and Blue on San Juan Hill,” 221, 227, 228, 234-235.

284 Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 267.

“speak English intelligibly.”<sup>285</sup> More ominously, the police denounced Bacarisse and Graf as unsavory foreigners who would corrupt American minds.<sup>286</sup> Graf himself declared that city officials refused to negotiate with him because he was a “foreigner.”<sup>287</sup>

While the ambiguous racial identity of non-Anglo-Saxon whites enabled them to wage a sustained critique of American imperialism, they also began to capitalize on white supremacist ideology that elevated ethnic whites over colonized others.<sup>288</sup> To that end, LMPA’s ethnic whites took great pains to distinguish themselves from black residents and “bad immigrants,” like Sicilians. Instead, non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants began to downplay their ethnic heritage and identify themselves simply as “Americans.” For example, while August Graf prized his heritage and was enmeshed in German community life, he positioned himself as an American first, German second. As president of the German American McKinley-Romain Club, Graf campaigned for President William McKinley and Armand G. Romain for U.S. Senate in 1896.<sup>289</sup> Delivering German-language speeches on Louisianan, American, and German current affairs, he distinguished between American and German political goals: German statesman Otto von Bismarck, who supported free silver, “was looking after the interest of the Fatherland,” while Germans in America must adopt the gold standard and thus protect “the interests of this country, and no longer after those of Germany.” By the time of his death in 1915, Graf’s obituary claimed that he was a “good example of the sturdy

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285 “Coxey’s Army,” 12; “The Unemployed Organized Now,” 7.

286 “Ready to Solve the Great Problem,” 3.

287 “Graf Acts Coxey Just for One Day,” 3.

288 Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 209- 210.

289 “German-American Republicans,” 9.

German emigrant who comes to this country and makes a comfortable living here.”<sup>290</sup>

Crucially, however, Graf’s assimilationist strategies hinged on rejecting his fervent integrationist and socialist activities.

### **The White Laboringmen’s Protective Association**

Like the LMPA, the WLMPA depended on politically well-connected allies to advance its unemployment relief campaign. Describing chronic unemployment as a labor “emergency,” the WLMPA soothed conservative city and business interests leery of class antagonism. City Board of Health clerk and WLMPA president Michael Nestor used his professional and political connections with the AFL, city officials, and business leaders to successfully secure public works contracts for white laborers.<sup>291</sup> Populists and the AFL renewed their commitment to working with new WLMPA members; in November 1897, J.T. Faust and R.D. Wilde urged Populists and labor organizers throughout Orleans Parish to influence their local boards of health to remove the quarantine measures squashing trade and starving workers.<sup>292</sup> By proposing job contracts that would assist white laborers in the short term, the WLMPA retreated from economic and political revolution to embrace the “bread and butter” aims of segregationist trade unionism.

Addressing the residual impact of the yellow fever epidemic and the final stages of the depression remained of primary importance to the group. Arguing that the unemployed chafed under “enforced idleness and its resultant want and suffering,” the

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290 “August Graf Dead,” 9.

291 “Nestor, Michael E.,” *Soards’ New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards’ Directory, 1899), 617, Ancestry.com; “Laboring Men: Approve the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Plan of Relief,” 3.

292 “People’s Party,” 7.

WLPMA contended that yellow fever only “[accentuated] the misery and despair of thousands of homes.”<sup>293</sup> During this state of emergency, the city should take immediate steps to prevent further idleness, crime, and suffering. Significantly, the organization blamed mass unemployment not on governmental corruption or corporate greed, but instead on “the all-wise creator of the universe.” By casting the depression as an “act of God,” the WLMPA limited itself to serving the immediate needs of out-of-work whites.

Along with other labor organizations and Citizens League reformers, the WLMPA posited that a city-run public works department would counteract the effects the sluggish economy and yellow fever quarantine measures. Over the course of 1897 and 1898, WLMPA state organizer August Graf joined members of the Board of Health, Municipal Improvement Association, the AFL, and prominent businessmen to protest the dispossession of the sewerage franchise to private corporations.<sup>294</sup> They feared sewerage rates would skyrocket, companies would not build sewer systems in impoverished communities, and the city might never regain control of the sewerage system.

After obtaining influential businesses’ endorsement, the WLMPA presented a petition to City Hall calling for the city to hire white workers to staff its public works projects.<sup>295</sup> The group estimated that if the city instituted a shorter workweek, it could hire more laborers, while a \$1.50 weekly salary would relieve over six destitute families.<sup>296</sup>

Aligned with reputable white labor, governmental, and business leaders, the WLMPA

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293 “Laboring Men: Approve the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Plan of Relief,” 3.

294 “The Committee on City Sewerage,” *Daily Picayune* (August 6, 1897): 7; “Sewerage as the Private Prerequisite,” *Daily Picayune* (October 7, 1898): 9.

295 “A Mysterious Orator,” 8; “Laboring Men: Draw up a Memorial,” 3.

296 “Laboring Men: Draw up a Memorial,” 3.

received a warm reception from Mayor Flower, who incorporated aspects of its demands into his public works program.

The WLMPA successfully pressured city officials and businesses to provide unemployment relief for its members during the 1897 yellow fever outbreak. In fact, the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Relief Plan, which the WLMPA enthusiastically endorsed, duly created an emergency fund to employ laborers in public works projects.<sup>297</sup> The New Orleans Public Works Commissioner W.L. McGary and capitalist Frank P. Mullen paid WLMPA members a dollar a day to gravel roads in the city. Additionally, the Louisiana Board of Health hired WLMPA members to monitor yellow fever hotspots as private watchmen.<sup>298</sup> Finally, after the WLMPA accused levee contractors of hiring African Americans and transient whites, a sawmill in Bowie, Louisiana, hired 75 members as skilled mechanics and laborers.<sup>299</sup> Thus, the WLMPA was part of a larger movement of southern businessmen and laborers who worked with city and state officials to modify quarantine regulations to resume interstate trade.<sup>300</sup>

However, because the WLMPA's unemployment campaign rested on temporary relief measures, it lost its bargaining power when the yellow fever epidemic subsided and the national economy recovered at the end of 1897. On December 11, labor organizers again met with Mayor Flower, claiming that Drainage Commission's Florida Canal

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297 "Laboring Men: Approve the Mayor-Mullen-McGary Plan of Relief," 3.

298 "Quarantine's Farewell," *Daily Picayune* (November 5, 1897): 1; "Labor's Indorsement," *Daily Picayune* (November 5, 1897): 1.

299 "Getting Work: The Unemployed Meeting Success Now," *Daily Picayune* (November 29, 1897): 5; "White Laboring Men," *Daily Picayune* (November 25, 1897): 3.

300 Humphreys, *Yellow Fever in the South*, 145.

contractors, as well as the National Contracting Company, were hiring foreign workers. When they demanded Flower instruct the Drainage Commission to employ only home labor, the mayor was noncommittal.<sup>301</sup> By late 1898, the WLMPA had quietly sunk from view.<sup>302</sup> Ultimately, by rejecting an integrated movement working toward political and economic redistribution of power, the WLMPA failed to achieve systemic change.

## **Conclusion**

In the wake of violent dockworkers riots, Populist electoral defeats, and mounting white supremacy that threatened New Orleans' long tradition of cross-racial political coalitions, the BCC envisioned a utopian Socialist society free from the evils of capitalist greed and government corruption. Yet it was not until Brotherhood members formed the LMPA that the cooperative exerted any measurable influence over the city's economic and political landscape. Negotiating with local business, political, and labor representatives, the LMPA pragmatically moderated the Brotherhood's idealism to solve New Orleans' pervasive unemployment: city public works contracts building levees and drainage systems. However, to do so, the LMPA abandoned Socialism and assured the public that its proposed employment relief was a temporary emergency measure rather than part of larger efforts to achieve revolutionary political change.

Eventually, persistent unemployment, rising rates of Sicilian immigration, a yellow fever outbreak, disenfranchisement of black and poor white Louisiana voters, and the racial imperatives of the Spanish American War shattered the Brotherhood and the

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301 "Labor Callers," *Daily Picayune* (December 11, 1897): 3.

302 The last reference to the WLMPA was in October 1898. See "Sewerage as the Private Prerequisite," 9.

LMPA's nascent multiracial and multiethnic cooperative movement. By the end of 1897, the LMPA had renamed itself the White Laboring Men's Protective Association, ousted its black members, and proposed an end to Sicilian immigration as a means of protecting "home labor." It was not until the 1901 Brewery Workers strike that black unions and political activists fully repaired cross-racial alliances among the city's waterfront laborers to achieve measurable change.<sup>303</sup> Over the course of three years, the newly organized Central Trade and Labor Council and the black-run Central Labor Union collaborated to boycott non-union breweries, after which many breweries recognized unions and granted wage increases.<sup>304</sup> Nonetheless, the history of the Brotherhood, the LMPA, and the WLMPA reflects the tension between craft unions' practical solutions to sweeping urban unemployment in New Orleans, and national and international Socialist imperatives to forcefully remake society. While individual members would participate in future labor struggles along the city's port, it would be a generation before New Orleans Socialists and radical unionists would publicly endorse a broad-scale, multiracial cooperative movement.

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303 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 120.

304 Rosenberg 99-101.

## **Chapter 2: Warriors for Lower Prices and Municipal Cleanliness: The Housewives' League and the Consumers Movement, 1910-1922**

In one of the few extant photographs of the Housewives' League Co-operative Store, the viewer is greeted with a ghostly sight. Their features barely discernible in the grainy picture, four white saleswomen stand resolutely in front of tall shelves stocked with canned vegetables and fruits.<sup>1</sup> They are modestly attired with their hair neatly pinned in buns. A small cashier with black, cavernous eyes peers solemnly out from the photograph. A female patron addresses the women, herself a grim specter cloaked in black. Like the photograph's blurry, faded figures, the Housewives' League Co-operative Store was ephemeral. Located next to the Prytania Street Public Market in the affluent area of Uptown New Orleans, the cooperative was open for only nine months between February and October 1921. Nonetheless, the grocery cooperative was the culmination of years of women-led cooperative effort to purify abusive production, distribution, and consumption systems.

First proposed in June 1919, the Co-operative Store was part of the all-female Housewives' League's comprehensive program for economic and political reform. The League sought to fundamentally transform corporate capitalism by demanding increased municipal and federal intervention in the marketplace and the creation of a national cooperative economy. Eventually, it argued, a network of consumer and producer cooperatives would guarantee average Americans access to affordable goods and

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<sup>1</sup> "Housewives' Grocery in Operation," *New Orleans Item Magazine* (April 17, 1920): 2.



services, while ultimately creating a moral economy that celebrated civic engagement and community cooperation.

The Housewives' League's cooperative efforts are instructive historical examples of the broader coalition building necessary for cooperative development. As members campaigned for a federal suffrage amendment to achieve political equality, the League also used female cooperative enterprise to confront exploitative capitalism and laissez-faire government. Demanding the return of World War I government price controls and decrying rising inflation and skyrocketing food costs, the League's progressive ideology was pushed further left as it joined a loose confederation of unlikely allies at the local, state, regional, and national level. A mix of social workers, pacifists, consumer activists, and Socialist cooperators encouraged League members to place their city-wide reform work within a larger context of political, social, and economic change. However, their visionary cooperative plan was bounded by League members' privileged middle-class status and adherence to racial hierarchies. Despite the League's progressive sympathies, its cooperatives functioned as bulwarks against World War I demobilization, a severe postwar economic downturn, and a rash of labor strikes and protests threatening to erode affluent white women's racial and class security.

Indeed, the narrative defining the Housewives' League is one that carefully contains political radicalism. To survive, the League cast the cooperative store as a forward-thinking business model; the Housewives' League channeled the language of

progress and modernity sweeping postwar New Orleans's public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Most significantly, however, it also made strategic alliances with labor representatives, commercial elites, and city and state officials otherwise leery of women's political and economic empowerment. To that end, the League engaged in rhetorical obfuscation by presenting white women's autonomy as non-threatening. By blandly representing the organization's members as "housewives" and "consumers" who desired to cut grocery bill costs by opening a cooperative store, the League sidestepped charges of Communism dogging other consumer, suffrage, and labor organizations.

This chapter examines three women who shaped the Housewives' League's interventions in the consumer marketplace. Most importantly, they illustrate the ways in which the League's cooperative ideals shifted in relation to different historical moments and the needs of competing constituents. First, Housewives' League president Inez Meyers defined the organization's prewar cooperative activities while nurturing a coalition of clubwomen, suffragists, politicians, farmers, and labor unions that would sustain the League's cooperative grocery store after World War I. However, the League's tumultuous encounters with black female unionists exposed the organization's fundamental unwillingness to build alliances with working-class African American women. Instead, cooperatives became a means to assert white middle-class authority. Second, as part of a national movement to reduce postwar inflation and protect consumers, Edna Egleston formed the Housewives' League Co-operative Store in 1919. Significantly, she downplayed cooperatives' radical roots even as she explicitly allied

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<sup>2</sup> Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 212.

with them. Finally, the chapter analyzes Ida Friend, a Jewish philanthropist and president of the New Orleans Consumers' League. Friend reflects liberal white Southerners' antiracist activism during the interwar years. While the lives of each woman overlap and intersect, they reveal the League's delicate negotiations around labor, gender, and race as the organization built broad relationships that would expand white women's autonomy and consumer empowerment more generally.

### **Inez MacMartin Meyers and the City Federation of Women's Clubs**

Speaking before the City Federation of Women's Clubs in 1912, prominent newspaper woman Inez MacMartin Meyers foreshadowed the subversive potential of the Housewives' League Co-operative Store by making the ideological connection between cooperation, women's equality, and Socialism explicit: while other women's clubs barred overtly political or Socialist members, Meyers professed, "I think [women] are all socialistic, or will get there soon, the longer we find that we can't do the things we want to do."<sup>3</sup> The Housewives' League echoed contemporary material feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman who proclaimed that women's political and economic equality hinged on their liberation from devalued domestic work.<sup>4</sup>

For example, in *Women and Economics*, Gilman decried housewives' economic dependence on husbands, arguing that cooking and cleaning were "social duties," not sexual ones.<sup>5</sup> The most advanced society would have professionally-run kitchens, cleaning services, nurseries, and kindergartens, freeing housewives to pursue careers.

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3 "City Federation of Woman Clubs Forms," *Times Picayune* (November 27, 1912): 5.

4 Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Boston: MIT Press, 1981), 7.

5 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: At Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 237-247.

Eventually, women should “stand beside man as the comrade of his soul, not the servant of his body.” As historian Dolores Hayden argues, material feminists believed that industrial capitalism and its attendant gender exploitation would yield to a “completely industrialized, socialist society utilizing collective technology to socialize” household labor.<sup>6</sup> Further, material feminists organized their own consumer and producer cooperatives to create a utopian cooperative movement.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the League believed a cooperative economy would reorganize both women’s work and the urban built environment to achieve female economic equality and the gradual evolution of an egalitarian society grounded in communal living.

The life of Housewives’ League President Inez Meyers helps elucidate how the League was able to press for radical alternative economic programs while also aligning with organizations sometimes antithetical to women’s empowerment and economic reform. Committed to expanding women’s economic and political autonomy, Meyers was a professional journalist, an ardent federal amendment suffragist, and a leader of the coalescing New Orleans consumer movement. Her background, allies, and political sympathies create an important counterpoint to historical representations of New Orleans’ white clubwomen as insular, hide-bound socialites. Pamela Tyler, for example, characterizes the Louisiana women’s club and suffrage movement era between 1900 and 1920 as exclusive and aristocratic, tied to the planter-business elite controlling city and

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6 Ibid., 11.

7 Ibid., 8.

state politics.<sup>8</sup> Predominantly well-educated, married, and affluent, female leaders shunned outsiders, favoring their insular traditions and social circles.

However, the women of Housewives' League were not, for the most part, members of the New Orleans plantation or industrial aristocracy. This heterogeneous membership made the League more receptive to meaningful governmental and economic change necessary to improving all Americans' lives. For instance, Meyers, like many Housewives' League's directors, was a cultural and geographic outsider in New Orleans. While Meyers was born in Iowa in 1868, her father was Canadian, and her mother was from Wisconsin.<sup>9</sup> As a young woman, Inez and her family moved to Jennings, a rural town in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana.<sup>10</sup> There, Inez's sister, Maude MacMartin, married the local postmaster, while in 1888, Inez married mail clerk Henry Buford Meyers.<sup>11</sup> Henry Meyers eventually became the superintendent of the United States Postal Service's railway mail department.<sup>12</sup> By 1901, Inez had relocated to New Orleans with Henry, his mother, and their son.<sup>13</sup> Settling into the rhythms of the city's social life, she quickly integrated into its burgeoning women's club and suffrage movement.

The location of Meyers' home reflects the future Housewives' League's racial and class politics. The family lived a large, rambling residence on Jackson Avenue in a

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8 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 5-6.

9 1910 United States Census, s.v. "Inez Mayer," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

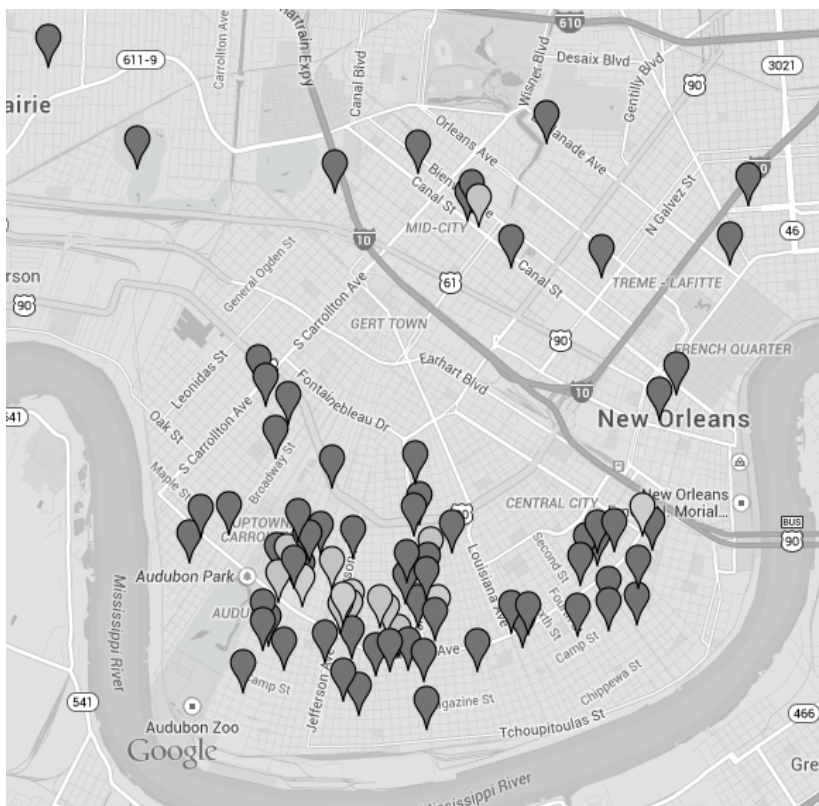
10 "Home Happenings," *Jennings Daily Record* (August 16, 1902): 8.

11 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Maude M. Derouen," Jennings, Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1900 United States Census, s.v. "Henry B. Meyers," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

12 "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers, Woman Leader," *Times Picayune* (November 3, 1923): 3.

13 "Prize Pupils of Public Schools," *Daily Picayune* (June 29, 1902): 9; "The Woman's Club," *Daily Picayune* (November 7, 1905): 5; "City Federation," *Daily Picayune* (February 18, 1914): 11.

historically German section of the Garden District. They ran the Meyers Printing and Advertising Company out of a modest Uptown shotgun home on Arabella Avenue near the Mississippi River.<sup>14</sup> Most Housewives' League members also lived in Uptown and Garden District neighborhoods, which geographer Richard Campanella terms the "the white teapot," the high ground between marginal swampland, populated by African Americans, and the Mississippi River waterfront, inhabited by white immigrants.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 3:** Demographic map of Housewives' League Co-operative Store members' residences. Light gray dots are Jewish members. Dark gray are Protestant or Catholic members.

14 Meyers was treasurer of the family business. Mrs. Henry B. Myers," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, Soards Directory Co., 1915), accessed through Ancestry.com; "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers," 3; "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers," 3; "Henry B. Myers," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1919), accessed through Ancestry.com.

15 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 186.

There, wealthy Anglo-Americans built stately mansions and townhouses along St. Charles Avenue and Magazine Street. The Garden District's urban enclaves were well established in the late nineteenth-century, and by World War I, "street-car suburbs" serving affluent whites had expanded into the greater Carrollton, Uptown, and Audubon Park districts. Living behind these great estates in cheaper residential blocks were African Americans and poor whites, forming a grid of racialized spatial inequality. While the Housewives' League launched initiatives to assist poor and black women, its middle-class membership remained concentrated in this wealthy district.

Meyers did not confine her energy to the printing business. For over two decades, she lent her skills and connections within the newspaper and printing industry to serve the Progressive movement and the suffrage cause. Meyers was "fearless in her advocacy of reforms," working first as an assistant magazine editor in the 1910s, and then editing the *New Orleans Item's* woman's page until her death in November 1923.<sup>16</sup> Meyers also faithfully served on the General Federation of Women's Clubs' press committee.<sup>17</sup> The Federation's press chairman called Meyers "one of the best known and most wide-awake newspaperwomen of the far south."<sup>18</sup> Working with Club-affiliated newspaperwomen across the country, she ensured that female professionals, suffragists, and reformers were positively portrayed in the New Orleans and national press. Meyers thus doggedly fought

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16 Mrs. Grace Julian Clark, quoted in Effie Leese Scott, "Activity in Women's Clubs," *Lincoln Daily Star* (January 11, 1914): 8; "Inez Mac Martin Meyers," Orleans Death Indices 1918-1928, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1910 United States Census, s.v. "Inez Mayer"; "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers," 3.

17 Scott, "Activity in Women's Clubs," 8.

18 Mrs. Grace Julian Clark, quoted in *Ibid.*

for the passage of state and federal suffrage amendments, as well as Progressive reform efforts to improve film regulation, prison conditions, public health, and family nutrition.

### **New Orleans' Suffrage Movement**

Additionally, like many other professional women, the suffrage movement was an animating force in Meyers' life.<sup>19</sup> As historian Elna Green observed, Louisianan federal amendment suffragists were integrated into the "national urban economy, making their living by serving the needs of the growing urban workforce."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Meyers and the Housewives' League's body of doctors, teachers, clerical workers, social workers, and journalists argued they should play integral roles in advancing America's urban, industrial, and governmental infrastructure, and to that end, supported working women and their economic independence.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the Housewives' League's future leaders had honed their political organizing skills in the Woman's Club and the Era Club. The Woman's Club was comprised of career women such as suffragists Jean and Kate Gordon and Progressive reformer Sophie Bell Wright.<sup>22</sup> The Era Club, a prominent New Orleans suffrage organization, also recruited influential and affluent white female reformers. In addition

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19 "Mrs. Graham Heads City Federation of Women's Clubs," *Times Picayune* (May 15, 1915): 4; "Style Show at Hand in Hotel Auditorium," *Times Picayune* (February 9, 1916): 5; Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 5.

20 Elna C. Green, "Those Opposed: Southern Antisuffragism, 1890-1920" (PhD diss, Tulane University, 1992), 19.

21 Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1989), 141; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 144; Dr. E.L. McGehee, Sr., "A Report from the Anti-Tuberculosis League to the State Medical Society," *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 60, no. 9 (March 1908): 175; "The Woman's Club," *Daily Picayune* (November 7, 1905): 5.

22 Mrs J.C. Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York: H.G. Allen, 1898), 1077; Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 15; "Louisiana Club Women," *Daily Picayune* (March 29, 1908): 15; "The Woman's Club," *Daily Picayune* (November 7, 1905): 5.



to advocating female enfranchisement, it lobbied for city sewerage and water improvements, child labor laws, juvenile courts, playgrounds and public baths, and female factory inspectors and legal witnesses.<sup>23</sup> As an Era Club member, Meyers worked closely with colleagues Carrie McWilliams, Ethel Hutson, Grace Chamberlain, and Sake Meehan, active Louisianan suffragists who would sustain the Housewives' League as it crept cautiously toward radical political and economic action.<sup>24</sup>

Yet despite allying with clubwomen of varying ideologies, Meyers identified herself with a coterie of "unusual women" who rejected the racial prejudices of New Orleans' social elites and advocated political empowerment for all women. For example, Meyers co-founded the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA)-affiliated Woman's Suffrage Party (WSP). The WSP was organized in 1913 after Era Club founders Kate and Jean Gordon rejected NAWSA leader Carrie Chapman Catt's proposed federal suffrage amendment and ousted all federal sympathizers from the Era Club, including Meyers.<sup>25</sup> Fearing that a federal amendment invited government meddling because it would allow black women to vote, the Gordons allied with anti-suffragists to block its ratification in Louisiana.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, federal amendment supporters dismissed the Gordons' racist diatribes as empty rhetoric. Further, Meyers

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23 "Era Club," *Daily Picayune* (October 29, 1911): 8; Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 193; "New Orleans Federation Will Mark Silver Anniversary," *Times Picayune* (November 21, 1937): 53.

24 Mary L. McLendon, "The Political Rights of Women," *Atlanta Constitution* (January 11, 1914): 5; "Mrs. Graham Heads City Federation of Women's Clubs," *Times Picayune* (May 15, 1915): 4; "Era Club," 8; "Says Husbands, 'Ring' Followers, Keep Wives Away," *Times Picayune* (November 22, 1919): 12; "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers," 3.

25 Elna C. Green, "The Rest of the Story: Kate Gordon and the Opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment in the South," *Louisiana History* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 177; Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 22.

26 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 20-26.

and her former Era Club peers had long chafed at the Gordons' authoritarian dictates and initially ran the WSP as an alternative, egalitarian political party.

While the Gordons represented an elitist suffrage movement that refused to work outside the Democratic Party or their small group of wealthy clubwomen, the early WSP recruited working-class women rather than "Lady Bountifuls."<sup>27</sup> Eschewing the autocratic labels of "president" and "vice president," the WSP was democratically run, in contrast to efforts "conducted too much along drawing room lines." To that end, the WSP spoke before women in labor unions, stores, and factories, and even discussed the possibility of urban women visiting "the cotton field in order to talk suffrage to the workers." The party also reached out to other working women as well; in addition to selling its journal to female passersby on the street, its Teachers' Political Equality League quickly mobilized 20 teachers who were vocal contributors to the organization. The Housewives' League's cooperative store would continue the WSP's commitment to democratic process and improved working conditions for women regardless of class.

### **Louisiana Women's Club Movement**

While suffrage organizing was crucial to Inez Meyers' understanding of female cooperation, so too was her reform work within the women's club movement. While the national women's club movement had been organizing women around self-improvement and education for decades, it was not until the South began to industrialize and urbanize

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<sup>27</sup> "Suffrage to Seek Working Women," *Daily Picayune* (January 18, 1914): 7.

that the General Federation of Women's Clubs extended to Louisiana.<sup>28</sup> Meyers chartered the New Orleans Federation of Women's Clubs in late 1912 as a concerted attempt to address the needs of the city's women.<sup>29</sup> As president between 1912 and 1915, Meyers gained access to the national federation's much-needed institutional framework that would unite Louisianan members around local, regional, and national issues concerning American women.<sup>30</sup>

While historian Landon Storrs claims that large Southern women's organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs blocked institutional change and enforced conservative ideologies antithetical to women's suffrage or other radical reforms, in fact, clubwomen constituted the majority of the New Orleans suffrage movement.<sup>31</sup> Not only had the New Orleans Federation endorsed suffrage in 1913, a year before the General Federation did so, but the city's suffragists ran the branch federation and other civic organizations.<sup>32</sup> The Federation also enlisted the Era Club in its efforts to lobby legislators to pass industrial and child labor laws.<sup>33</sup> Rather than hindering Progressive and suffrage efforts, the New Orleans Federation worked in concert with suffragists to expand women's public recognition and legal protections.

Indeed, fostering unity among white female activists was of great concern to the New Orleans Federation, and Meyers duly incorporated cooperative principles into its

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28 Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1970), 150.

29 "New Orleans Federation Will Mark Silver Anniversary," *Times Picayune* (November 21, 1937): 53.

30 Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 162.

31 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 140.

32 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 169; "Buyers Welcome! Buy-At-Home, Too!" *Daily Picayune* (August 18, 1913): 1, 3.

33 "City Federation of Woman Clubs Forms," *Times Picayune* (November 27, 1912): 5.

project for women's economic and political autonomy. Recognizing that "there is force in numbers, and 20 or 50 clubs co-operating heartily can naturally accomplish more than one working by itself," Meyers promoted coalition building among women belonging to a range of organizations.<sup>34</sup> For example, Agnes Morris, a New Orleans public health worker and member of both the Woman's Suffrage Party and the Housewives' League, characterized the model clubwoman as "she who strives for the solution of the questions of wage-earning women, of the underage working children, of the Consumers League, of the Sanitation Clubs, of the political equality movement."<sup>35</sup> As Anne Firor Scott argues, by regularly convening to discuss urban ills disproportionately affecting women, southern female club members began to challenge economic and political disparities dividing their cities and the nation at large.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Meyers' work with women's clubs inspired her to end capitalism's most egregious conditions. Female economic and political cooperation became her means to achieving this end.

### **The "Housewife" and the Female Consumer**

The Housewives' League was born out of an emerging consumer rights movement that mobilized after the Panic of 1910, when food prices rapidly increased and corresponding food shortages in 1912 and 1913 swept the country. In 1911, Mrs. Julian Heath formed the National Housewives' League (NHL) in Chicago to offset the Panic of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>35</sup> Agnes Morris Papers, Report on Milwaukee Convention, Department of Archives, LSU, cited in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 161; "Suffrage Party Upholds Leaders in New Election," *Times Picayune* (November 23, 1918): 7; "Says Husbands, 'Ring' Followers," 12; Helen M. Winslow, ed., *Official Register and Directory of Women's Clubs in America* (Boston: N.A. Lindsey and Co., 1919), 179.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 161.

1910's resulting economic recession and rapid inflation.<sup>37</sup> Claiming that working and middle-class women were responsible for budgeting over 90 percent of their families' annual income, the NHL trained the middle-class American housewife to "recognize her economic position" as an efficient and responsible consumer.<sup>38</sup> To that end, it published a monthly journal explaining current agricultural policy, reporting on branches' public sanitation campaigns, and deploying the theories of New Nutrition and home economics to assist women purchasing and preparing clean, cheap food.<sup>39</sup> While historian Tracey Deutsch posits that pre-Depression consumer activism was largely localized and unorganized, the New Orleans Housewives' League members, nevertheless, saw themselves as part of a national effort to feminize government and economic institutions that intervened in women's everyday lives as consumers and citizens.<sup>40</sup>

Specifically, Meyers' critique of capitalism crystalized around a 1913 regional and national economic crisis, which revealed how volatile consumer markets unduly impacted women. Additionally, two severe economic recessions between 1913 and 1915 and an accompanying food shortage between January 1913 and December 1914 generated a national debate over how the plunging market would affect workers' wages and consumers' living standards.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, changing labor demographics in

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37 "Housewives Seek to Sever League from Federation," *Times Picayune* (June 5, 1915): 5; Victor Zarnowitz, *Business Cycles: Theory, History, Indicators, and Forecasting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 226-229; Mrs. Julian Heath, "Work of the Housewives League," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 48 (July 1913): 121.

38 Heath, "Work of the Housewives League," 121.

39 *Housewives League Magazine* 5, no. 1 (January 1915).

40 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 106; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 145.

41 Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 109.

New Orleans forced many middle-class women to complete their own housework, from cleaning and child-care to shopping and cooking. Most strikingly, by 1900, seven out of ten housewives nationwide performed their own household labor as their domestic servants sought better paying industrial work.<sup>42</sup>

In response, Meyers formed the Housewives' League, a division of the New Orleans Federation of Women's Clubs, to provide white middle-class women with money- and labor-saving strategies so that they could turn their attention to public reform.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, the League's strove to lower food prices, ensure that retailers and wholesalers adhere to standardized weights and measures, inspect public markets, and "advance the mutual interests of producer and consumer by supervising daily consumption practices and ensuring women's equitable treatment in the marketplace."<sup>44</sup> Proclaiming, "food is our most vital necessity," the League rallied around reforming women's food procurement and consumption, allying with national organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Consumers League, the National Housewives' League, and the National American Women's Suffrage Association.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Housewives' League's Political and Commercial Alliances**

The Housewives' League also formed at a moment when the New Orleans mayoral administration was slowly conceding to female reformers' demands for greater influence over the city's economic and political affairs. At the same time, however,

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42 Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution* 21.

43 Ethel Hutson, "Housewives' Body Active to Better Living Conditions," *Times Picayune* (March 13, 1921): 38.

44 "Housewives Seek to Sever League from Federation," *Times Picayune* (June 5, 1915): 5; "Housewives' League Branch Organized," *Times Picayune* (June 12, 1915): 5.

45 "Co-op Store Has Big Future, Mrs. Egleston Says," *New Orleans Item* (April 4, 1920): 13.

Mayor Martin Behrman resisted their call for political equality. As progressive reformers and suffragists, the League's members decried politicians who blocked their enfranchisement. They were particularly critical of the anti-suffrage Old Regular Democratic Party (ORD), or Democratic Ring, that dominated city and state politics. Between 1904 and 1920, Behrman's administration controlled each of New Orleans' 17 alderman positions and rewarded loyal working-class voters with patronage jobs and charity services through its machine-controlled precinct organizations.<sup>46</sup> Fearing that women's enfranchisement would lead to sweeping political reform, Behrman instructed city ward leaders to vote against a state suffrage amendment in 1912 and 1918.<sup>47</sup>

His trepidations were well grounded: With an eventual membership of 1,500 members, or nearly seven percent of registered white female voters in 1920, the Housewives' League balanced consumer advocacy with political activism.<sup>48</sup> For example, at a sparsely attended annual Housewives' League meeting in November 1919, "political controversy invaded the discussion of how cheaper gas for the housewives of New Orleans may be obtained."<sup>49</sup> Reformist state senators accused Behrman of lavishing city funds on Industrial Canal improvements while neglecting citizens' need for reliable, inexpensive fuel. WSP head Lydia Holmes revealed that many of the League's husbands supported the Ring and had barred their wives from attending the contentious meeting. However, she reminded attendees that while women could not vote, they could still pressure City Council through "constant, continual, everlasting agitation" to lower fuel

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46 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 11.

47 Ibid., 24; McConnaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America*, 185, 190-193.

48 Winslow, *Official Register and Directory of Women's Clubs in America*, 179.

49 "Says Husbands, 'Ring' Followers, Keep Wives Away," 12.

costs. Under Meyers' leadership, the League "alternatively stormed and wheedled public opinion and the powers that be" to advocate for female political and economic equality.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, Housewives' League members were closely affiliated with the city's reformist commercial interests, often married to successful businessmen. Consequently, the League was deeply invested in the economic growth of the city and Louisiana, especially as it affected women's financial stability. Convinced that the ORD was enriching itself before redistributing monetary resources to the city and state, male commercial leaders formed the Citizens' League, a nonpartisan reform organization that ran its own political candidates in order to end both the Ring's dominance and political corruption.<sup>51</sup> Mayor Behrman was concerned enough by the opposition party's gains to integrate New Orleans' reformist commercial elite into city administrative positions, which the business community touted as the best strategy to improve government efficiency and civic responsiveness.<sup>52</sup>

Examining the Housewives' League's alliances with New Orleans' commercial elite in greater detail reveals both the constraints League members faced as they struggled for public legitimacy, as well as their subversion of corporate interests. Although the Housewives' League critiqued commercial and governmental prejudices that glorified war and exploited the poor, they were implicated in the very systems of global exchange that fueled American imperialism.<sup>53</sup> New Orleans in the early decades of the twentieth

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50 "Women Work for Humanity Cause," *Daily Picayune* (September 1, 1913): 29.

51 McConaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America*, 186; Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 11; Kendall, *History of New Orleans*.

52 McConaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America*, 187.

53 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 153-154.



century witnessed rapid infrastructure and port modernization and corresponding economic growth.<sup>54</sup> Mayor Behrman's strategic alliance with the city's commercial leaders allowed him to promote "municipally run economic development"; consequently, New Orleans' command over the global marketplace rapidly expanded. Boasting the second largest port in the nation, New Orleans was poised to capitalize on the burgeoning import and export trade in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central America, and Latin America by the 1910s.<sup>55</sup> New Orleans exported items such as cotton, sugar, lumber, oil, and rice, and imported coffee, bananas, nitrates, and molasses. For example, between 1899 and 1902, the Vaccaro Brothers and Samuel Zemurray's Cuyamel Fruit Company consolidated their hold over Central American banana importation, ensuring that New Orleans would lead the tropical fruit industry.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, at least 21 Housewives' League members had husbands or brothers employed in expanding export and import industries such as cotton, sugar, molasses, rice, oil, chicory, lumber, and feed. Participating in New Orleans' infrastructural modernization, six other husbands managed engineering offices, dry docks, steamship companies, and telephone and telegraph offices. For example, Edna Egleston's husband Howard was a civil engineer and member of the Association of Commerce. He had helped construct the Panama Canal as well as railroad lines throughout Mexico, Florida,

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54 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 211.

55 Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, 614-620; "New Orleans Second Largest Port in the United States," *The Longshoreman* (November 1917): 2; "New Orleans Building Greater Trade with South American Ports," *New Orleans Item* (May 8, 1920): 16.

56 Richard Campanella, "New Orleans: Timeline of Economic History," New Orleans Business Alliance, New Orleans New Opportunities Guide Book (2012)  
[http://richcampanella.com/assets/pdf/article\\_Campanella\\_New%20Orleans%20Timeline%20of%20Economic%20History\\_NOBA.pdf](http://richcampanella.com/assets/pdf/article_Campanella_New%20Orleans%20Timeline%20of%20Economic%20History_NOBA.pdf).

and Louisiana.<sup>57</sup> The United States' acquisition of the rights to build the Panama Canal and its support of Panamanian independence in 1903 secured its diplomatic, labor, technological, and economic dominance over new South American markets.<sup>58</sup>

It is unsurprising, then, that women whose livelihoods depended on expanding domestic and transnational commerce were vocal city boosters. *Times Picayune* feature writer Julia Truitt Bishop, for example, declared that the city's waterfront, canal, and railroad modernization would guarantee that the Port of New Orleans would become "one of the best and busiest and most economical ports in the entire country."<sup>59</sup> The League even held meetings at the Association of Commerce library, promoted local goods in "Made in New Orleans" campaigns, and co-organized the Association of Commerce's annual Buyers Week to attract corporate investment.<sup>60</sup>

Given their families' roles in facilitating global markets, the Housewives' League's determined foray into cooperative economics is especially striking. The League exploited the Behrman administration and the Association of Commerce's alliance, believing that it could lower the cost of living by strategically cooperating with both. Recognizing city officials' mistrust of suffragists and female reformers and excluded from a political machine relying on patronage and votes, women's organizations like the Era Club had long attempted to garner civic influence by volunteering on Behrman's

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57 "Howard Egleston Dies of Pneumonia: Well-Known Civil Engineer Came to City Fourteen Years Ago," *Times Picayune* (February 6, 1926): 2.

58 Bill Brown, "The Prosthetics of Empire," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, 139, 141.

59 Julia Truitt Bishop, "Personal Visit to the Great Port of New Orleans," *Times Picayune* (July 4, 1915): Magazine Section.

60 "Buyers Welcome! Buy-At-Home, Too!" 1, 3; "Matrons to Decide on Store Monday," *Times Picayune* (October 30, 1921): 6.

civic commissions.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, despite explicitly opposing the Ring, Housewives' Leaguers believed that civic engagement would demonstrate their fitness for political equality. Indeed, the Housewives' League members' identification as "housewives" and "consumers" constituted a kind of rhetorical gymnastics that legitimized their political ambitions. As historian Allison Parker argues, female reformers often justified political activity by extending their maternal and domestic duties to "mothering" the nation.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, by labeling professional women "housewives," League members practiced civic mindedness without threatening gender roles.<sup>63</sup>

Casting women as consumers could be either accommodationist or subversive, and the League tacked a fine line between the two. Because women were positioned as both "housewives" and the nation's primary consumers, the New Orleans government and the Association of Commerce often prevailed upon the Housewives' League to help strengthen New Orleans' economy and modernize its failing infrastructure.<sup>64</sup> To that end, League members served on municipal consumer commissions and made policy recommendations to civic leaders. For example, in April 1919, the League's law and legislation committee declared that retailers and wholesalers ignored weights and measures laws mandating fair, standardized pricing. Likewise, future Housewives' League Co-operative Store head Edna Egleston petitioned to the city administration to

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61 McConaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America*, 181-182.

62 Parker, *Purifying America*, 141-142; "Parents Condemn Movie Thrillers," *Times Picayune* (June 26, 1921), 225.

63 Clipping, Judith Hyams Douglas Papers, Dept. of Archives, LSU, cited in Scott, *A Southern Lady*, 191.

64 Anne Meis Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption, and Economic Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 18.

enforce laws mandating that ice trucks contain working scales.<sup>65</sup> Her lobbying was effective: in response to Egleston's petition, City Attorney Isaiah Moore instructed Mayor Behrman to have police monitor ice delivery wagons.<sup>66</sup> The League's campaign to lower food costs for women therefore dovetailed with Progressive campaigns formalizing female involvement in the government's market regulation. Women enjoyed increasing influence over public health, nutrition, and food production, distribution, and consumption practices.<sup>67</sup>

Yet the League's alliance with commercial and civic leaders did not hinder its proposal for economic reform, a move that often pitted them against the Association of Commerce and the Behrman administration. For example, even as Howard Egleston was constructing railroads and dredging canals to extend the reach of American capitalism, he and his wife Edna simultaneously advocated a decentralized system of cooperative stores that countered the very same economic and political structures Howard Egleston was aiding. The League saw no contradiction in facilitating global markets and pursuing economic cooperation. As historian Jonathan Hansen argues, cosmopolitan feminists "presumed that other cultures would yield obligingly before the advance of Western technology and commerce" in order to achieve international harmony.<sup>68</sup> Analogously, the

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65 "Women Protest Extreme Styles," *Times Picayune* (April 12, 1919): 8.

66 "To Compel Use of Scales on Ice Delivery Wagons," *Times Picayune* (May 1, 1919): 13.

67 "Housewives Seek to Sever League from Federation," *Times Picayune* (June 5, 1915): 5; Harriet C. Barton, "Report of the Sanitation Committee of the Woman's League" (1910), *Woman's League Papers*, n.d., New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La.

68 Jonathan Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 186.

Housewives' League believed national and international cooperative enterprise would redeem American capitalism and enlighten global citizens.

### **Early Cooperative Projects: The Public Market**

As state legislators, U.S. Senate committees, and private institutions labored to identify the cause of skyrocketing food costs, activists began to form consumer cooperatives to circumvent wholesalers and retailers the public largely blamed for the national food supply crisis. To do so, they worked directly with producers and processors.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in 1913, the Housewives League launched a far-reaching campaign to reform the city's public markets to provide women access to high quality, inexpensive foods. Fearing that unregulated peddlers threatened small farmers' livelihoods, the League "took a deep breath and girded its armor...for...efforts that will mean a central market and cheaper meat."<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, the League urged city officials to regularly inspect public markets for proper sanitation and equitable pricing.<sup>71</sup> It also lobbied the city to operate safe and sanitary retail and wholesale markets throughout the city so small producers and female consumers could avoid middlemen retailers or wholesalers who unfairly inflated produce prices. Specifically, the Housewives' League argued that small farmers could sell low-cost, fresh bulk produce directly to consumers and coordinated between female consumers and small producers, agricultural unions, and

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69 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 109-110; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 19.

70 "Women Work for Humanity Cause," *Daily Picayune* (September 1, 1913): 29.

71 Market Committee Records, 1912-1916, Louisiana Research Collection, <http://specialcollections.tulane.edu/archon/?p=collections/findingaid&id=805>; "Housewives Seek to Sever League from Federation," 5; Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 14, 26, 49.

cooperative stores.<sup>72</sup> Beginning in 1913, the League enlisted the city's farmers, trade associations, and unions to advise members how best to intervene in the marketplace.<sup>73</sup>

Most importantly, investigating public market conditions and allying with producers and retailers critical of corporate-controlled food distribution encouraged the League to establish its own cooperative organizations. For example, in May 1915, responding to a severe, year-long national depression, Meyers announced that the League had initiated an experiment in cooperative marketing with the Louisiana State Farmers' Educational and Co-operative Union of America (LSF), a rural Populist organization.<sup>74</sup> The LSF was a branch of the National Farmers Union, a militant regional association established in 1902 that extended across the Cotton Belt South.<sup>75</sup> Recruiting farm laborers and collaborating with trade unions, the National Farmers Union organized credit unions and supply-purchasing, marketing, grain elevator, and grocery cooperatives. Additionally, it lobbied the federal government to ban commodity market speculation and to regulate agricultural prices to aid small farmers.<sup>76</sup> The LSF and the Housewives' League increased profits for depressed farmers by facilitating direct trade between producer and urban consumers in New Orleans' public markets.

However, the LSF and Housewives' League struggled to educate both consumers and producers about the benefits of cooperative enterprise in public markets. Two

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72 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 26; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 18-28.

73 "New Orleans Federation Will Mark Silver Anniversary," *Times Picayune* (November 21, 1937): 53;

"Municipal Curb Market Opened in Carrollton," *Times Picayune* (July 14, 1917): 7.

74 "State Farmers' Union to Hold Annual Meeting," *Times Picayune* (May 15, 1915): 7; "The Farmers' Union and the City," *Times Picayune* (July 13, 1915): 8.

75 Joseph Knapp, *The Rise of American Cooperative Enterprise, 1620-1920* (Danville: Interstate, 1969), 176-177.

76 Curl, *For All the People*, 131.

months into the project's implementation, LSF State Agent J.H. Craig reported that farmers refused to coordinate with the organization and instead glutted the public markets with their surplus vegetables.<sup>77</sup> Women's market patronage was similarly unreliable, largely because of the cooperative stall's inconvenient location and uneven quality of produce preparation and storage. Nonetheless, the LSF remained adamant that economic cooperation between "the farmers or the farm wives and [women's] clubs" was "a recognized condition imperative for the common weal." Similarly, when sold in "abundance," the League hoped bulk vegetables, poultry, and fruit would appreciably reduce urban food costs while profiting small producers.<sup>78</sup>

### **An Independent Housewives' League**

By June 1915, the New Orleans Housewives' League split from the City Federation to become a separate, affiliated body. After receiving a charter from the National Housewives' League (NHL), the New Orleans chapter fully committed itself to achieving that organization's mandate to improve economic conditions for middle-class women.<sup>79</sup> Inez Meyers was unanimously elected president, serving in that office for seven years.<sup>80</sup> Reflecting its members' ties to urban commercial elites, the League established its permanent headquarters in the Association of Commerce's offices

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<sup>77</sup> "The Farmers' Union and the City," 8.

<sup>78</sup> "Members of the Housewives' League to Try Operating Stalls in the Public Markets," *Times Picayune* (July 21, 1915): 5.

<sup>79</sup> "Housewives Seek to Sever League," 5; "Milk Price Goes Up, Consumption Goes Down, Today," *Times Picayune* (October 1, 1919): 4.

<sup>80</sup> "Housewives' League Branch Organized," *Times Picayune* (June 12, 1915): 5; "Housewives Seek to Sever League," 5; "Funeral Today For Mrs. Myers," 3.

bordering Canal Street and the French Quarter.<sup>81</sup> Riding a street car along St. Charles Avenue from her peaceful Uptown suburbs to the Association of Commerce, a middle-class Leaguer would have passed through the Warehouse and Cotton Districts containing the factories, banks, agents, and factors dependent on the state's languishing cotton industry, and into the Central Business District, filled with commodity exchange houses and businesses supporting New Orleans agricultural trade.<sup>82</sup>

As an independent entity, the League continued to explore cooperative economic projects. It had good reason to: By 1916, food prices had risen by nearly 20 percent in response to crop failure, railway car shortages, Allies' wartime food demands, and a domestic shortage of staples like onions, bread, and cabbage.<sup>83</sup> To counter rising food costs, in December 1915, the League's market committee established a cooperative curb market at the corner of St. Charles and Napoleon Avenues.<sup>84</sup> To relieve farmers and consumers of the middleman's mark-up, peddlers were barred from the market. In fact, the League's goal was to demonstrate to retailers and wholesalers that "they can't hold up the people any longer!"<sup>85</sup> Committee member Edna Egleston recalled that members "twice a week got up at dawn, in rain or shine, in cold or heat, and went to the various

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81 "Co-op Store Plans are Now Under Way," *Times Picayune* (April 24, 1920): 4.

82 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 203 and 289.

83 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 109.

84 Mrs. Howard Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement in New Orleans and the South," in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Social Work, at the Forty-Seventh Annual Session Held in New Orleans, Louisiana, April 14-21, 1920* 47 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920), 306; Miller, "Housewives Establish Curb Markets for the Farmers in New Orleans," *Housewives League Magazine* (March 1916): 51; "Curb Market is So Successful It Will be Held Twice a Week," *Times Picayune* (January 6, 1916): 10.

85 "Curb Market is So Successful," 10.



market places and sold these fresh country eggs to eager customers.”<sup>86</sup> Half a dozen wagons “laden as long as anything would stay on” traveled from Jefferson Parish and Baton Rouge farms to sell produce on Wednesdays and Saturdays.<sup>87</sup> Farmers celebrated the arrangement, claiming their profits far exceeded those at public markets.

Located by an Uptown street car stop on New Orleans Railway and Lighting Company land, the market drew white middle-class women who arrived in “droves” by cars or public transit, traveling by themselves, or with their husbands, children, and servants. Additionally, African American domestic workers shopped for their white employers and themselves. Embracing the market as a social event, patrons shared their inexpensive, high quality finds with friends, such as “lettuce as big and solid as cabbage...excellent sweet potatoes...[and] the finest and tenderest spinach...turnips and mustard greens and endive and shallots.” In order to promote women’s economic solvency, the League even encouraged women to sell homemade breads and jellies, as well as their craftwork.

Yet the curb market project’s success was contingent on League members maintaining good relations with a confounding range of interests, including transportation companies, municipal officials, farmers, market neighbors, and the city’s food retailers and wholesalers. In what would become a common refrain throughout the Housewives’ League’s consumer campaigns, in 1916, food retailers and wholesalers accused the

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86 Egleston, “The Co-operative Movement,” 306.

87 “Curb Market is So Successful,” 10.

organization of conspiring to destroy their businesses.<sup>88</sup> Meyers observed, “There has been persistent effort exerted to influence the growers against the Housewives’ League market. We know for a surety that many of them, if not all, have been importuned to disappoint us, to take their produce elsewhere to market.” However, the farmers stood by “the women patronizing them.” Sidestepping any hint of anti-capitalist demagoguery, Meyers assured retailers that the League aligned with the moderate aims of the National Housewives’ League, which “emphasizes most emphatically that its purpose is not to fight the middleman.” Further, she claimed that lower food costs facilitated the city’s economic development by attracting potential residents to New Orleans.

At the same time, Meyers nevertheless insisted that the League curb market constituted a “revolution” in food distribution. She reiterated that the curb market reduced waste and lowered consumer costs by enabling truck farmers to sell directly to women, and most importantly, broke wholesalers’ monopoly on produce distribution to the “detriment of housewives.” Noting that with its 800 members the League was a powerful force, Meyers declared that her organization was “determined” that small farmers would continue to use the market, regardless of produce merchants’ opposition. To do so, Meyers continued to draw on the support of city officials.

Most importantly, the League’s curb market program inspired the organization to continue researching cooperative enterprises. Looking back in 1920, Edna Egleston remarked that the curb market “demonstrated what can be done through co-operation [between producers and consumers and among New Orleanian women], for, in a way, it

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<sup>88</sup> “Housewives Lose One Site; Obtain Another at Once,” *Times Picayune* (January 21, 1916): 11.

was a movement in that direction.”<sup>89</sup> The League taught its female members to handle every aspect of the market’s business, appointing a farm products committee, a buying committee, as well as a coordinator for transportation, freight, express and parcel post deliveries. Members not only began to understand the nuances of modern food distribution systems, but also how to work collaboratively. Egleston noted that the members’ desire to find new “ways and means of economizing” soon led the League to research formal cooperative enterprise.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, America’s entry into World War I and women’s voluntary and paid war work laid the groundwork for the League’s renewed participation in food distribution reform and cooperative activism. As the nation readied for war, Progressive reformers lauded consumer cooperatives as a vital distribution channel that would end the food crisis by cutting out middlemen and connecting consumers directly to cheap food.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, foreshadowing the League’s radical postwar economic and political program, renowned New Orleans journalist and reformer Ida Tarbell declared in 1917 that by mobilizing “woman-power” around national defense and civilian food supply, “women whose minds have dealt so keenly with...successive food problems may become dangerous opponents of food speculators and food hoardings.”<sup>92</sup> Wartime cooperative enterprise would lead to a postwar cooperative democracy that acted “for the sake of the whole...based on a sense of national need and national good.”

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89 Egleston, “The Co-operative Movement,” 306.

90 “Housewives’ League Plan to Establish Co-operative Store,” *Times Picayune* (June 29, 1919): 49.

91 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 110.

92 Ida M. Tarbell, “Mobilizing the Women,” *Harpers Monthly Magazine* (November 1917), J. Fred MacDonald Presents World War One Centennial Gallery, accessed June 20, 2014, <http://jfredmacdonald.com/worldwarone1914-1918/usa-17mobilizing-women.html>.

## The Housewives' League and World War I

While Louisianan suffragists developed collaborative partnerships through a vibrant pre-war national peace movement that decried self-interested corporations driving global war, World War I work provided a concrete, publicly acceptable platform for the League's evolving cooperative philosophy.<sup>93</sup> After President Woodrow Wilson declared war in April 1917 and instituted severe restrictions on civil liberties and free speech to silence pacifists and radicals, mainstream suffragists backpedaled from advocating pacifism.<sup>94</sup> Avoiding a political backlash, former antiwar advocate Carrie Chapman Catt announced NAWSA would strategically support the war effort as a means to secure lasting peace while continuing to advocate for women's suffrage. Like other mainstream suffragists, the Housewives' League believed that active participation in the war effort through industrial labor, volunteer work, military enlistment, and civilian defense training would exemplify women's fitness for full citizenship.<sup>95</sup>

Taking advantage of Progressive reformers' new-found influence over New Orleans and Louisiana politics, the Housewives' League's work in wartime food production and consumption forged ties with high-ranking reform politicians crucial to the passage of state and federal suffrage amendments. By enabling women to serve on defense committees and domestic commissions on civilian affairs, the war helped legitimize white women's calls for citizenship. Indeed, Housewives' League members

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93 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 170-171; "Louisiana Women Advocating Plan for World's Peace," *Times Picayune* (April 1, 1915): 17.

94 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 171.

95 Carmen Meriwether Lindig, "The Woman's Movement in Louisiana: 1897-1920" (PhD diss., North Texas State University, 1982), 199; Susan Godson, *Serving Proudly: A History of Women in the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 60.

endorsed Louisiana's reform governors Ruffin Pleasant and John M. Parker's efforts to shut down the New Orleans political machine and, in return, expected them to enfranchise women.<sup>96</sup> Given his platform of progressivism, future governor Parker was a logical ally for the Housewives' League fighting for both consumer protections and women's suffrage. Running for governor on the Progressive Party ticket during the Good Government movement in 1916, Parker was committed to eradicating the anti-suffrage Democratic Ring political machine.<sup>97</sup> By 1920, Parker was now a reform Democrat who supported suffrage and "business progressivism," sympathies the League applauded.<sup>98</sup> Parker's platform included constitutional and administrative reforms, eliminating "bossism" in Louisiana politics, and relieving postwar capital and labor tension.

During World War I, Parker was appointed state food administrator for President Woodrow Wilson's Food Administration, which monitored the nation's wartime food supply by preventing food shortages, hoarding, price inflation, and food riots.<sup>99</sup> The Food Administration encouraged citizens to reduce their consumption of staples and hired female home economists and food reformers to staff the agency's state offices. Simultaneously, to foster cooperation between the Food Administration and women consumers, Governor Ruffin Pleasant recruited several Housewives' League members to

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<sup>96</sup> Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 23; Lindig, "The Woman's Movement," 209.

<sup>97</sup> Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South*, 29-30.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>99</sup> Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 138.

the New Orleans WCCND, a federally appointed advisory organization of eleven women coordinating civilian women's defense work.<sup>100</sup>

As WCCND members, League directors worked closely with Parker's Food Administration.<sup>101</sup> For example, after Inez Meyers and her colleagues completed a WCCND-sponsored Tulane University home economics summer course, the League hosted food conservation and food economy workshops in city department stores. The League instructed women to can their own victory garden harvest, "which we are raising in such abundance in response to President Wilson's call for the south to feed itself."<sup>102</sup> Also, suffrage supporter and Progressive reformer Parker invited Anna Howard Shaw to meet with local WCCND leaders, also ardent suffragists.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, Parker, alongside prominent League members Eva Dibert and Catherine Van Meter, endorsed the Hope Haven Industrial Farm, a cooperative farm opened in 1917 to redress wartime food shortages and systemic poverty.<sup>104</sup> The League thus garnered credibility as it forged government partnerships that would construct a temporary welfare state framed and legitimized by patriotic food relief activities.

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100 "Reforming Their World: Women in the Progressive Era," The National Women's History Museum, last modified 2007, <http://www.nwhm.org/ProgressiveEra/worldwarI.html>; Godson, *Serving Proudly*, 56; "Dr. Shaw Comes to Organize War Work for Women," *Times Picayune* (April 1, 1918): 9; Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 140-142; "Defense Council Hears Dr. Scherer on Work to Do," *Times Picayune* (July 22, 1917): 103; Tarbell, "Mobilizing the Women."

101 "Dr. Shaw Comes to Organize War Work for Women," 9.

102 Inez Meyers, quoted in "Woman's Page: What America's Society Women of Wealth are Doing to Correct Wastefulness," *Ogden Standard* (June 30, 1917): 5; Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 142; "Patriotic Talks Mark School's End," *Times Picayune* (July 21, 1918): 4A.

103 Parker's wife was president of the suffragist organization Era Club for several years. See "Buyers Welcome! Buy-At-Home, Too!" 3; "Dr. Shaw Comes to Organize War Work for Women," 9; McConnaughy, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in America*, 187.

104 "Societies and Institutions," *The Catholic Charities Review* 1, no. 5 (May 1917): 150.

The League's cooperative war work was also inspired by the words of Ida Tarbell, who in 1917 hailed the WCCND as an unprecedented opportunity for the nation to harness women's vast intellectual resources.<sup>105</sup> WCCND volunteers not only performed mundane tasks such as making bandages or uniforms, but they also envisioned "great economic and social readjustments, reforms and undertakings." For example, Tarbell observed that WCCND-run cooperatives sprang up around the country to benefit "all classes of the community," ranging from community canning centers and food exchanges, to cooperative buying clubs and cooperative food storage facilities. She argued that if women's organizations could set aside differences to create "democratic all-serving food centers" in the service of the national good, they could also establish "intellectual and social centers where all women may grapple with community and national problems." Ultimately, Tarbell contended, women's collaborative war work could inspire a "disinterested co-operative democracy." Similarly, by working with the WCCND and state officials, the Housewives' League became convinced that broad-scale cooperation could foment peace, economic prosperity, and political enfranchisement. After the war, the League would pursue formal cooperative organizing to achieve lasting economic reform in the service of women's political independence.

### **Racial Instability, the Housewives' League, and the Colored Domestic's Union**

However, the wartime climate threw League members' racial, class, and ethnic prejudices into sharp relief, which severely constricted the Housewives' League's mission to build a democratic, cooperative economy. The League's cooperative

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<sup>105</sup> Tarbell, "Mobilizing the Women."

experiments intersected with white women's political enfranchisement, the streamlining of women's domestic work, and an increasingly unsettled racial landscape. After working with black women in segregated WCCND sections to coordinate women's statewide war work, some League members, like Ida Friend, joined an emerging group of white southern women to create sustained, antiracist advocacy organizations. However, for the most part, the League's interracial and cross-class alliances remained fragile and tenuous.<sup>106</sup> While directors largely disdained suffragists Kate and Jean Gordon's rabidly racist rhetoric, they did not pursue racial equality as a precondition for true democracy.<sup>107</sup>

In particular, the racial dynamics undergirding white women's suffrage campaigns and war work informed the Housewives' League's ambivalent response to black women's social justice and political activism. African American women's participation in the public sphere was deeply threatening to many middle-class white women, including some members of the Housewives' League. As black women mobilized for wartime volunteer campaigns, they also demanded political enfranchisement and a slew of social reforms, all of which threatened to overturn the city's ingrained racial and class hierarchies.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, most League members resolutely regarded white and black working-class women as beneficiaries of their aid and expertise rather than as allies.<sup>109</sup>

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106 Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 199; Lee Sartain, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 55.

107 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 21.

108 Sartain, *Invisible Activists*, 49-51, 55.

109 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 264-265.



The League's paternalist model of interracial cooperation was shattered during wartime and postwar domestic labor shortages and subsequent black unionizing efforts. World War I provided black and white working-class women new opportunities to cultivate economic autonomy and demonstrate their patriotic fitness for civic life. In 1917, the demand for cotton, sugar, timber, and petroleum skyrocketed and created an economic boom in Louisiana for the duration of the war.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, the federal government expanded the city's maritime facilities, including three shipyards, a modern repair yard, and an expansive warehousing terminal for railcars and shipping. A labor shortage also drove up wages. Consequently, better paying industrial work and immigration restrictions shrank the pool of domestic servants to the extent that white middle-class women feared a full-blown "servant problem."<sup>111</sup>

Over the course of 1918, black domestic workers grew increasingly dissatisfied with their private employers, as well as their treatment within wartime non-profit organizations and government agencies. In fact, when Alice Dunbar-Nelson was appointed by the Women's Committee to survey black women's war activities, she discovered that New Orleans' interracial civil defense collaboration was, in reality, merely a facade of "lovely co-operation, and general foggy feeling of goodwill and sisterly love."<sup>112</sup> White Louisiana Women's Committee organizers had not even ventured

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110 Matthew Reonas, "World War I," in KnowLA Encyclopedia of Louisiana, ed. David Johnson (Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, 2010), last modified November 16, 2011, <http://www.knowla.org/entry/823/>.

111 "Training School For Servants May Hold Husbands," *Times Picayune* (December 31, 1918): 6; "Servant Problem Occupies Meetings of Women's Clubs," *Times Picayune* (October 29, 1920): 1.

112 Alice Dunbar-Nelson, quoted in Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006): 43.

beyond New Orleans to assist black women's volunteer efforts. Most troublingly, the city's maids and nurses reported to Dunbar-Nelson that the Red Cross, the Women's Committee, and the federal government confined black women to low-paid janitorial and domestic jobs, regardless of their qualifications.<sup>113</sup>

Demanding higher wages and shorter hours for black female servants, in May 1918, African American unionist Eleanor Peete formed the American Federation of Labor (AFL)-affiliated Colored Domestic Union of New Orleans.<sup>114</sup> While her husband Sylvester protested dockworkers' wage reductions as president of the local freight handlers' union, Eleanor recruited nearly 1,000 laundresses, cooks, maids, and nurses to the domestic union.<sup>115</sup> Pointing to African Americans' wartime patriotism, fellow Colored Domestic Union member Sarah P. Williams admonished white women "not [to] stand in the way of the negro woman's effort to make a day's...honest pay....We have given our sons and husbands [to the war] and without protest. My race has bowed in submission to all laws and is loyal."<sup>116</sup> To Williams, the labor movement was "one of the greatest things that has happened in years amongst the negro women" because it provided a formal structure for black women to redress their grievances.

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113 Ibid., 45.

114 "Housewives Talk of Scarcity of Help," *Times Picayune* (October 3, 1918): 8; "Supplemental Report of Committee on Credentials," *Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor* (Washington, DC: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1919): 185; "Household Labor Finds New Orleans Homemakers Calm," *Times Picayune* (July 23, 1918): 12; Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*, 45; Maurine Weiner Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work: The Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 41.

115 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 229.

116 Sarah P. Williams, "The Servant Problem," *Times Picayune* (July 28, 1918): 10.

Members of the Housewives' League responded to the Colored Domestic Union in divergent ways. Immediately after the union organized, Carrie McWilliams publicly declared that white housewives would rather perform their own domestic work than acquiesce to the union's demands that to pay cooks \$25 a month, limit their duties to cooking, and reduce their daily work shift to 11 hours.<sup>117</sup> To bolster her argument, McWilliams claimed that Blanche Armwood Perkins, a respected black home economics instructor, had also denounced the union.

McWilliams's pronouncement fractured a delicate interracial alliance forged around domestic servant training and middle-class uplift ideology. Working-class African American women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were infuriated that Perkins had categorically rejected the domestic union's campaign for a living wage.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, Perkins occupied a precarious position within New Orleans's complicated racial and class landscape. Dependent on substantial financial backing, Perkins cultivated white donors by deploying Booker T. Washington's conservative mantra that black economic security would result in social equality.<sup>119</sup> For example, in 1915, Perkins had opened her first domestic science school in Tampa, Florida; a local gas company sponsored the institution to promote its services to white

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117 "Cooks' Union Slogan Brings Protests from Housewives," *Times Picayune* (May 19, 1918): 11; "Homemakers' Meeting," *Times Picayune* (July 22, 1918): 12; "Home-Makers Organize at Suffrage House Tuesday," *Times Picayune* (July 21, 1918): 4.

118 "Cooks' Union Slogan," 11.

119 Mary Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood (1890-1939)," *The Sunland Tribune* 15 (November 1989): 43.

housewives.<sup>120</sup> After moving to New Orleans in 1917, Perkins secured funding from the New Orleans Gas Company, the YMCA, and white housewife-employers to open the New Orleans School of Domestic Science.<sup>121</sup> For two years, she taught over 1,000 women and girls scientific food preparation and wartime food conservation methods.<sup>122</sup>

Yet despite her seemingly accommodationist politics, Perkins strategically tacked between conservative and radical racial activism in order to advance a pragmatic program of social welfare and civil rights.<sup>123</sup> For example, she was an avowed NAACP member, suffragist, and anti-lynching crusader. Therefore, to repair her reputation within the black community while maintaining middle-class propriety and white support, Perkins publicly explained that she had no position on the Colored Domestic Union. Rather, she was convinced that proper vocational training would enable cooks to command higher pay.<sup>124</sup> However, Perkins' diplomacy neither endeared her to working-class women, nor did it soothe white housewives' growing apprehension about the implications of organized domestic labor.

Indeed, in July 1918, McWilliams called an open meeting at the Suffrage House to discuss the "servant problem."<sup>125</sup> The *Times Picayune's* women's page opined that

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120 Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s* (Champaign: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 2001), 164-165.

121 "Practical Domestic Science Taught to Increase Efficiency and Number of Colored Cooks," *Times Picayune* (January 27, 1918): 42.

122 Michele Alishahi, "'For Peace and Civic Righteousness': Blanche Armwood and the Struggle for Freedom and Racial Equality in Tampa, Florida, 1890-1939" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2003), 63.

123 *Ibid.*, 94, 115.

124 "Negroes Criticize Objections Urged to Cooks' Union," *Times Picayune* (May 21, 1918): 14.

125 "Housewives Call Meet to Discuss Dearth of Labor," *Times Picayune* (July 16, 1918): 1; "Cooks Must Toe the Line Under Rule of Women's Body," (July 17, 1918): 14; Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*, 45.

attendees made outlandish, vague accusations that subversive, unpatriotic black domestics would prevent white women from their vital war work, which “made the meeting quite uncanny at times.”<sup>126</sup> When League president Inez Meyers suggested that domestic servants could work standardized shifts to more equitably distribute their labor, the majority of the audience vociferously rejected her suggestion and resolved to form an independent organization to study the issue, the Homemakers’ Association. The club immediately barred servants from taking food home, eating more than one meal at work, or arriving late, regardless of “toothaches, illness and society funerals.”<sup>127</sup> In fact, fierce opposition to the Colored Domestic Union chilled counterarguments supporting unionized household staff; in July 1918 the Homemakers Association, anti-espionage organization the American Protective League, and city police accused the union of harboring spies spreading German propaganda.<sup>128</sup> Police Superintendent Mooney claimed that the police should carefully investigate the union because “Servants and cooks in private households are in a position to learn many secrets which other spies could not learn.” Worse yet, infiltrators overstepped racial boundaries by attempting to “dictate to white women what remuneration [servants] shall receive.”

Given the Homemakers’ Association’s vitriolic, racist, and anti-union response, it is remarkable that any League members recognized black domestic laborers’ concerns. Lacking a coherent economic analysis to launch long-term cross-class or interracial

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126 “Home-Makers Organize at Suffrage House Tuesday,” 4.

127 “Cooks Must Toe the Line,” 14.

128 Police Superintendent Mooney claimed that the police should carefully investigate the union because “Servants and cooks in private households are in a position to learn many secrets which other spies could not learn.” See “Household Labor,” 12.

collaboration, League members either suggested moderate, individualized strategies for better staff management or advised white women to forgo servants altogether.<sup>129</sup> For example, Catherine Van Meter, founder of the Catherine Club, a home for poor and working women, argued “the day of the female tyrant [has] passed.”<sup>130</sup> America promoted representative government as an integral part of benevolent empire building overseas; affluent women, too, must apply these same “Christian virtues” at home by improving servants’ working conditions. One Leaguer similarly espoused white maternalist values: “sympathy and kindness are the best way to keep a servant.”<sup>131</sup> Ultimately, improved communication, better pay, and shorter hours would encourage “our girls” to leave unions and exploitative factories and return to former household positions.

Increasingly, the Housewives’ League suggested the “modern housewife” should eliminate her dependence on troublesome servants entirely. To do so, Inez Meyers brought both mass consumption and cooperative economics to bear on the “servant problem” by replacing them with electric appliances.<sup>132</sup> On the surface, Meyers echoed material feminists in New Orleans and across the country encouraging women to adopt “socialized” housekeeping and modern conveniences to improve domestic efficiency. To radical reformers, both the telephone and the cooperative delicatessen would prevent the

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129 Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution*, 22.

130 Catherine C. Van Meter, “Women are Striving for Equitable Conditions of Labor in the Household,” *Times Picayune* (July 21, 1918): 4.

131 “Servant Problem Occupies Meetings of Women’s Clubs,” *Times Picayune* (October 29, 1920): 1.

132 “To Show Electric Appliances Tuesday,” *Times Picayune* (April 14, 1919): 7; “How to Manage With a Servant and Without One,” *Times Picayune* (April 20, 1919): 53.

“enormous social waste from educated women becoming mere domestic drudges after marriage” rather pursuing professional careers.<sup>133</sup>

However, clear racial and class assumptions restricted Meyers’ cooperative labor proposal to the middle-class. For example, in an April 1919 Housewives’ League workshop entitled “Housework Minus Servants,” Meyers suggested that servant-less women form cooperative buying clubs to collectively invest in and share large laborsaving appliances like washing machines, dishwashers, and vacuums.<sup>134</sup> While the “wise woman” applying home economic principles would “slowly but surely [be] emancipated from the old-time all-day drudgery of housekeeping,” Meyers did not explain how domestic servants or other working-class women might also afford expensive modern appliances to relieve themselves of the same household work.<sup>135</sup> Meyers resolutely declared that “every woman has the right to be mistress of her own home,” yet coded her female audience as white middle-class consumers.<sup>136</sup> Unlike female reformers who urged both housewives and their servants to socialize domestic labor for their mutual benefit, the Housewives’ League conveniently overlooked the racial and class inequalities structuring black and low-income women’s lives to suggest how white, middle-class women alone could transcend the unstable labor market.<sup>137</sup>

### **Ida Weis Friend and the Consumers’ League**

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133 Mrs. George H. Williams, “Of Interest to Housekeepers,” *Times Picayune* (April 19, 1914): 53.

134 “Housework Minus Servants,” *Times Picayune* (April 9, 1919): 5; “To Show Electric Appliances,” 7.

135 “How to Manage,” 53.

136 “Let Women Make Survey of Duties Daily, Is Urged,” *Times Picayune* (November 24, 1918): 41.

137 Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution*, 22.

While the Housewives' League did little to advance interracial or cross-class unity, many of its Jewish, ethnic, and emigrant members adhered to more progressive racial, class, and gender ideologies. They often belonged to the local branch of the progressive National Consumers' League (NCL), a key consumer advocacy organization formed by Socialist Florence Kelley in 1899 to ameliorate the abuses rendered by the market's "invisible hand."<sup>138</sup> Of the documented Housewives' League members, a third hailed from out of state. Similarly, as historian Landon Storrs documents, Consumers' League women were frequently either educated outside the region or were recent migrants.<sup>139</sup> Some were also married to northern men or had northern or non-native-born parents. As we shall see, because Housewives' League and Consumers' League members had spent significant periods outside the Jim Crow South, they more willingly confronted pernicious class, race, and gender stereotypes defining the region's political, economic, and social structures.

In 1913, while the South largely ignored the budding consumers' movement, a small group of female consumer activists founded both the NCL and the National Housewives' League's New Orleans chapters.<sup>140</sup> The organizations shared many of the same members and directors.<sup>141</sup> The Housewives' League's seeming indifference to working-class and black women can thus be attributed to the two organizations' different,

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138 Florence Kelley, cited in Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 15. Catherine Van Meter, Alice Polk Flower, Carmelite Janvier, and Ida Weiss Friend were members of both organizations. See "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (April 24, 1913): 14; Winslow, *Official Register and Directory of Women's Clubs in America*, 179.

139 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 144.

140 "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (February 19, 1913): 9; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 15.

141 "City Federation of Women's Clubs," *Daily Picayune* (February 19, 1913): 9.



though related, foci. Although the Housewives' League promoted legislation to protect consumers, its alliance with the NCL ensured that members were also attuned to the plight of female laborers. For example, in April 1920, Florence Kelley spoke before both the New Orleans Housewives' and Consumers' Leagues about NCL campaigns to safeguard women and children factory workers.<sup>142</sup>

The Housewives' League's sustained commitment to ethical consumption can partially be explained by the consumer reform work of Jewish philanthropist Ida Weis Friend, a director of the Housewives' League, the Consumers' League, and the City Federation of Women's Clubs. Friend belonged to what historian Linda Gordon Kuzmack terms "the Jewish women's movement," in which Jewish women seeking expanded female autonomy aligned with secular women's organizations like the Consumers' League and the Housewives' League.<sup>143</sup> Friend's Jewish identity and liberal politics thus represent a significant countervailing trend within the Louisiana club movement. Born in 1869 in Natchez, Mississippi to a wealthy German-Jewish cotton factor, Friend was educated in Europe and New Orleans.<sup>144</sup> She married a Milwaukee native and lived in Chicago for a time before returning to New Orleans. Similarly, at least twelve-percent of Housewives' League members were affluent German-American Jews prominent within the city's commercial and philanthropic circles.<sup>145</sup>

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142 "Kelley is to Speak to Wives and Consumers," *New Orleans Item* (April 20, 1920): 15.

143 Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and the United States, 1888-1933* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1990), 3.

144 Karen Trahan Leathem, "Ida Weis Friend," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, last modified March 1, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/friend-ida-weis>.

145 Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 276.

Friend and her colleagues were Reform Jews who were distinct from both Christian New Orleanians and Orthodox Eastern European Jews. By the late nineteenth-century, wealthy Reform Jews culturally and geographically distanced themselves from a coalescing ethnic enclave of Eastern European Jews concentrated in Dryades Neighborhood.<sup>146</sup> Dryades Street was comprised of predominantly Orthodox religious centers and Jewish merchants, tailors, and jewelers serving black and white ethnic immigrants otherwise excluded from segregated Downtown commercial districts. In contrast, Reform Jews lived further west in Audubon Park and St. Charles Avenue suburbs, while their offices and stores were located in the Central Business District. Similarly, Jewish Housewives' League members living clustered within a mile and a half of each other along the upper reaches of Dryades Street and St. Charles Avenue.<sup>147</sup> They also worshipped together: most were active in the expansive Touro Synagogue and Temple Sinai, two community anchors for prosperous Reformists located near their St. Charles homes.<sup>148</sup> Likewise, the women were all buried in Hebrew Rest in Gentilly.<sup>149</sup>

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146 Ibid., 272-276.

147 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 144.

148 Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 269-270, 282; "Touro Sisterhood Defends Its Title," *Times Picayune* (May 17, 1959): 79; "Women Will Aid Salvation Army," *Times Picayune* (October 21, 1921): 12; Rabbi Leucht Returns," *Times Picayune* (September 13, 1908): 5; Miss Marie Van Os," JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; Rosa Michaelis, JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; Helen Israel, JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Cecile Alcus," JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Amelia Goldsmith," JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Celina Weinfeld," JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com; Jessie Michaelis, JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry, accessed through Ancestry.com.

149 International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, "New Orleans: (Orleans Parish)," International Jewish Cemetery Project, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/louisiana-la/new-orleans-orleans-parish.html>.

New Orleans' Jewish community was also segregated from the city's Protestant and Catholic planter elite, which would have important ideological implications for the Housewives' League.<sup>150</sup> Excluded from Protestant and Catholic-affiliated social clubs, some began to challenge the racial and class-based presumptions that elevated such institutions. Further, Jews' frequent exchanges with friend and familial networks outside the South tended to erode their loyalty to Jim Crow culture. Consequently, Jewish women became vocal participants in progressive, civil rights, and antipoverty campaigns. Likewise, with its large contingent of Jewish members, the Housewives' League became a repository for Progressive reform.

As head of the New Orleans Consumers' League and the City Federation of Women's Clubs, Ida Friend also ensured that the Housewives' League' program for women's economic empowerment concerned both consumer advocacy and legal protections for working women. Like the Housewives' League, the NCL believed that the government had an obligation to intervene in corporations' affairs in order to protect citizens' best interests.<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, the New Orleans Consumers' League pressed for protective legislation for the "conservation of the health, efficiency and self-support of working women and young people, Sunday rest, the short working day, a living wage, sanitary conditions of work in factories, and a definite period of rest at night."<sup>152</sup> Influenced by evolutionary socialism and social democratic thought, NCL members

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150 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 145; Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 30.

151 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 15.

152 "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (April 24, 1913): 14.

contended that labor laws were essential to extending political and economic equality to all aspects of American life.<sup>153</sup>

To achieve its aims, the Consumers' League, like the Housewives' League, saw white, middle-class female consumers as primary agents of reform. Both organizations proposed that women could change production and consumption practices by altering their buying habits, articulating policy recommendations, and even forming consumer cooperatives to opt out of exploitative mass markets.<sup>154</sup> For example, founding Consumers' League chapter member Jean Gordon explained that consumers could wield "enormous influence upon mill and factory owners and proprietors of stores" by boycotting products from corporations that exploited workers.<sup>155</sup> Accordingly, both the Consumers' League and the Housewives' League distributed a "white list" of honest factories and retailers such as ice dealers, and instructed women to avoid unscrupulous retailers.<sup>156</sup> Significantly, middle-class women's campaigns to curb capitalism's excesses meant undermining the very foundation upon which their social class rested.<sup>157</sup> Affluent consumers exerted a moral influence that would eliminate sweatshop conditions, ban child labor, and improve goods for consumers.

Like the Housewives' League, the Consumer League also built alliances with government bodies by actively participating on municipal and state consumer and labor

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153 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 16.

154 *Ibid.*, 20.

155 "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (February 19, 1913): 9.

156 "Price 'Outrageous,' Says League Head," *Times Picayune* (May 10, 1919): 11; Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 151.

157 Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 167, 171; Lynn Y. Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 68; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 16.

committees.<sup>158</sup> Over the course of the 1910s, the Consumers' League researched industrial conditions in New Orleans, examined women and children's salaries, domestic life, and working conditions, and requested the City implement minimum wages.<sup>159</sup> For example, Ida Friend chaired the Women in Industry Committee for the New Orleans and Louisiana Divisions of the Council of National Defense.<sup>160</sup> After surveying women's economic conditions in industrial and government positions, the committee demanded equal wages for female wartime employees. The Consumers' League sought to prove to public officials that women were rational, ethical consumers above the self-interest of either the capitalist or laborer. It argued, therefore, that women were best suited to intervene in the labor market and consumer economy.<sup>161</sup>

As Ida Friend studied working-class women's labor conditions, she began to build cross-class alliances that diluted both the Consumers' and Housewives' Leagues' paternalist attitudes. In 1917, Friend and the Consumers' League collaborated with large department stores and the Retail Merchants' Association to remind the "derelict and thoughtless" "leisure class of women" to only patronize shops closing at 6pm for the health and wellbeing of female shop clerks.<sup>162</sup> To remonstrate "those who should know better," the coalition placed cautionary posters in street cars and distributed "thousands" of poems in department store packages. Working with labor unions like the Retail Clerks'

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158 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 22-23, 37.

159 "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (March 27, 1914): 11.

160 Women in Industry Committee, Council of National Defense, New Orleans Division and Louisiana State Division, *Conditions of Women's Labor in Louisiana: New Orleans and Louisiana Industrial Survey* (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1919).

161 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 19-21, 22-23.

162 *Ibid.*, 19; "Consumers' League Opposes Opening Stores at Night," *Times Picayune* (December 1, 1917): 6.

Protective Association, the Consumers' League investigated the working conditions of major retail stores, deploring women's unequal pay, long, unpredictable hours, and buildings' inadequate heating systems and fire escapes.

However, as Storrs observes, while the Consumers' League urged working-class women to "use their purchasing power as a reform tool," it, like the Housewives' League, still envisioned itself as a middle-class body of non-laboring white women.<sup>163</sup> Therefore, the Housewives' League's lack of a well-articulated plan for aiding poor and African American female workers may not only reflect the organizational division between clubs, but also the generalized class bias structuring both groups. Ultimately, the League's white middle-class orientation would starkly define its next, more ambitious cooperative effort.

### **Anti-High Cost of Living Movement**

The Housewives' Cooperative Store formed within the context of demobilization, inflation, economic depression, government political repression of radicals and unions, as well as cooperative expansion and economic innovation. Working with cooperative curb markets, the NCL, and government agencies during World War I, the Housewives' League discovered the efficacy of federal intervention and cooperative economics in reforming consumer capitalism.<sup>164</sup> The Housewives' League's commitment to collective action and federal reform was redoubled in the wake of severe postwar inflation, during which the cost of rent, food, clothes, and other living expenses suddenly doubled.<sup>165</sup>

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163 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 19.

164 Ibid., 15; "Housewives' Grocery in Operation," 2.

165 Deutsch, *A Housewife's Paradise*, 45.

The postwar economy ignited a second wave of female protest over high consumer prices, which drove the Housewives' League to sharpen its critique of capitalism's deleterious effect on women's finances and autonomy.<sup>166</sup> As prices for staples such as butter, eggs, meat, milk, and sugar skyrocketed, women across the nation organized boycotts, led marches, and fomented riots.<sup>167</sup> The League also organized highly publicized boycotts to protest "outrageous" commodities, connecting their activities to a larger moral project to purify capitalism.<sup>168</sup> For example, in May 1919, President Meyers organized a boycott that successfully reduced the cost of butter and eggs. Additionally, when milk prices rose to 19 cents a quart in October 1919, Meyers instructed the 1,600-member League to cut their consumption by at least fifty-percent.<sup>169</sup> Every woman, she declared, was "under moral obligation to back up the action as a whole." Women had suffered "long enough," and she was confident that several hundred families would "fall in line" immediately to "call a halt" to unfair market prices. Working in tandem with federal and municipal efforts to regulate the consumer marketplace, the "anti-high cost of living" movement sparked a host of innovative grassroots efforts led by women to transform conventional food distribution systems.<sup>170</sup>

Other consumer, labor, and community organizations in New Orleans also worried that unaffordable basic foodstuffs would lead to riots, which currently plagued other cities. In August 1919, the Association of Commerce held an emergency meeting

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166 "Buyers Welcome! Buy-At-Home, Too!," 1, 3.

167 Deutsch, *A Housewife's Paradise*, 107; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 18-21.

168 "Price 'Outrageous,'" 11.

169 "Milk Price Goes Up," 4.

170 Deutsch, *A Housewife's Paradise*, 107; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 21.

to stave off unrest.<sup>171</sup> One member observed, “Mob spirit is spreading. If we try now to tell people that present prices of food are right and must stand they will not listen. They may act. Gentlemen, under the circumstances, we must try to feed the hungry for at least the next few weeks while awaiting some turn for permanent betterment.” Over the protests of wholesalers and food retailers, the Association and the Housewives’ League asked the City to halt profiteering and set foodstuffs and essential commodities at affordable prices. High inflation rates and food scarcity prompted prominent citizens and politicians to search for “anything that will cut the high cost of living.”<sup>172</sup> By 1920, the consumer cooperative movement had ignited; the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported approximately 2,600 cooperative stores and buying associations in the nation, mostly concentrated in small towns and farms.<sup>173</sup>

At the same time, the country placed the responsibility for solving the food cost crisis squarely on female consumers’ shoulders, rather than on corporation and government institutions. Even National Housewives’ League president Julian Heath blamed soaring food prices on “women’s ignorance of market conditions, their naive trust of grocers, and sheer laziness result[ing] in wasted food dollars.”<sup>174</sup> Additionally, proponents of “low cost of living clubs” assumed that small groups of citizens could drive down consumer prices by buying in bulk directly from farmers and wholesalers and

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171 “Business Men Ask City to Enlarge Food Sales,” *Times Picayune* (August 13, 1919): 1, 5.

172 “Co-operative Plan Enthusiasts Not Afraid of Jobbers,” *Times Picayune* (February 24, 1920): 2.

173 Florence E. Parker, *The First 125 Years: A History of Distributive and Service Cooperation in the United States, 1829-1954* (Superior: Cooperative League, 1956), 117-119.

174 Julian Heath, “Are Wives Wasting Their Husbands [sic] Money?” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (January 1914): 4.



avoiding grocers' price markups.<sup>175</sup> Frequently organized along racial or ethnic lines, the largest buying clubs typically only had between 20 and 300 members.<sup>176</sup> Often run out of members' homes, smaller groups of women in Louisiana and Mississippi formed their own cooperative buying clubs or supplied New Orleans clubs with inexpensive farm products. Uncoordinated and unaffiliated with larger consumer advocacy organizations, they failed to lower consumer costs for southerners more generally.<sup>177</sup>

In contrast, the New Orleans Housewives' League demanded continued federal intervention to safeguard consumers from economic exploitation. Impressed with government wartime regulation of utilities, transport, and food, the League argued that high food costs necessitated structural changes such as legislation encouraging neighborhood public markets, enforcing stricter anti-hoarding provisions, and welcoming consumer and agricultural cooperatives.<sup>178</sup> Consequently, between 1919 and 1922, the Housewives' League launched a four-part consumer campaign targeting the individual, city, state, and federal level.<sup>179</sup> First, the League argued that women could reduce their food expenses by preparing less expensive foods and economically growing, canning, preserving, and cooking vegetables. Second, members served on League, city, and state consumer committees where they assiduously investigated consumer abuse and made policy recommendations to politicians. Third, the League joined labor unions and like-

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175 "Co-operative Store Rouses Interest in Big Territory," *Times Picayune* (February 19, 1920): 1; "Co-operative Plan Enthusiasts," 2.

176 Frank Moore Colby, ed., *The New International Year Book: A Compendium of the World's Progress for the Year 1916* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company 1917), 164.

177 "Co-operative Store Rouses Interest," 1.

178 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 50.

179 "Cost of Living to be Attacked by Housewives," *Times Picayune* (March 12, 1920): 1.

minded women's clubs to petition the federal government to reduce the cost of living by regulating commodities prices and retaining army surplus stores. Fourth, the League proposed opening a cooperative grocery store owned and operated by women. After seven years of cooperative organizing, the Housewives' League Co-operative Store was the final iteration of the League's mission to collectively transform morally bankrupt corporate and government institutions through collective action.

### **Housewives' League Co-operative Store**

Cooperative food politics in postwar New Orleans were a site for radical action, as respectable society women allied with labor unions, Socialists, and other leftists to counter laissez faire politics and corporate capitalism's stranglehold over average consumers. As part of their effort to lower the cost of living, in June 1919, the Housewives League announced that they would open a cooperative grocery store for New Orleans housewives.<sup>180</sup> Over the course of the next two years, cooperative store president Edna Egleston urged housewives to save money by combining their purchasing power as owners of the enterprise. Members would have guaranteed access to store rebates and quarterly dividends. Further, by connecting consumers directly to producers, cooperative members would eliminate the "present excessive cost of [food] distribution" due to retailers' price mark-ups.<sup>181</sup> To Egleston, "the only way the housekeeper can benefit by wholesale prices" was to join a consumer cooperative that would contract with wholesalers at a reduced price. Because women were most commonly responsible for

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180 "Housewives' League Plan," 49.

181 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 307.

food shopping, the Housewives' League Co-operative Store quietly conflated consumers and women to offer New Orleanians a feminized model for ethical consumption.

The Co-operative Store was not only a corner grocery store for women, however, but it was also a subtle protest against wartime and postwar repression of civil liberties. As the cooperative coalesced, government crackdowns on unions, Socialists, Communists, and foreigners stifled the radical potential of the mainstream women's movement and narrowed its potential allies. For example, in 1917, anarchist feminist Emma Goldman was jailed for two years for opposing military draft, before being deported to Russia.<sup>182</sup> After the war, a torrent of government and corporate investigations into women's political organizing spurred moderate activists like Carrie Chapman Catt to disassociate from leftist colleagues. As suffragists and reformers, Housewives' League members were also vulnerable to conservatives who branded female activists as "alien and subversive." Nonetheless, while the Co-operative Store sought acceptance from commercial and government entities, it critiqued corporate capitalism. The League would demonstrate women's political efficacy and civic fitness by transforming the nation's volatile political, social, economic system into a cooperative democratic society.

### **Suffrage, the Consumer Movement, and the Housewives' League Co-operative Store**

Longtime Housewives' League member Edna Egleston was central to the cooperative store's development and ideological formation.<sup>183</sup> A middle-aged Indiana native, Egleston and her second husband Howard married in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in

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182 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 173, 190.

183 "Says Husbands, 'Ring' Followers, Keep Wives Away," 12.

1910.<sup>184</sup> Two years later, they moved to New Orleans and settled in the newly developed Metairie Ridge suburb near Lake Pontchartrain.<sup>185</sup> The couple's wealth was tied to the city's burgeoning infrastructural and commercial development. From his Hibernia Building headquarters in the Central Business District, Howard ran an engineering consulting firm and designed railroads and bridges for the Association of Commerce.<sup>186</sup>

At the same time, the couple was deeply committed to egalitarian and social reformist values of the Episcopal Church. They worshipped at the respected Trinity Episcopal Church on Jackson Avenue. In 1899, the church's Christian Socialist minister, Beverly Warner, established the Kingsley settlement house to serve the white working class population of the nearby Irish Channel.<sup>187</sup> Head resident and future Housewives' League member Eleanor McMMain ran Kingsley House, which was affiliated with Jane Addams' Hull House and the National Federation of Settlements.<sup>188</sup>

Further, Edna was an ideal candidate for heading the Co-operative Store because the Eglestons had joined consumer cooperatives while living in Indiana. Indeed, since the Civil War, the Midwest had been a bastion of agricultural and consumer cooperatives.<sup>189</sup> A large contingent of Midwestern women now living in New Orleans

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184 1910 United States Census, s.v., "Edna Egleston," Chattanooga, Hamilton County, Tennessee, accessed through Ancestry.com.

185 "Howard Egleston Dies of Pneumonia," 2; Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans*, 96. 1920 United States Census, s.v., "Edna Egleston" Police Jury Ward 8, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

186 "Howard Egleston Dies of Pneumonia," 2.

187 "History of the Church," Trinity Episcopal Church, accessed June 23, 2014, <http://www.trinitynola.com/page.aspx?pid=797>.

188 Isabella Dubroca, *Good Neighbor: Eleanor McMMain of Kingsley House* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1955), 31.

189 "Urges Co-operative Grocery Store Plan: Howard Egleston Explains System to Members of Housewives' League," *Times Picayune* (June 21, 1919): 16.

were already well-acquainted with cooperative enterprises in their Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Iowa hometowns.<sup>190</sup> For example, Mary O'Hara, manager of The Catherine boarding house for impoverished women, publicly endorsed the Co-operative Store. Having belonged to a cooperative grocery store in Brainerd, Minnesota, O'Hara wholeheartedly believed "in co-operative stores as a method to reduce the high cost of living." Thus appealing to her fellow Midwesterners, Egleston claimed that the Co-operative Store would fulfill the Midwestern cooperative movement's reformist legacy by "obtain[ing] the best materials at minimum cost."<sup>191</sup>

The urgency with which Egleston and her female peers assessed cooperative economics speaks not only to women's investment in the outcome of postwar consumer rights struggles, but to their commitment to securing political enfranchisement. The Housewives' League Co-operative Store formed during a fierce campaign to ratify the federal Anthony Amendment between 1918 and 1920. League members declared the cooperative was part of suffragist efforts to combat corporate and political collusion that inflated living costs, exploited female workers, and denied women the right to vote.<sup>192</sup>

The League's female-centered, democratic cooperative was a rebuke to politicians who hindered women's political advancement. For example, Governor Ruffin Pleasant campaigned against the federal suffrage amendment, while John M. Parker, once a close Housewives' League ally during the war, retreated from his public endorsement of

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190 "Housewives' Store Program Indorsed: Support Offered by Persons Who Have Seen Experiment Succeed," *Times Picayune* (March 4, 1920): 9.

191 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 307; "Urges Co-operative Grocery Store Plan," 16.

192 "Says Husbands, 'Ring' Followers, Keep Wives Away," 12.

suffrage after he was elected governor in May 1920.<sup>193</sup> Although in April 1920 Parker had appointed suffrage leaders, including League member Ida Friend, to the Joint Ratification Committee to prepare for the Anthony Amendment's ratification, Parker betrayed federal amendment supporters' trust when he blocked its passage in the Louisiana legislature that July.<sup>194</sup> As Louisiana legislators debated the federal amendment, Parker announced his neutrality on the subject and then refused to meet suffragists to discuss his position.<sup>195</sup> Finally, Mayor Behrman and the Democratic Ring's tepid endorsement of the amendment and a bitter anti-federal amendment campaign resulted in Louisiana's failure to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.

Alluding to women's political disenfranchisement, Egleston declared that each cooperative store subscriber was guaranteed one vote as part of the business's democratic organizational structure.<sup>196</sup> The cooperative pointedly demonstrated white women's fitness for full citizenship rights as much as it modeled cooperative economics. The Housewives' League argued that a successful cooperative venture would reveal women's aptitude for regulating the market and enacting legislation.<sup>197</sup> Likewise, the League's politicized consumption practices persisted after the Nineteenth Amendment was finally ratified in August 1920. For example, in June 1921, League members announced that they would "use not only their influence, but their votes" to pressure legislators to pass laws protecting "a pure food supply" and "the welfare of the home, women, and

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193 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 23; Lindig, "The Woman's Movement in Louisiana," 209.

194 Lindig, "The Woman's Movement," 209, 212.

195 Tyler, *Silk Stockings and Ballot Boxes*, 25.

196 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 307; "Housewives Open Subscription List for Joint Store," *Times Picayune* (March 6, 1920): 1.

197 Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 18-21, 27.

children.”<sup>198</sup> Meyers instructed members to note which legislators voted against such protective measures so that “we can find out who to keep at the next election.”

The League also endorsed the Capper-Kelly “Honest Merchandising Bill,” which would have permitted the federal government to regulate commodity resale prices to reduce consumer prices while increasing independent retail stores’ competitiveness with powerful chain stores.<sup>199</sup> While the bill never passed, retail cooperatives and voluntary chains nonetheless expanded because the government began to permit federations of otherwise economically vulnerable cooperative stores to collectively fix prices, rather than treating cooperatives as monopolies restraining trade.<sup>200</sup>

Most significantly, to many League members, a cooperative store represented women’s derring-do in the face of male contempt for both female entrepreneurship and cooperative enterprise. Many League members reported that while their husbands condescendingly referred to the cooperative as “a worthy scheme,” they dissuaded wives from financially investing in the project.<sup>201</sup> In response, Egleston urged women’s clubs to contribute ideas to the store and to establish committees to sign up subscribers.<sup>202</sup> She also continually stressed that the store was “primarily a women’s movement” and would be staffed entirely by women, “from the sales force to the truck driver.”<sup>203</sup> Nonetheless, Egleston fumed that although the League had labored for years to help consumers, “many

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198 “Housewives’ Body Enters Politics at June Meeting,” *Times Picayune* (June 12, 1921): 5.

199 *Schwegman Bros. et al. v. Calvert Distillers Corp.*, 341 U.S. 384 (1951)

<https://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/US/341/341.US.384.442.443.html>

200 Frederick John Harper, “The Anti-Chain Store Movement in the United States, 1927-1940” (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1981), 53, 69.

201 “Eve Up-to-Date,” *Times Picayune* (August 28, 1920): 7

202 “Committee to Set Store Opening Date,” *Times Picayune* (March 3, 1920): 1.

203 “Housewives Report Big Trade at Co-operative Store,” *Times Picayune* (May 3, 1921): 5.

a masculine eyebrow was raised, and many a man of business made dubious conjugal comment” concerning the economic soundness of the cooperative.<sup>204</sup>

For example, in April 1920, Edna Egleston served on the Department of Justice’s fair price committee to establish fixed rates for household commodities.<sup>205</sup> Egleston was the only woman on a committee largely “devoted to the interests of many merchant members”; its members were wholesale and retail grocers, sugar brokers, and Association of Commerce representatives. As the only consumer advocate, Egleston was outraged when the committee voted on key price rates without her. Condemning the Association of Commerce and city officials’ pursuit of the profit motive at the expense of the common good, Egleston enjoined women to subscribe to the League’s cooperative store. The experience only hardened Egleston’s commitment to create cooperative businesses rooted in a female-centered, egalitarian economy.

### **Cooperatives and the New Orleans Labor Movement**

Recognizing that women were not only exploited as consumers but also as laborers, the Housewives’ League allied with national union, consumer, and cooperative organizations seeking to protect workers from the vagaries of the market. Historian Anne Firor Scott argues that as women’s organizations like the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) and the NCL investigated the industrial abuse of working women and children, members began to reassess industrial labor and its social, economic, and

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204 “Eve Up-to-Date,” 7.

205 “Mrs. Eglston Objects to Fixed Retail Prices,” *New Orleans Item* (April 10, 1920): 4; Ethel Hutson, “Housewives’ Body Active to Better Living Conditions,” *Times Picayune* (March 13, 1921): 38.



political impact.<sup>206</sup> By asserting that only government regulation could protect working women and consumers, middle-class female activists joined what Scott terms “the radical aspect of the [southern] labor movement.”<sup>207</sup>

During World War I, federal wartime policy favored uninterrupted industrial production, and national and local labor arbitration boards often conceded to union demands for increased wages and improved working conditions.<sup>208</sup> Trade unions rapidly expanded in size and number throughout the nation. However, after the war, President Wilson terminated local labor adjustment committees and returned state-owned railroads and other industries to private hands, while rising inflation and stagnating wages exacerbated labor unrest.<sup>209</sup> Then, in 1920, consumer prices dropped precipitously.<sup>210</sup>

To compensate for reduced commodity prices, corporations cut union wages by as much as 20 percent and fired many workers. In New Orleans, the Association of Commerce urged major industries to roll back union advances by endorsing the open shop “American Plan.” Further, industrialists abandoned wartime labor mediation in favor of mechanization, wage cuts, hourly increases, and strikebreaking in order to modernize city infrastructure. Claiming that unions were Old Regular cronies that stymied port development, reform mayor John Parker helped commercial elites dismantle

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206 Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 190, 192.

207 Ibid., 161.

208 Curl, *For All the People*, 152-153; Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 243.

209 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 231.

210 Ibid., 229-243.

labor organizations when elected in 1920. In response, massive strikes between 1919 and 1921 shut down New Orleans' ports and railways.<sup>211</sup>

In the wake of growing anti-union sentiment and explosive conflict between labor and employers, consumer cooperatives serving unemployed or striking unionists sprouted across the country. New Orleans unions proposed funding the labor movement by building an alternative economy comprised of a network of union-owned cooperatives.<sup>212</sup> For example, in May 1920, the New Orleans Council of Railway Workers elicited immediate interest when it announced plans to open the Industrial Corporation for Workmen, a chain of cooperative shoe and dry goods stores.<sup>213</sup>

Yet in a climate of extreme government repression of progressive and radical activism, conservatives branded the rapidly expanding consumer cooperative movement as subversive. In order to silence criticism of the war effort and prevent a Russian Revolution on American soil, the federal government passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and Sedition Act of 1918, which effectively banned free speech and free press.<sup>214</sup> Further, during the Palmer Raids, which were carried out in 30 cities, including New Orleans, radical consumer cooperatives were targeted for their revolutionary politics and support of the labor movement.

Regardless of the controversial position that unions and radical consumer cooperatives occupied, Egleston explicitly aligned the Housewives' League Co-operative

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211 Ibid., 230.

212 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 107.

213 "Housewives' Store Boosted By Unions: Many Buy Stock in Co-operative Plan, Organizers Report," *Times Picayune* (May 23, 1920): 32.

214 Curl, *For All the People*, 147-156.

Store with union-owned cooperative stores.<sup>215</sup> Her union coalition-building is also unusual because not only did Louisiana suffragists overlook working-class organizations as potential allies, but mainstream labor unions, dismissing the unskilled positions women normally filled, considered unionizing women a low priority.<sup>216</sup> Nonetheless, the League worked in tandem with the AFL, which had launched a campaign to circumvent profiteering and inflation by establishing union-owned cooperatives across the nation.<sup>217</sup> Similarly, by May 1920, city trade unions announced that they would assist the League in securing storefront property on Camp and Canal Streets.<sup>218</sup> Because both consumers and unionists considered themselves the victims of exploitative capitalists, the League depended on trade union support.

However, seeking to join the national cooperative movement, Egleston embraced radical politics and industrial unionism as well. First, Egleston collaborated with the Cooperative League of America (CLUSA).<sup>219</sup> CLUSA, one of the most prominent Socialist consumer cooperative leagues in the nation.<sup>220</sup> Formed in 1916, CLUSA proclaimed it was part of “an anti-capitalist, revolutionary movement, aiming toward a radical social reconstruction based on all-inclusive collectivism” and a national cooperative commonwealth.<sup>221</sup> Headed by James Warbasse, CLUSA hoped to construct a

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215 “Housewives’ Grocery in Operation,” 2.

216 Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 157, 191.

217 “Labor Indorses Co-op Stores,” *New Orleans Item* (May 7, 1921): 12.

218 “Housewives’ Store Boosted By Unions,” 32.

219 Curl, *For All the People*, 144, 158.

220 “Co-op Store Has Big Future, Mrs. Egleston Says,” *New Orleans Item* (April 4, 1920): 13.

221 Kathleen Donohoe, “From Cooperative Commonwealth to Cooperative,” in *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, eds. Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 121; Curl, *For All the People*, 144.

national network of consumer cooperatives.<sup>222</sup> By 1920, it had formed several regional organizations to facilitate local cooperative organizing, coordinate regional wholesale activities, and implement educational programs.<sup>223</sup>

Second, Egleston modeled the Housewives' League Co-operative Store's chain store business structure, then considered the epitome of progressive business, from radical, union-affiliated cooperatives such as the Tri-State Cooperative Association and the Pacific Cooperative League (PCL).<sup>224</sup> Seeking solutions to high cost of living, cooperative chain stores offered working-class patrons inexpensive goods by collectively purchasing items in large lots, selling the same items across affiliate stores, receiving discounts from processors and suppliers, and operating their own processing and wholesale subsidiaries.<sup>225</sup> While the Housewives' League acknowledged that its young cooperative venture must "creep before [it] can walk," they also envisioned opening a New Orleans-based chain of cooperatives served by a central cooperative wholesale.<sup>226</sup> Pointing to the cooperative networks of meat markets, grocery stores, bakeries, and laundries currently aiding union struggles along the Pacific Coast, Egleston asked, "Why should not the New Orleans housewife have similar economic advantage?"<sup>227</sup>

### **The Housewives' League Co-operative Store and Army Retail Stores**

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222 Curl, *For All the People*, 145.

223 Parker, *The First 125 Years*, 111-116.

224 "Housewives' League Plan," 49; Curl, *For All the People*, 155-156.

225 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 52.

226 "Many Food Buyers Back Housewives' Co-operative Plan," *Times Picayune* (February 29, 1920): 1, 12; "Housewives' Grocery in Operation," 2.

227 "Co-op Store Has Big Future," 13.

The precarious nature of the Housewives' League's support network of unions, businessmen, women's clubs, and politicians is most clearly illustrated by the League's spirited participation in public debates over whether army retail stores and cooperatives should regulate the consumer market.<sup>228</sup> Facing mounting inflation rates, citizens and veterans alike demanded that after years of personal sacrifices and austerity measures, the federal government must redistribute its wartime food supply as cheaply as possible to alleviate economic hardship.<sup>229</sup> Accordingly, in 1919, the federal High Cost of Living Division began distributing surplus canned foods and dry goods below market price in army retail stores in large cities across the country.<sup>230</sup> In New Orleans, army "quartermaster stores" were very popular; some locations saw between 2,500 and 3,000 customers a day.<sup>231</sup> Consequently, during and immediately after World War I, New Orleanians patronizing army retailers enjoyed some measure of price control.

Yet by early 1920, the War Department argued that it had become too burdensome to maintain the retail stores and began rapidly selling off surplus goods to retailers and shuttering the businesses.<sup>232</sup> In New Orleans, zone supply officer Colonel E.S. Walten announced that reconversion policy dictated that all city stores would close by March 31, 1920.<sup>233</sup> Believing that army stores were inherently "Unfair, Un-American,

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228 "Co-operative Stores Become Vital," *Times Picayune* (February 22, 1920): 1.

229 "Ex-Service Men Beneficiaries of Army Sales, Legion Shows," *Times Picayune* (February 22, 1920): 1; Curl, *For All the People*, 151.

230 Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 47.

231 "Housewives' Store Hits \$5000 Mark: Half of Stock Necessary to Start Business is Subscribed," *Times Picayune* (March 20, 1920): 4.

232 "Cost of Living to be Attacked by Housewives," 1; "Housewives Await Letter from Dupre," *Times Picayune* (February 23, 1920): 14.

233 "Co-operative Stores Become Vital Issue," 1.

Un-Democratic,” produce wholesalers and retailers applauded the decision.<sup>234</sup> For example, the New Orleans Wholesale Grocers’ Association argued that since the federal government was returning railways, telegraph and other service corporations to private hands, it must cease meddling with the nation’s food supplies.<sup>235</sup>

In contrast, the Housewives’ League contended that army retail stores were vital exercises in public influence over production and distribution systems. Without army stores to regulate the market, consumers would be unable to afford soaring food costs.<sup>236</sup> The League staged a letter writing campaign to Congress and state officials to demand that army stores remain open. It proposed that the War Department ship remaining food supplies to its New Orleans outpost at cost rather than selling supplies to local retailers, who, the organization suspected, would price the goods far exceeding their value.<sup>237</sup>

When the War Department rejected its plan, the League asserted that its proposed cooperative store would replace army retail stores by offering affordable goods to consumers.<sup>238</sup> League members exclaimed that the Co-operative Store would unequivocally “eliminate the middle man” and “waged active warfare on behalf of lower prices and municipal cleanliness.”<sup>239</sup> Condemning unscrupulous retailers who cheated unwitting consumers, Egleston had assured frustrated New Orleanians that the

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234 Ibid.

235 “Thompson States Claim of Grocers,” *Times Picayune* (February 22, 1920): 1, 6.

236 “Co-operative Plan Enthusiasts Not Afraid of Jobbers,” *Times Picayune* (February 24, 1920): 2.

237 “Cost of Living to be Attacked by Housewives,” 1.

238 “Co-operative Stores Become Vital Issue,” 1.

239 “Housewives’ League Outlines Plan for Co-operative Stores,” *Times Picayune* (February 22, 1920): 1; “Housewives’ Grocery in Operation,” 2; “Funeral Today,” 3.

cooperative would be “conducted in [consumers’] interests, insuring in all cases the highest class of goods and absolutely correct weight and measure.”<sup>240</sup>

The League’s announcement was immediately controversial, and a variety of stakeholders opined on the political and economic implications of cooperative-driven consumer empowerment. First, New Orleans’ wholesalers, produce jobbers, and food retailers protested that consumer cooperatives were illegal combinations in restraint of trade and would put them out of business.<sup>241</sup> Egleston did little to allay their fears when she proclaimed that the cooperative movement “[furnished] the consumer with all the necessities of life at the lowest possible cost, eliminating to a very large extent the [middleman’s] present handling charges.”<sup>242</sup>

For their part, as regulatory bodies contracted during reconversion, federal officials largely supported the cooperative plan as a practical substitute to government intervention in consumer markets.<sup>243</sup> For example, army retailers argued that consumer cooperatives would continue to moderate economic inflation in their stead. To do so, local army retailers advised the Housewives’ League Co-operative Store to adopt their business model and pledged to help the cooperative in any way they could.<sup>244</sup> Further, both Louisiana District Attorney Adolphe Coco and United States Attorney Henry

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240 “Housewives’ League Outlines Plan,” 1.

241 Ibid.; Curl, *For All the People*, 155.

242 “Co-op Store Has Big Future,” 13.

243 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 228-229.

244 “Housewives’ Store Hits \$5000 Mark.” 4.

Mooney promised to prosecute any jobbers or wholesalers refusing service to formally organized retail stores, including incorporated cooperatives.<sup>245</sup>

Women's clubs were also important allies for Housewives' League cooperative organizers. For example, as early as 1913, Consumers' League co-founder Eleanor McMain proposed that impoverished "back-of-town" residents establish housing cooperatives to improve tenement housing, stabilize rent, and enforce sanitation regulations.<sup>246</sup> Similarly, in 1920, Consumers' League president Ida Friend argued that both consumer cooperatives and government regulation would lower the high cost of living.<sup>247</sup> Friend declared, "I don't think there is more than one opinion among women on these matters." Accordingly, the Consumers' League spearheaded a letter writing campaign to Louisiana congressmen protesting army stores' closure and endorsed the Housewives' League cooperative store as a worthy replacement.<sup>248</sup>

Friend's actions dovetailed with the NCL's plan to use cooperatives as tools to reduce living expenses for working-class women.<sup>249</sup> While women's collaborative activities were increasingly branded as socialistic and subversive, leading figures of the social work and consumers movement nonetheless advocated women's cooperative projects. Indeed, Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union all promoted cooperative boarding to facilitate unionizing among working-class women and encouraged shared housekeeping for middle-class settlement

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245 "Co-operative Stores Become Vital Issue," 1.

246 "Consumers' League," *Times Picayune* (February 19, 1913): 9.

247 "Co-operative Stores Become Vital Issue," 1; "Co-operative Plan Enthusiasts," 2.

248 "Many Food Buyers Back Housewives' Co-operative Plan," 12.

249 "Co-operative Plan Shown in Detail," *Times Picayune* (April 16, 1920): 14.



workers.<sup>250</sup> Ultimately, national consumer activists' cooperative experiments lent the Housewives' League Co-operative Store vital credibility: For example, at the 1920 National Conference on Social Work in New Orleans, Florence Kelley spoke alongside Edna Egleston on the benefits of women-led cooperatives.<sup>251</sup>

Finally, New Orleans labor unions also supported both army retail stores and cooperatives as tools to lower the cost of living. In February 1920, the Board of Business Agents, representing New Orleans building trades unions, publicly endorsed consumer cooperatives and inveighed against any jobbers and retail grocers refusing to sell to them.<sup>252</sup> Board chairman Miller declared that both army stores and cooperatives "have an important connection with the industrial situation here." Given the anti-union climate, Miller proffered that because army stores and consumer cooperatives reduced workers' living costs, the effect was "the same as an increase in wages. That is a fact that should be taken into serious consideration." Therefore, the Board coordinated with the Housewives' League and other cooperative organizations to protect labor. However, while the League carefully crafted a coalition of sympathetic government officials, female reformers, and trade unionists, their greatest challenge was neutralizing the city's business interests threatened by alternative economic models.

### **Coalition-Building Among Commercial Interests**

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250 Hayden, *Grand Domestic Revolution*, 169-173.

251 *Ibid.*; "Co-operative Plan Shown in Detail," 14;

252 "Labor Considering Cooperative Plan," *Times Picayune* (February 22, 1920): 12; Sidney Fine, *Without Blare of Trumpets: Walter Drew, the National Erectors' Association, and the Open Shop Movement, 1903-57* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 179.

At the same time Egleston joined trade unionists' efforts to build cooperative networks, she also wooed the city's commercial elites, hoping that they would financially support the Housewives' League Co-operative Store. This required softening some of the League's anti-capitalist rhetoric to convince investors that its cooperative posed little threat to responsible retailers and wholesalers. First, to head off accusations that the cooperative was the project of bored dilettantes and subversive Socialists, Egleston argued that the store would help stabilize the postwar economy. She legitimized her cooperative campaign by pointing to Great Britain's successful cooperative system and the extent to which it had helped Europe rebuild after World War I.<sup>253</sup> Egleston claimed that one-third of Great Britain's citizens belonged to cooperatives, and its economy was augmented by the "immense wholesale co-operative organizations supplying the thousands of retail stores, and being supplied in turn by their own factories, tea and coffee plantations, wheat lands, fruit farms, coal fields, etc., the products of which are transported in their own ships."<sup>254</sup> Egleston even shamed local commercial interests into financing the store by pointedly observing that enlightened Scottish businessmen had already bought numerous shares of stock.<sup>255</sup>

Second, Egleston guaranteed that the cooperative would not bankrupt grocery retailers or wholesalers by slashing prices and selling substandard goods.<sup>256</sup> On the contrary, she professed that the cooperative was grounded in modern business

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253 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 305.

254 *Ibid.*, 305, 307.

255 "Temporary Site for Store Found," *Times Picayune* (January 29, 1921): 2.

256 "Housewives' League Outlines Plan," 6.

practices.<sup>257</sup> As Railway and Light Company cooperative manager C.L. Bricksler argued, “there is only one way to run a co-operative store, and that is on a clear profit basis.”<sup>258</sup> To that end, Egleston assured investors that the Co-operative Store was “more businesslike and better” than either the League’s wartime cooperative curb markets or the small, informal cooperative buying clubs then in vogue.<sup>259</sup> She argued that the informal and temporary nature of both seldom benefited members in the long-term.<sup>260</sup> In fact, recognizing that cooperatives had much to learn from a “well-managed retail store,” Egleston recruited her former nemeses from the New Orleans Retail Grocers’ Association to serve on the Co-operative Store’s advisory board.<sup>261</sup>

Rooting cooperative enterprise in liberal economic principles and the civic good, Egleston explained to wary businessmen that like a conventional store, the successful cooperative must also handle a large volume of sales and markup prices to cover overhead costs.<sup>262</sup> For example, she predicted that the League’s women-run cooperative would have at least 1,000 members.<sup>263</sup> Egleston observed that the only difference between the two business models was that in a cooperative, capital stock was owned by member-owners who regularly shared profits in proportion to their purchases. Yet, she insisted, annual dividends and rebates “helped unbelievably in solving the problem of the high cost of living in many communities” around the world. Indeed, it was the

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257 “Housewives Open Subscription List,” 1.

258 “Many Food Buyers Back Housewives’ Co-operative Plan,” 1.

259 “Housewives’ Grocery in Operation,” 2.

260 “Housewives’ League Plan,” 49.

261 “Housewives’ League Outlines Plan,” 1; “Eve Up-to-Date,” 7; “Co-operative Stores Become Vital Issue,” 1.

262 “Housewives’ League Outlines Plan,” 1, 6.

263 “Urges Co-operative Grocery Store Plan,” 16.

cooperative's unique rebate and dividend policy that made the store "an instrument of universal public interest."<sup>264</sup>

### **The Housewives' League Co-operative Store Opens**

While interest in the Housewives' League Co-operative Store was initially limited to its own club members, regular *Times Picayune* and *New Orleans Item* press coverage spurred greater public response. Consequently, between June 1919 and mid-1920, the League slowly raised the \$10,000 worth of stock necessary to open its storefront in 1921.<sup>265</sup> Prospective members hoped the cooperative would reduce their living expenses and eagerly purchased the \$10 stocks.<sup>266</sup> Egleston claimed that "People from all walks of life and from every quarter of the city and from surrounding towns" had subscribed. Most had bought small shares in the cooperative, but the League also appealed to the city's affluent class, including a few prominent businessmen.<sup>267</sup> For example, one of the first male subscribers was Meyer Eiseman, a Jewish real estate magnate, suffrage sympathizer, and advocate of "ethical culture" who belonged to other local co-ops.<sup>268</sup>

Following the Rochdale Principle of federating with fellow cooperatives, the Co-operative Store depended not only on New Orleans subscribers, but on a growing network of rural Louisianan and Mississippi clubwomen who not only wished to become

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264 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 307.

265 "Housewives' Plan for Co-operative Store Gets Boost," *Times Picayune* (February 28, 1920): 1, 8.

266 "Housewives' Store Hits \$5000 Mark," 4.

267 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 306; "Women Appeal to Men to Subscribe for Balance of Co-operative Stock," *New Orleans Item* (April 2, 1920): 22.

268 Ad, "Liquidators' Sale of People's Co-operative Laundry" *Times Picayune* (October 30, 1924): 30; "Army Store Head to Lecture Women," *Times Picayune* (March 19, 1920): 5; Henry E. Chambers, *A History of Louisiana*, 2 (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1925), 7-8.

members but sought advice on how to establish their own cooperative store.<sup>269</sup> In 1920, the president of the Mississippi Federation of Women's Clubs reported that Amory, McComb, Vicksburg, Ocean Springs and Laurel clubwomen were organizing or had already formed cooperatives.<sup>270</sup> They ranged from cooperative grocery stores, repair shops, and dry goods stores, and demonstrated "a very decided note of friendly co-operation and mutual helpfulness" among women.<sup>271</sup>

While the League had raised nearly \$5,000 by March 1920, it took nearly a year for the League to secure the remaining funds and find a suitable store location.<sup>272</sup> In January 1921, the organization finally selected a small wooden building on 4900 Prytania Street and paid to have it painted, cleaned, and renovated.<sup>273</sup> It was a "neat little store" with the hand-painted sign "Housewives Co-operative Stores Incorporated" hanging out front.<sup>274</sup> Not coincidentally, the grocery was located next to the Prytania Street Market, where the League had established its produce stand during the 1914-1915 depression.<sup>275</sup> The League hoped that the market's proximity would help women complete all their shopping at once.<sup>276</sup> Throughout the store's renovation, "dozens" of women "passed daily...anxious to see how it [was] 'getting on.'"

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269 "Co-op Store Plan Begins to Sweep Southern States," *Times Picayune* (March 11, 1920): 1.

270 "Co-op Store Plan," 1; "Housewives' Store Reports Increase in Subscriptions," *Times Picayune* (March 26, 1920): 25.

271 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 308.

272 "Housewives' Store Hits \$5000 Mark," 4.

273 "Temporary Site for Store Found," 2.

274 "Housewives Find Co-operative Plan Not Money Maker," *Times Picayune* (October 28, 1921): 15; "Housewives' Grocery in Operation," 2.

275 Richard and Marina Campanella, *New Orleans Then and Now* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1999), 155; "Members of the Housewives' League," 5.

276 Alice Rightor, "Housewives' League to Open Co-operative Store this Week," *Times Picayune* (February 20, 1921): 24.

On February 27, 1921, the Co-operative Store finally opened its doors. As cooperative president, Edna Egleston threw a grand opening celebration for its stockholders and New Orleans' clubwomen. The *Times Picayune* reported that attendees were invited to purchase goods from the cooperative's "white enameled shelves" featuring a "well-equipped line of groceries."<sup>277</sup> On opening day, flowers from the Louisiana Federation of Women's Clubs decorated the counters, while the telephone rang constantly with women ordering goods and sending their congratulations.<sup>278</sup>

Hoping to lower the cost of living for as many people as possible, the Co-operative Store strictly adhered to the Rochdale Plan for consumer cooperatives, in which individuals join a retail association and contract directly with producers and distributors, eliminating the middleman's profiteering in the process.<sup>279</sup> The Plan mandated that 1) cooperative member-owners retain democratic control over their store; 2) institute market rates for all goods sold; 3) require that owners receive regular dividends and guarantee patronage refunds, in which the business returned profits to members as a percentage of their store purchases; 4) enforce cash-only transactions; 5) educate the public about cooperative principles and goals; 6) expand from retail into other industries to achieve immediate, lasting economic benefits for members; and 7) federate with neighboring cooperatives "with the ultimate purpose of national and world co-operation."<sup>280</sup>

Accordingly, the League opened membership to the general public, although one

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277 Ibid.; "Housewives' Store Elects Mrs. Egleston President," *Times Picayune* (May 1, 1920): 24;

"Housewives Find Co-operative Plan," 15.

278 "Housewives' Store is Reality," *Times Picayune* (February 26, 1921): 7.

279 Giese, "How the Old Co-ops Went Wrong," 318-319.

280 Egleston, "The Co-operative Movement," 305.

did not have to be a stockholder to shop at the store.<sup>281</sup> Members received rebates every three months, while regular patrons bought goods at fair market rate.<sup>282</sup> For example, the League sold the least expensive eggs in the city and offered special rates on cheese, sugar, boiled ham, and canned items like salmon, sardines, tomatoes.<sup>283</sup> Within three months, the Co-operative Store had made almost \$6,000, which the League touted as concrete evidence of what a women-run business could accomplish.<sup>284</sup>

However, the store was not just a consumer cooperative, but a producer cooperative as well. Member-owners prepared foods for general consumption, working in the cooperative's modern kitchen at the rear of the building.<sup>285</sup> In addition, League members used the agricultural connections they cultivated while running their cooperative market to turn the store into a distribution channel for small farmers and manufacturers. By cutting out the wholesaler and retailer middleman and mitigating unreasonable price mark-ups, the Co-operative Store stimulated regional agricultural trade to benefit individual farmers as well as average consumers.

To appeal to women's desire for convenience, customers could telephone their orders the day before, requesting pre-made raisin, lemon, and coconut cream pies, or cakes made to their specifications.<sup>286</sup> The request line was so popular that the League added another phone line in May.<sup>287</sup> The store made daily home deliveries of foodstuffs

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281 Rightor, "Housewives' League," 24.

282 "Committee to Set Store Opening Date," *Times Picayune* (March 3, 1920): 1.

283 "Cabbages Are In, Fish Out as Summer Arrives," *Times Picayune* (April 29, 1921): 31.

284 "Housewives' Store is Reality," 7.

285 Rightor, "Housewives' League," 24.

286 Ad, "Housewives Co-operative Stores, Inc.," *Times Picayune* (September 17, 1921): 12.

287 Ad, "Housewives' Co-operative Stores, Inc.," *Times Picayune* (May 21, 1921): 10.

such as uncooked and boiled ham and honeycombs in one pound cases.<sup>288</sup> It also carried fresh, inexpensive eggs and convenience foods such as Hellmann Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise Dressing and potato chips wrapped in wax paper.<sup>289</sup> Mary Boynton, a Housewives' League cooking demonstrator, managed the cooperative's delicatessen, which prepared "dainty cakes," pies, salad dressings, and "other delicacies."<sup>290</sup> The store even had a lunchroom that sold ice cream, sodas, and sandwiches.<sup>291</sup>

The Co-operative Store aimed to improve both the conventional corner grocery store and the modern chain store. The League believed neighborhood grocery stores were complicit in maintaining the high cost of living.<sup>292</sup> As Tracey Deutsch notes, because corner stores did not post prices, item value was not standardized.<sup>293</sup> Consequently, every purchase required a careful negotiation based on the customer and shop clerks' class, gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliations. To the League, the chain store heralded an end to high consumer prices and symbolized efficient, forward-thinking business methods. Similarly, the cooperative advertised itself as an exemplar of modern, sanitary food retail and preparation.<sup>294</sup> Reporters also touted the cooperative's "New York apartment house efficiency," enumerating its electric ceiling fans, "commodious refrigerator," and kitchen ovens that "may be raised or lowered like window shades."<sup>295</sup>

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288 Ad, "Housewives' Co-operative Stores, Inc.," *Times Picayune* (October 8, 1921): 19.

289 Ibid.; Ad, "Housewives Co-operative Stores, Inc.," September 17, 1921, 12.

290 Rightor, "Housewives' League," 24.

291 Ad, "Housewives Co-operative Stores, Inc.," September 17, 1921, 12.

292 Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 20.

293 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 11-14.

294 Ad, "Housewives Co-operative Stores, Inc.," October 8, 1921, 19.

295 Rightor, "Housewives' League," 24.



Women could attend cooking demonstrations at the store to learn to use modern cooking appliances to create easy, healthful, and economical dishes.<sup>296</sup>

At the same time, the Co-operative Store also retained the intimacy of a conventional corner store. As Tracey Deutsch contends, before chain stores emerged in the 1920s and standardized the economic exchanges between customer and grocer, women commanded respect and authority over their food purchases, much to the frustration of retailers, wholesalers, and jobbers.<sup>297</sup> Recognizing the potential for both corner grocery and chain retailers to supply low quality, over-priced goods, the Housewives' League employed two experienced saleswomen and one African American maid to serve female customers.<sup>298</sup> Staff was under the direct supervision of Edna Egleston and an advisory council of grocery retailers. Ultimately, the League refused to sacrifice good customer service to chain store convenience, favoring a "competent manager and sales force" over self-service models.<sup>299</sup> The cooperative, therefore, cast itself as a middle-class oasis of ethnical consumption and women's autonomy.

### **Beyond Consumption: The Politics of the Co-operative Store**

Egleston took the Rochdale principle of federating with other cooperatives and like-minded organizations very seriously. In fact, her vision of consumer and producer cooperation closely replicated James Warbasse's 1919 plan to create a national cooperative economy in which federations of local cooperatives would socialize farmland

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296 Ad, "Housewives Co-operative Stores, Inc.," October 8, 1921, 19.

297 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 11-14.

298 "Committee to Set Store Opening," 1; "Housewives' Grocery in Operation," 2.

299 "Housewives Open Subscription List for Joint Store," *Times Picayune* (March 6, 1921): 1.

and control manufacturing and service industries.<sup>300</sup> These cooperative farms and factories would eventually supply wholesale products to cooperative stores across the country.<sup>301</sup> Similarly, the League argued that its Co-operative Store was just the first step in creating a national cooperative economy governed by regional and national networks of professionally managed, large scale cooperative federations.<sup>302</sup>

Recognizing that the southern cooperative movement was “still in its infancy,” Egleston encouraged local cooperatives to affiliate with CLUSA, which she neutrally described as a national organization dedicated to educating consumers about cooperatives and facilitating cooperative formation.<sup>303</sup> Egleston hoped to contract directly with agricultural producers to establish cooperative farms to supply a chain of League-run consumer cooperatives.<sup>304</sup> Building on producer relationships it established before World War I, the League continued to collaborate with New Orleanian truck farmers organizing cooperative markets. Despite opposition from wholesalers, truck farmers believed that cooperative markets were “the opening wedge in tumbling down the structure of...a combine among the buyers” to depress farmers’ profits and inflate consumer prices.<sup>305</sup>

Most significantly, connecting the Co-operative Store to the national cooperative movement, Egleston argued that cooperatives functioned as moral and political entities, arguing, “cooperative in its truest sense can and should go much farther than the mere

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300 Parker, *The First 125 Years*, 58.

301 Curl, *For All the People*, 154.

302 “Many Food Buyers,” 1.

303 Ibid.; “Housewives’ League Plan,” 49.

304 “Co-op Store Has Big Future,” 13.

305 “Farm-to-Table Garden Marketing Looms After Price Exposed,” *New Orleans Item* (May 5, 1921): 11.

saving of money for its adherents.”<sup>306</sup> Speaking at the 1920 National Conference on Social Work, Egleston articulated her fervent belief that cooperatives should educate citizens to transform the nation into a true democracy. While Egleston conceded “we are at this time appealing to the people of New Orleans from the angle of the pocket-book,” she praised sociologist, feminist, and CLUSA co-founder Agnes Warbasse’s convictions that the national cooperative movement would “improve the lot of the world.”

Similarly, fellow conference attendees and prominent social workers Allen T. Burn, an expert on Americanization and Immigrants’ Co-operative Societies, John L. Elliot, a cooperator from the Hudson Guild Settlement House in New York, and NCL secretary Florence Kelley all argued that cooperatives were vital tools in solving not only the nation’s “industrial and economic problems,” but in making “Democracy more efficient.”<sup>307</sup> Like Egleston, progressive reformers celebrated cooperatives’ social welfare contributions beyond mere economics. Ultimately, Egleston and her cooperative peers hoped to remodel all aspects of life into a grand cooperative experiment. As she asserted, “The idea that the cooperative store is...an ordinary small grocery store...is very much belittled by such limit.”<sup>308</sup>

### **End of Housewives’ League Co-operative Store**

Despite its lofty ideals and powerful allies, problems dogged the Housewives’ League Co-operative Store from its inception. Most troubling was members’ infrequent patronage. Because bureaucratic hold-ups delayed the League from acquiring its

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306 Egleston, “The Co-operative Movement,” 306-307.

307 “Co-operative Plan Shown in Detail,” 14.

308 “Co-op Store Has Big Future,” 13.

storefront, by the time the cooperative opened in late February 1921, Egleston noted, “public interest had waned.”<sup>309</sup> For example, despite multiple daily deliveries, the cooperative’s Uptown location and cultural orientation “lessened its value as a purchasing depot to stockholders living below Canal Street,” presumably white Creole women living in the French Quarter, along Esplanade Ridge, and in Mid-City. Consequently, just two months after the store opened, only a third of the store’s 338 stockholders remained regular customers.<sup>310</sup> Worse yet, stockholders had dwindled to 281 by October.<sup>311</sup> Egleston repeatedly reminded women that the only way to maximize their savings was to faithfully buy groceries from the cooperative because they would receive dividends proportionate to their purchases at the end of each quarter.<sup>312</sup> Despite her admonitions, most subscribers were “disloyal in buying stock in an enterprise they were not willing to support.”<sup>313</sup>

Low member patronage was related to apathetic membership. While Egleston freely donated her “time and her ability” to run the store and appreciated the “staunch backing of a few men and women” who supported cooperative economics, the project was ultimately sabotaged by a prevailing attitude of “let George do it.” Ironically, the most involved members were “too busy to cooperate,” so rather than delegate or work together, they “did a greater share of the work than co-operation calls for.” The majority of members, in contrast, “promised co-operation (on their stock certificate) [but] failed to

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309 “Housewives Find Co-operative Plan,” 15.

310 “Over 100 Women Buying Groceries from Own Store,” *Times Picayune* (May 8, 1921): 32.

311 “By Way of Comment,” *Times Picayune* (November 6, 1921): 46.

312 “Over 100 Women,” 32.

313 “By Way of Comment,” 46.

cooperate.” When an October stockholders meeting to discuss the cooperative’s future dissolved due to lack of quorum, Egleston finally recognized the “deficiency” in member support. By late October 1921, Egleston called for the co-op’s dissolution and declared bankruptcy.<sup>314</sup> By January 1922, the store’s inventory of state-of-the-art refrigerators, scales, slicing machines, electric fans, and remaining stock was valued at \$1,540 and filed with the Civil District Court as part of the League’s bankruptcy agreement.<sup>315</sup>

While the cooperative’s unique staffing and patronage problems shuttered the store after only nine months of operation, its closing was also indicative of the economic and political structures decimating cooperatives nationwide. In early 1920, an economic recession caused commodities prices to fall precipitously, and a period of economic uncertainty extended into spring 1921.<sup>316</sup> Consumer cooperatives like the Housewives’ League had attracted their clientele by promising lower prices, but they could no longer compete with large retailers who could afford to slash prices and still stay solvent.<sup>317</sup> The lack of adequate funding, declining membership, and infighting within cooperatives resulted in the widespread closing of consumer cooperatives by the mid-1920s.<sup>318</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, the Housewives’ League sought to economically empower white middle-class “housewives” while it supported separate charitable institutions for black and poor New Orleanians. Undeniably, the League’s ties

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314 “Housewives Find Co-operative Plan,” 15.

315 “Housewives’ Store Assets Inventoried at \$1540.35,” *Times Picayune* (January 11, 1922): 3.

316 Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 243.

317 Curl, *For All the People*, 151; “Housewives Find Co-operative Plan,” 15.

318 Curl, *For All the People*, 157.

to commercial elite inextricably bound it to southern racial and class politics, city infrastructural modernization, and America's political and economic expansionism. However, the League also included a diverse body of Jewish, non-Louisianan, and first generation Americans who resisted the Jim Crow logic of their peers.

The rise and fall of the Co-operative Store also highlights the necessity of coalition building between clubwomen, government, labor, and commercial entities in order to economically survive. Not content to remain a small grocery store, the Housewives' League adopted CLUSA's vision of "co-operative society...made up of co-operators."<sup>319</sup> Because Egleston recognized the immediate necessity of securing mainstream support, she downplayed her Socialist ties. Therefore, the League uneasily tacked between assuring the public that its cooperative mirrored corporate business practices and reasserting the essential ethical nature of cooperative enterprise.<sup>320</sup>

While the Housewives' League cooperative collapsed under the weight of patron apathy and a changing economic and political climate, women's interest in consumer cooperatives persisted during the interwar years. Although prior to World War I the line between Progressive reformer and Socialist was "fluid and permeable," the postwar Red Scare and vilification of female reform largely chilled Progressive activism.<sup>321</sup> Yet as Landon Storrs argues, women who continued to advocate for the NCL throughout the 1920s and 1930s, despite Florence Kelley's Socialist leanings, evinced radical

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319 "Housewives' League Plan," 49.

320 "Co-operative Stores Become Vital," 1.

321 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 17-18, 38.

sympathies of their own.<sup>322</sup> Throughout the Depression, for example, NCL leadership would work with leftist unions, Popular Front coalitions, radicals, and Socialists.

Housewives' Leaguer Ida Friend is a key example of the continuity between Progressive reformers and Popular Front leftists fighting for economic and political equality for average Americans. She participated in the New Orleans anti-fascist movement that supported a range of Depression-era civil rights and Popular Front activities. In fact, Friend's Depression-era activism put her in contact with a new generation of cooperative organizers who explicitly paired Socialist politics with radical economic alternatives, whom I will discuss at length in Chapter 4. Arguing that the United States was spending \$2 million a day on armaments while Americans starved, Friend joined the New Orleans branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom along with New Orleans Socialist Party president Louise Jessen, a committed cooperative activist.<sup>323</sup> Significantly, she also belonged to the New Orleans Committee for the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), a Socialist organization based in Tulane University that had ties to Florence Kelley.<sup>324</sup> LID hosted talks throughout the Depression on consumer cooperatives' economic benefits. Friend also supported the Loyalists (or Republicans) in the Spanish Civil War, along with key figures in the New

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322 Ibid., 18.

323 "Cuts in Military Costs Urged by Women's League," *Times Picayune* (April 21, 1933): 17.

324 Ida Friend and Carmelite Janvier joined the LID. Pamphlet, League for Industrial Democracy, *Democracy in Action: Six Discussion Lectures. Fifth Annual Series Through the New Orleans Committee for LID Lectures* (New Orleans: LID, 1938), 4. LID Industrial File; S.R. McCulloch, "Civic and Social Societies Unite to Combat 'Subversive Activities'," *St. Louis-Post Dispatch* (November 22, 1936): 1. Vertical File: Communist Party, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, La.; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 17.

Orleans radical, civil liberties, and cooperative community.<sup>325</sup> Friend is thus an important link to the Depression and World War II-era cooperative movement.<sup>326</sup>

Finally, eschewing the white supremacist rhetoric of her suffragist peers, by 1932, Friend participated in early, moderate interracial efforts to ease racial tension in the South.<sup>327</sup> She was one of a growing number of white southern women who used their war work as a launching pad for more radical reform, including interracial organizing. Black and white cooperation during WWI inspired Friend and white club women; in the years after the war, nearly 1,300 southern counties organized interracial committees under state or regional supervision, including the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), established in 1919.<sup>328</sup> Similarly, Friend served on the CIC in 1932, participated in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, and helped form the New Orleans chapter of the Urban League in 1938, moderate organizations that advocated incremental black advancement within the boundaries of Jim Crow. Nonetheless, Friend's work challenged the discriminatory gender, race, and class policies that policed New Orleans citizens. Finally, as we shall see, her commitment to racial equity would be the cornerstone of Socialist cooperative projects during the Depression and World War II.

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325 Medical Bureau of North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Local Committee, letter, undated. Vertical File, Organizations, North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

326 "Institute to Hear Brooklyn Minister," *Times Picayune* (February 20, 1933): 12.

327 Leathem, "Ida Weis Friend."

328 Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 19, 21.



### **Chapter 3: “Civilization’s Supreme Test”: Henry Hermes, the New Orleans**

#### **Cooperative Movement, and the Politics of Place: 1940-1980**

A fiery Socialist barber named Henry Hermes cut an eccentric figure in the twentieth century cooperative movement. During the Great Depression and World War II, Hermes's Freret Street neighbors were as likely to spot him proselytizing Socialist doctrine from atop a milk crate as they were to see him shaving local clients in his barbershop. Indeed, Hermes had an abiding interest in the power of democratic collaboration and economic cooperation to solve America's persistent racial and class inequality. To that end, Hermes established the Consumers' Co-operative Union (CCU) in 1941 as an integrated cooperative grocery store serving the working-class Freret Neighborhood. Offering a variety of fresh produce, convenience foods, and imported dry goods, the cooperative sought to liberate patrons from the stranglehold of modern corporations, which undercut the economic and political autonomy of small producers and consumers.<sup>1</sup> Through a democratic organizational structure, store-sponsored lectures, and social events, the CCU demonstrated practical, egalitarian worker-employee relations and strategies for consumer empowerment. Despite World War II rationing and price controls, competition from chain stores, and uneven member-owner participation, the CCU remained a politicized consumer space until it disbanded in 1965.

The CCU disrupts our notion of insular neighborhood cultures, illuminating the complicated and overlapping political geography of Popular Front and consumer activism

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<sup>1</sup> “Our Store,” *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 1, folder 2, box 1, Herman Lazard Midlo Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, La. Hereafter cited as Midlo Collection.

in New Orleans. Bound to the economic health of its immediate community, the cooperative was a microcosm of Freret Neighborhood responses to the Great Depression, World War II, and postwar white flight. Yet even as it coalesced around neighborhood-specific needs, the CCU depended on Hermes's Popular Front support network that extended far beyond Freret Neighborhood to bridge political, racial, gender, and class divides. The fractious dynamic between Freret residents and leftist activists ultimately confounded the CCU's ability to establish a community-based cooperative commonwealth. While this coalition disintegrated in the face of white flight, anti-Communist hysteria, and urban economic decline in the 1950s, Hermes joined the credit union movement, by now well-established in Louisiana. As a member of the LCUL, he aligned with mainstream institutions at the local, state, and national level to cope with new political realities.

This chapter explores key moments in Henry Hermes's 40-year cooperative career to chart the promise and the failures of mid-twentieth century cooperatives in New Orleans. First, I analyze the CCU's struggle to replace capitalism with a utopian cooperative economy. Secondly, I study the accommodationist strategies of the Louisiana Credit Union League. Both cooperatives illustrate the central tension animating the cooperative institutions to which Hermes belonged: how to attract average citizens to the cooperative movement while remaining committed to national economic and political revolution in an era of extraordinary tumult. Between the 1930s and the 1980s, these two cooperative institutions and their organizational strategies would constantly evolve as they navigated mid-twentieth century political, economic, and social movements.

## Freret Neighborhood

Born in Cologne, Germany in 1899, Heinrich W. Hermes immigrated to New York to join his father when he was just 14 years old.<sup>2</sup> While he was working as a barber in Brooklyn, Hermes married Amelia Mendez, a native of Guatemala and resident of New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> By 1928, Henry and Amelia had moved back New Orleans to be closer to her family.<sup>4</sup> Settling in the ethnic, working-class Freret Neighborhood not far from the Mendezes, Hermes opened a barbershop on Freret Street.<sup>5</sup>

Bordering Tulane University and Loyola University, Freret Neighborhood is located in the city's Thirteenth Ward. Situated in a low-lying, marshy area between the elite Uptown and Claiborne districts, the Freret area remained undeveloped until the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Drainage, railroad, and port improvements, extended streetcar lines, and population growth from rapid immigration and improved city infrastructure spurred the neighborhood's rapid development. The community was close-knit, fostered in part by its mixed-use development and pedestrian-friendly layout. Small entrepreneurs and

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2 Passenger Record, s.v. "Heinrich Hermes," (October 27, 1913) accessed through The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation.

3 1925 New York State Census, s.v. "Henry W. Hermes," Brooklyn, Kings County, New York, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1920 United States Census, s.v. "Amelia Mendez," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

4 1930 United States Census, s.v. "Henry Hermes," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

5 "Hermes, Henry Wm.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1928); 1940 United States Census, s.v. "Henry Hermes," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; 1930 United States Census, s.v. "Albert E. Mendez, Sr.," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

6 Coleman Warner, "Freret's Century: Growth, Identity, and Loss in a New Orleans Neighborhood," *Louisiana History* 42, no. 3 (2001): 324.

their families often lived above their stores or nearby, which nurtured community responsibility and cooperation essential to the CCU's success.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1940s, Freret had become a popular and inexpensive shopping district, and the St. Charles streetcar line transported eager bargain-hunters to the neighborhood. However, Freret remained racially segregated at the street level; while African Americans comprised 40 percent of the population, their homes and businesses were concentrated along Soniat Street.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, small Jewish, Italian, and Eastern European businesses such as Cardaro's Poultry and Seafoods, Herman Bagalman's Pharmacy, Olga Pollock Beauty Salon, and Morris's Kosher Delicatessen lined Freret Street.<sup>9</sup>

Erasing ethnic divisions while amplifying racial difference, white shop owners like Henry Hermes belonged to segregated civic organizations such as the Freret Carnival Club, Freret Civic Association, and Freret Business Men's Association, which lobbied for infrastructural improvements to make Freret "the best shopping center this side of Canal Street."<sup>10</sup> As in other ethnic enclaves, Freret's Mardi Gras parades and neighborhood events drew much-needed business while establishing a white ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup>

While bound to Jim Crow racial codes, the Great Depression spurred white Freret residents to consider economic and political alternatives. Although many supported Governor Huey Long's racialized populism, residents eventually embraced President

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7 Warner, "Freret's Century," 340.

8 Ibid., 343.

9 "Freret Street Has Switched to Trolley Coaches Because Trolley Coaches Are MODERN," *Times Picayune* (September 3, 1947): 21.

10 "Trolley Busses Move on Freret," *Times Picayune* (September 4, 1947): 1, 9.

11 "Freret Carnival Club Picks LaMont," *Times Picayune* (April 30, 1952): 36; Stanonis, *Creating the Big Easy*, 172.

Franklin Roosevelt's activist federal government and New Deal welfare programs that protected average citizens.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, because Socialists advocated for the unemployed and allied with mainstream institutions such as the CIO and the Democratic Party, white Freret residents tolerated Henry Hermes's radical, integrationist politics.<sup>13</sup> For example, the community affectionately dubbed Hermes the "neighborhood socialist," while a few, such as Clifford LeBlanc and Peter Biewer, participated in Popular Front and anti-fascist protest.<sup>14</sup> Freret's support was essential to sustaining the Popular Front-oriented CCU, which depended on black and white patrons' loyalty.

### **Barbers' Union**

Once established in Freret, Hermes threw himself into the heady world of radical labor organizing. Hermes's steadfast belief in an alternative economic system was rooted in his experience working with local union, Socialist, and cooperative organizations during the Great Depression. Between 1930 and 1936, the worsening national economy and vicious factional politics between the Huey P. Long political machine and New Orleans mayor T. Semmes Walmsley plunged the city into financial crisis.<sup>15</sup> As governor, Huey Long and the Regular Democratic Organization (RDO) had brokered an uneasy alliance to consolidate power over Louisiana politics and stimulate state infrastructural development. However, the RDO soon grew leery of Long's anti-New

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12 Warner, "Freret's Century," 335.

13 Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2-3, 261-262.

14 Singer interview, cited in Warner, "Freret's Century," 335; "Foes of Fascism Fined \$5 Each for Picketing Theater," *Times Picayune* (March 19, 1935): 13; "Assail Congress for Passing Cut in Relief Budget," *Times Picayune* (January 29, 1939): 4.

15 Garry Boulard, *Huey Long Invades New Orleans: The Siege of a City, 1934-36* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1998), 75-99.

Deal populism and tremendous sway over state politics. Consequently, when Walmsley ran for election in 1933, the RDO repudiated its alliance with Long, now a U.S. Senator. Angered, Long eliminated state funding for New Orleans and revoked much of its ability to regulate its own affairs and collect revenue.

Tensions escalated, and on the eve of the 1934 senatorial election Long declared martial law in New Orleans. He deployed 3,000 National Guard members, who, armed with tear gas, occupied the voter registrar's office and posted machine guns in the windows facing City Hall. In response, Walmsley ordered 400 city police officers to City Hall. While the conflict was defused, Long sympathizers in the state legislature continued to push New Orleans to the brink of bankruptcy, even after Long's assassination in 1935.<sup>16</sup> Frustrated with Walmsley's handling of the skirmish, the RDO forced Walmsley to resign in 1936 and installed Long loyalist Robert Maestri as mayor.<sup>17</sup> Although Maestri helped the city regain financial footing, he was also a master of political patronage and tolerated prostitution and gambling. The city's staunch anti-union views, voter disenfranchisement, political repression, and chronic unemployment eventually spurred many citizens to take radical action.

Simultaneously, during the 1930s and 1940s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) launched competing campaigns to unionize the South.<sup>18</sup> A more radical offshoot of the AFL, the CIO aligned

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16 Boulard, *Huey Long Invades New Orleans*, 199; Edward F. Haas, "New Orleans on the Half-Shell: The Maestri Era, 1936-1946," *Louisiana History* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1972), 284.

17 Haas, "New Orleans on the Half-Shell," 287-288, 293-298.

18 James E. Fickle, *The New South and the 'New Competition': Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 315.

with the Popular Front in 1935 to lobby for collective bargaining laws to organize factories.<sup>19</sup> Conservatives condemned the organization as a motley group of outside agitators and Communists.<sup>20</sup> Against this tumultuous political backdrop, Hermes joined the Associated Master Barbers of America (AMBA) in 1931 and was elected vice president a year later.<sup>21</sup> The union eventually affiliated with the CIO, reflecting both Hermes's Socialist leanings and New Orleans barbers' support of industrial unionism.

Attacking government corruption at the local and state level, Hermes quickly gained a reputation for zealously safeguarding his fellow barbers' economic livelihood. For example, in 1932, Hermes had a young bootblack arrested "for practicing barbering without a license when [Hermes observed him] shampooing the head of the owner of the barber shop."<sup>22</sup> The AMBA was also fiercely opposed to the Huey P. Long administration and demanded state intervention to regulate the barber trade. In 1934 it accused Senator Long of stacking the state barber board with cronies who refused to enforce sanitation regulations protecting the public.<sup>23</sup> These experiences pitted Hermes against corrupt city and state officials and spurred his experimentation with radical economic and political institutions.

Like many New Orleans labor organizations, barbers unions created a vibrant and cohesive identity centered on distinctive community and political spaces. Hermes mingled with his peers at fundraisers, picnics, film screenings, and concerts at the verdant

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19 Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 262.

20 Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 185.

21 "Lotto Party Announced," *Times Picayune* (April 14, 1932): 5.

22 "Bootblack Jailed as Barber, Freed," *Times Picayune* (October 5, 1932): 3.

23 "Officers Installed by Master Barbers," *Times Picayune* (January 4, 1934): 4.

Audubon Park.<sup>24</sup> For example, the Master and Journeyman's Barbers Band and Booster Club held their meetings at the Benevolent Knights of America headquarters and hosted parties on the building's roof top garden.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, the strong social bonds Hermes cultivated with his fellow barbers would form the CCU's core membership. By 1949, five unionized barbers had become directors of the CCU.<sup>26</sup>

One CCU barber in particular reveals the connection between cooperation, unions, and ethnic communities. Born in Boccadilfacò, Sicily, Onofrio Chiarello lived along Esplanade Ridge in the Seventh Ward.<sup>27</sup> In 1941, Chiarello was elected committee chairman of the local Journeyman Barbers' International Union of America.<sup>28</sup> He was also active in the city's Italian community, which had its own vibrant cooperative culture. For decades, Italian immigrants had formed benevolent societies to provide members burial insurance and medical services. Mutual aid societies strengthened social bonds among Italians by celebrating members' hometowns and traditions and fostering cross-class exchange through various social functions.<sup>29</sup> Chiarello himself managed the Italian Union Hall on Esplanade Avenue, which several Italian mutual aid societies had collectively purchased in 1912.<sup>30</sup> Befriending Hermes through the barber union, Chiarello parlayed his cooperative organizing skills into a position as CCU president in 1947.<sup>31</sup>

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24 "Lotto Party Announced," 5.

25 "Barber Band to Play," *Times Picayune* (June 5, 1931): 24.

26 "Consumers' Union to Install Staff," *Times Picayune* (January 5, 1947): 18.

27 "Onofrio Chiarello," World War II Draft Registration Card, (1942), New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through FamilySearch.com.

28 "Boat Ride is Set," *Times Picayune* (October 15, 1941): 11.

29 Maselli and Candeloro, *Italians in New Orleans*, 43.

30 *Ibid.*; "Flag Present by VFW Auxiliary," *Times Picayune* (September 20, 1959): 8.

31 "Consumer Group Elects Officers," *Times Picayune* (December 13, 1945): 29; "Consumers' Union to Install Staff," 18.



## **The New Orleans Popular Front**

By 1934, Hermes had channeled his commitment to the class struggle into a critical position as secretary of the Socialist Party of New Orleans.<sup>32</sup> Hermes joined the Party during a heady moment of Socialist organizing in New Orleans. For example, publicly opposing a militant municipal streetcar drivers strike as acting mayor, T. Semmes Walmsley had run his 1930 mayoral campaign on a platform of restoring law and order.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, in 1932 he passed a city ordinance prohibiting the “teaching, uttering, printing, or advocating of anarchistic, communistic, or radical doctrines.” Despite state repression of political dissent, Socialists vociferously denounced the anti-union, segregationist, and corrupt RDO stranglehold over New Orleans politics. For instance, in the midst of a vicious mayoral campaign for Walmsley's reelection, Hermes was thrown out of a RDO campaign rally for “disturbing the peace.”<sup>34</sup> When Central Trades and Labor Council president James Dempsey asserted that Walmsley had always supported labor unions, Hermes repeatedly cried out, “I challenge that statement!” before police seized him and thrust him into a waiting police car. After drawing the window shades, the officers allegedly struck Hermes, bruising his face.

Like many radicals, Socialists were outraged by the precipitous decline of New Orleans' finances in the wake of the Depression and friction between city and state political factions. Further, because the obstructionist state legislature denied the municipal government the power to regulate public utilities, Mayor Walmsley was unable

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32 “Socialists to Meet,” *Times Picayune* (March 9, 1934): 8.

33 Boulard, Huey Long Invades New Orleans, 36.

34 “Long Chief Issue in City Election,” *Times Picayune* (January 9, 1934): 1.

to effectively manage basic city services. The Socialist Party demanded that the city government reduce utility rates for average citizens. For example, in 1934 ran its own write-in candidate for mayor, Walter Smith, who proposed that the public “take over, own, and operate the [New Orleans] Public Service, and sell electricity, gas, and street car service to ourselves AT COST.”<sup>35</sup> New Orleans Socialists’ commitment to public ownership of municipal services foreshadowed Hermes's interest in social and economic alternatives for New Orleans residents, directly leading to his cooperative career.

In the mid-1930s, the contacts Hermes cultivated as secretary of the Socialist Party coalesced into a diverse body of New Deal leftists and Popular Front allies who would sustain the CCU in the decades to come. Historian Kent Germany describes the emerging New Deal welfare state in Louisiana as revolving around market reform, economic development, labor regulation, and federal subsidies.<sup>36</sup> As conservative segregationists rallied to maintain the racial and class status quo, a vast, intricate network of leftist coalitions dedicated to expanding political participation and economic justice sprang up to protect nascent social welfare bureaucracies.

The emerging Popular Front framed much of Hermes’s organizing. In 1935, in response to the Seventh Comintern Congress's call for a Popular Front, the New Orleans chapter of the Communist Party proposed a “united front” of black and white Communists, Socialists, unions, and progressives promoting anti-fascism and civil

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35 Socialist Party of New Orleans, *Two Packs of Cigarettes a Month* (1934), 1, Williams Research Collection, The Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La.

36 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 13.

liberties.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, New Orleans Communists rejected “dictator” Huey Long's so-called Populism and “Share the Wealth” program as affronts to the working-class. They demanded that like-minded leftists aid Louisiana's urban laborers and its black sharecroppers and tenant farmers. At the same time, southern Socialists seeking to consolidate their electoral influence by courting black voters welcomed the Communist Party's commitment to racial and class justice. As historian Glenda Gilmore notes, Socialist Party branches became nodes for Communist Party alliances, so that party officials like Hermes became brokers for southern Popular Front coalitions.<sup>38</sup>

Although few Communists actually operated in New Orleans, the Popular Front nonetheless fostered an activist culture attentive to labor, anti-Fascism, and civil liberties issues.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Mayor Robert Maestri, whose ties to Huey Long and Earl K. Long's political machine enabled him to assume office in 1936 without an election, spent much of his time and resources attacking industrial unions.<sup>40</sup> While Huey Long publicly supported improving labor conditions and was beloved by craft unions, as U.S. Senator, he neither sponsored pro-labor union legislation nor hired non-union workers on state construction projects.<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, Long's ambiguous labor position did little to counter the state's virulent anti-union politicians, and in the wake of his assassination, Longites like Maestri abandoned his “Share Our Wealth” populism in favor of protecting

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37 Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 185, 213; Communist Party, District 24, “An Open Letter!” (New Orleans: Trades Council Allied Printing, nd): 1, University of Michigan Special Collections Library, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/s/sclradic>.

38 Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 186.

39 Ibid., 211.

40 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 28; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 34.

41 Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 31, 201-203.

business interests at the expense of unions.<sup>42</sup> For example, in the midst of a CIO organizing drive in New Orleans, Maestri enlisted Chief of Police John J. Grosch to stifle radical labor activities. According to historian Adam Fairclough, Grosch “raided homes and offices, seized documents, arrested strikers, threatened union lawyers, turned a blind eye to the [craft union] AFL’s thugs, and beat up CIO organizers” in jail.<sup>43</sup>

Further, city officials and businessmen portrayed anyone with unpopular political views as potential saboteurs, attacking leftist college professors, public speakers, anti-fascist protestors, and Communist or Socialist party members. In fact, civil liberty organizations reported that conservative New Orleanian businesses, working with the police, had blacklisted a variety of political figures, and “Benevolent institutions permitting anyone on the list to speak in their buildings are threatened with reprisals, including exclusion from the Community Chest.”<sup>44</sup> Protestors such as Socialist Party president Louise Jessen were jailed for refusing to pay \$10 permit fees for street meetings and faced sentences of up to 90 days in prison.<sup>45</sup> Dissidents accused New Orleans officials of police brutality; as a 1936 *St. Louis Dispatch* headline blared, “Police Make Their Own Laws: Their Fists Their Warrants.”<sup>46</sup> To avoid police reprisals, “avowed Communists and certain labor leaders live in a state of terror. They dodge from place to place in flight from the police, communicating with one another by trusted messenger.”

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42 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 34.

43 Ibid.

44 McCulloch, “Civic and Social Societies,” 1.

45 “Arrests, Permit Fee Ordinance Draw Fire,” *Times Picayune* (October 8, 1936): 4.

46 McCulloch, “Civic and Social Societies,” 1.

A well-organized civil liberties community formed in response to this aggressive city and state program of police repression against African Americans, unions, and radicals. For example, when Hermes was arrested in 1937 for possessing literature criticizing Mayor Maestri, the civil liberties community rushed to his aid. Hermes's defenders would form the bedrock of the CCU four years later. On August 20, 1937, Hermes halted the committee meeting he was conducting for the United Automobile Workers and watched warily from the podium as several policemen filed into the Socialist Hall in the French Quarter.<sup>47</sup> The police harassed the audience before confiscating the Socialist Party's literature. When they discovered a pamphlet linking New Orleans gambling interests with politically corrupt state and city officials, the officers arrested Hermes. Police Chief Grosch declared that he would "beat [Hermes] to a pulp" before "run[ning] him out of town" because the circulars criticized Maestri's administration.<sup>48</sup> After a "great deal of rough handling," the police dragged Hermes off to jail. Under the State War Emergency Act of 1917, the New Orleans district attorney charged Hermes with "attempting to incite riot by distributing slanderous literature attacking our City and State Governments."<sup>49</sup>

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47 "Facts Concerning the Arrest of Henry Hermes," August 1937, folder 5, box 1, Harold Newton Lee Papers, 1917-1970, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as Lee Papers.

48 "\$10,000 Damages Asked of Grosch by Local Barber," *Times Picayune* (July 14, 1938): 4.

49 Sidney A. Mitchell, letter to George A. Dreyfous, 26 Aug., 1937, folder 2, box 3, Mathilde Dreyfous (Mrs. Geo. A) Papers, 1937-1989, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as Dreyfous Papers.

Hermes's tribulations did not end there. In jail, he was kept in isolation for 18 hours, manhandled by police, and allegedly suffered a nervous breakdown.<sup>50</sup> Finally, out on bail, Hermes was walking down Cadiz Street to his Freret Street barbershop, when he noticed a car following him. Two men Hermes suspected were cronies for the city's slot machine racket leapt out of the car and kicked the barber to the curb. As they beat him, the men snarled, "So you don't like our governor, huh?"<sup>51</sup> Despite the incident's brutality, police did not investigate.

New Orleans civil liberties activists immediately sprang to Hermes's defense, using Hermes as a test case for combatting police abuse. The Workers Defense League (WDL), a Socialist legal aid organization, claimed that Hermes's civil suit was the first of "scores, maybe as many as 100 [lawsuits] involving similar abuses" perpetrated by police during CIO teamsters' and taxicab drivers' strikes the same year.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the Louisiana League for the Preservation of Constitutional Rights (LLPCR) took Hermes's case on the grounds that the arrest violated his civil liberties. Advocating criminal law reform in Louisiana and New Orleans, the LLPCR was committed to "maintaining the liberties essential to keeping a liberal democratic government."<sup>53</sup> Composed of liberal Uptown intellectuals and lawyers, the LLPCR meticulously documented New Orleans police and city government harassment of political activists and raised support among

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50 "\$10,000 Damages," 4.

51 George A. Dreyfous, letter to Isaac S. Heller, 11 Sept. 1937, folder 2, box 3, Dreyfous Papers.

52 "False Arrest Suit Filed," *Middlesboro Daily News* (July 13, 1938): 1.

53 Harold Lee, letter to Morris Langley, 7 Mar., 1938, box 1, Lee Papers.

local and national civil liberties organizations like the ACLU.<sup>54</sup> Although Assistant District Attorney Rudolph Becker eventually dismissed all charges in 1938, Hermes's LLPCR lawyers subsequently filed a civil suit against Police Chief Grosch for false arrest.<sup>55</sup> In response, Grosch smirked, "Hermes' barber business must be bad...I have nothing to worry about."

For their part, both city and national Socialist Party members decried Hermes's arrest and organized letter writing campaigns to government officials and newspapers, hosted protest speakers, and provided Hermes legal and financial assistance.<sup>56</sup> For example, the local branch of the WDL persuaded founder and Socialist Party head Norman Thomas to travel to New Orleans to protest Hermes's mistreatment.<sup>57</sup> Thomas declared that citizens were languishing under a fascist state. Given the city's pervasive political corruption and citizens' apathy, Thomas concluded, "I found that Louisiana could grow almost anything—but freedom...Your land is rich, but you have the poverty of exploitation."<sup>58</sup> If Hermes could be arrested for engaging in free speech, Socialists argued, so could ordinary Americans.<sup>59</sup>

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54 Dreyfous, letter, 11 Sept. 1937; Louisiana Coalition of Patriotic Societies, Inc. Newsletter, [1937], folder 2, box 3, Dreyfous Papers.

55 "\$10,000 Damages," 4.

56 Louisiana Coalition of Patriotic Societies, newsletter.

57 "Norman Thomas Urges Increases in Civil Liberties," *Times Picayune* (September 11, 1937): 15; The Workers Defense League Collection Papers, 1935-1971, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

58 "Norman Thomas Urges Increases in Civil Liberties," 15.

59 Socialist Party of America, New Orleans Chapter, pamphlet, "An Open Letter to the People of New Orleans," 1937, folder 1, box 1, Midlo Collection.

Hermes's arrest galvanized him, and for the rest of the 1930s he was an unwavering supporter of the New Orleans' civil liberties and anti-fascist movements.<sup>60</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that the CCU's leaders included former Popular Front allies.<sup>61</sup> For example, many CCU members hailed from the Louisiana Division of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, which Hermes co-founded in 1937.<sup>62</sup> Future CCU president Peter N. Biewer also bridged Freret Neighborhood's populist politics and radical activism.<sup>63</sup> Chicago native and Freret resident Biewer was a committed Socialist active in the WDL, LLPCR, and the Workers Alliance of America, a largely Socialist organization that protested extensive pay cuts, suspensions, and terminations within the Works Progress Administration.<sup>64</sup> However, Biewer abandoned the Socialist Party in the 1940s to concentrate on refrigeration sales as well as managing the CCU's credit union.<sup>65</sup>

### **Cooperative Politics**

By the mid-1930s, Hermes identified cooperatives as tools for radical political change. Indeed, during the Depression many Socialists promoted cooperatives as part of

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60 LLPCR member list, 28 March 1939, Dreyfous Papers, folder 4, box 3.

61 Hermes retained the services of LLPCR lawyer Herman Midlo, who became a longtime CCU member, legal advisor, and board member. Henry W. Hermes, letter to Herman Midlo, 1 November, 1958, folder 3, box 1, Midlo Collection.

62 The organization was comprised of Spanish-speaking rank-and-file members as well as vocal Socialists. Eric Smith, *American Relief Aid and the Spanish Civil War* (Columbia, MO: The University of Missouri Press, 2013), 71.

63 Biewer's daughter, Ruth, also joined the CCU and became a director in 1945. She saw the CCU as part of a larger effort to improve Freret Neighborhood. See "Our Store," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944), 1; "Consumers' Group Plans Celebration," *Times Picayune* (January 5, 1945): 16; "Mrs. Ruth Braniff Wins Freret Contest," *Times Picayune* (October 5, 1945): 22.

64 1940 United States Census, s.v. "Peter N. Biewer," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; P.N. Biewer, letter to George A. Dreyfous, 16 Oct. 1938, folder 3, box 3, Dreyfous Papers; *New Orleans Co-operator* (Jan and Feb 1944): 1; "Assail Congress for Passing Cut in Relief Budget," *Times Picayune* (January 29, 1939): 4; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 155.

65 Peter N. Biewer, "Our Credit Union," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 3-4.



a utopian project by ameliorating racial and class disparities by radically transforming the individual's relationship to the state. For example, rejecting corporate capitalism as a threat to democratic ideals, Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California gubernatorial campaign inspired the formation of 2,000 cooperatives in 1932.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, he proposed that California assist its unemployed by creating state-owned cooperative colonies, a comprehensive industrial system comprised of worker-owned factories, and social welfare programs.

Socialists believed that once cooperatively organized, workers could create political institutions responsive to their needs.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, educational reformer John Dewey predicted a strong labor and cooperative movement would promote community feeling and direct action necessary to building a "genuinely cooperative society" grounded in a worker-controlled system of production and economic distribution.<sup>68</sup> On a grander scale, CLUSA co-founder James Warbasse and national peace activist Emily Greene Balch argued that an international cooperative movement would inoculate nations both from totalitarianism and repressive capitalism by engendering world peace.

Hermes and the New Orleans Socialist Party were similarly drawn to cooperative societies' utopian potential. In 1934, the Party hosted Louisianan representatives from New Llano Cooperative Colony, a Socialist intentional community in Leesville, Louisiana.<sup>69</sup> The colony's "new social fabric" of national economic and political

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66 Curl, *For All the People*, 180-184.

67 John H. Dietrich, "The Cooperative Movement," *The Humanist Pulpit Series* 16 (Minneapolis: The First Unitarian Society, 1933).

68 Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 36.

69 "Socialists to Hear of New Llano Plan," *Times Picayune* (December 14, 1934): 15.

cooperation would soon “cover the back of advancing humanity after the old and torn one of capitalism [was] discarded.”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, chapter party president Louise Jessen taught at Commonwealth College, a Socialist labor school and commune founded by former New Llano colonists.<sup>71</sup> It modeled cooperative living while training industrial unionists to resist imperialism and fascism.<sup>72</sup> Finally, at a 1936 New Orleans campaign rally, Socialist Party presidential candidate Norman Thomas argued that a national “cooperative commonwealth,” a people-centered system of economic collectivism, would end soaring unemployment rates and improve living conditions for “the masses.”<sup>73</sup> These Socialist utopian experiments indelibly marked Hermes’s cooperative philosophy.

The national consumers’ movement also directly informed Hermes’s cooperative thinking. As historian Tracey Deutsch argues, during the 1930s and 1940s, organized protest over mass retailing and older forms of food marketing and distribution swept the country.<sup>74</sup> Consumer activists decried supermarkets and chain stores consolidating their hold over local retail markets. Significantly, the consumers’ movement inspired a generation of new food cooperatives countering exorbitant consumer prices.<sup>75</sup> Most largely adhered to the “Rochdale Plan,” a set of economic and organizational principles guiding consumer cooperatives’ actions.<sup>76</sup> The most prominent proponent of the

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70 Dr. Walter Siegmeister, “The Downfall of Capitalism and the Birth of the New Cooperative System,” *Llano Colonist* (April 1, 1933).

71 “Anti-War Summer School Planned for Southerners,” *Fortnightly* 13, no. 13 (July 1, 1936): 1.

72 Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South*, 15-26.

73 “Norman Thomas Would Organize ‘Useful Workers,’” *Times Picayune* (March 9, 1936): 13.

74 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 108.

75 Curl, *For All the People*, 189.

76 Giese, “How the Old Co-ops Went Wrong,” 319.

Rochdale Plan was CLUSA.<sup>77</sup> Its Socialist founders hoped to build a national network of affiliated consumer cooperatives and socialized farms that would eventually replace capitalism.

In the mid-1920s, as Socialists and Communists vied for control over CLUSA, the organization debated how to interpret the Rochdale principle of political neutrality. More conservative factions opined that “neutrality” barred the organization from engaging in any political activity or even discussing Communist, Socialist or other radical political and economic theories. Abandoning the Socialist vision for a “universal Cooperative Democracy,” by the 1930s, “economic cooperators” applied modern business practices to compete within a capitalist framework.<sup>78</sup> Cooperatives would no longer campaign to replace market capitalism but would instead compete within the system as another type of business.<sup>79</sup> The mainstream cooperative movement's disavowal of radical politics laid bare the central problem facing 1930s and 1940s cooperative activists: How could cooperatives construct a national “economic utopia” without also adhering to a well-defined political-economic theory?<sup>80</sup>

As radicals were nudged out of CLUSA, Socialists debated the implications of an apolitical cooperative movement. In 1933, Unitarian minister John Dietrich tackled the ideological divide between Socialists and consumer cooperators.<sup>81</sup> Dietrich contended

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77 Curl, *For All the People*, 144, 158.

78 Giese, “How the Old Co-ops Went Wrong,” 320.

79 Curl, *For All the People*, 184.

80 Daniel Zwerdling, “The Uncertain Revival of Food Cooperatives,” in *Co-ops, Communes and Collectives: Experiments in Social Change in the 1960s and 1970s*, eds. John Case and Rosemary C.R. Taylor (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 104.

81 Dietrich, “The Cooperative Movement,” 94-95.

that the two groups fundamentally disagreed over who would benefit from a cooperative society. To rectify class injustice, Socialists organized laborers into worker cooperatives like cooperative factories and collective farms. Further, a Socialist government would control the means of production and distribution. Ultimately, Socialists believed that a comprehensive economic revolution required organized political engagement.

Conversely, the mainstream cooperative movement posited that consumers, “everybody on the basis of their consumption,” were the foundation of a new economy. Rather than taking political action, a “non-political, voluntary association of people” would coalesce gradually and organically. No government apparatus was needed because cooperators believed that “people can conduct their own business without profit and without the state.” Dietrich's portrait of the two groups captured an increasingly polarized debate within the 1930s cooperative movement.

However, Henry Hermes was inspired not only by Socialist and Rochdale cooperative models, but also by the Southeastern Cooperative Educational Association (SCEA), which occupied a middle ground between radical activism and apolitical economic activity. Active between 1939 and 1946, the SCEA was an interracial network of regional and sub-regional cooperatives and provided educational resources to southern colleges, unions, financial institutions, churches, and non-profit organizations establishing cooperatives.<sup>82</sup> Influenced by the Antigonish cooperative tradition of Nova Scotia, the SCEA argued that southern poverty was rooted in damaging federal agricultural policies, as well as rural communities' dependence on exploitative

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<sup>82</sup> Lee M. Brooks, letter to Edward Yeomans, 17 Oct., 1940, folder 2, box 1, SCL Records.

corporations, bankers, and wholesalers.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the SCEA promoted legislation, adult education, rural development, and cooperatives that would help southerners regain control over the region's economic and political institutions.<sup>84</sup>

Adhering to the Rochdale Plan, the SCEA argued that because all Americans were consumers, citizens, whether black and white, rural and urban, should unite around their common consumption practices to reform capitalism.<sup>85</sup> While the SCEA professed that capitalism was essentially sound, it also believed that the cooperative movement was part of a larger struggle for political equality and democracy for all citizens. According to SCEA director Ruth Morton, the cooperative store was more than “simply...a business enterprise,” but rather, was “one of the means by which the common man attains his democratic ideal.”<sup>86</sup> Joining the SCEA in 1941, the CCU received vital institutional support and, most importantly, entry into the regional cooperative community.<sup>87</sup>

### **Consumers' Co-operative Union**

After seven years of careful research, Hermes opened the Consumers' Co-operative Union (CCU) in July 1941.<sup>88</sup> Against CLUSA, the Socialist Party, and the SCEA's competing strands of cooperative thought, Hermes' hybridized cooperative plan positioned the CCU squarely within a Socialist political framework while still advocating

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83 Moses Coady, *Masters of Their Own Destiny: The Story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education Through Economic Cooperation* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1939); Southeastern Cooperative Education Association, newsletter, 8 Feb., 1941, folder 46, box 2, SCL Records.

84 Lee M. Brooks, “The South, Our Problem in Cooperative Democracy,” radio transcript, 28 September 1942, box 2, folder 46, SCL Records.

85 Ed Yeomans, letter to Charles M. Smith, 10 Aug., 1941, folder 6, box 1, SCL Records.

86 Morton, letter to Ed Yeomans, 28 Nov. 1940, 3.

87 “Baton Rouge Conference Exceeds Expectations,” *The Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 5 (1941): 4, folder 43, box 2, SCL Records; “Consumers Cooperative Union, Inc. Joins SCEA,” *The Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 7 (1941): 3, folder 43, box 2, SCL Records.

88 Herman L. Midlo, letter to Secretary of State, 28 Jul. 1941, folder 1, box 1, Midlo Collection.

for consumers. Deeply concerned about Freret Neighborhood's economic health, Hermes located the cooperative grocery store in a modest two-story stucco building near from his Freret Street barbershop.<sup>89</sup> Drawn to its middle and working-class urban demographics and proximity to street car lines, three grocery chains surrounded Freret by 1944.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, when the Schwegmann Brothers Giant Supermarket, New Orleans' first supermarket, opened shortly thereafter, its vast stock and competitive prices quickly siphoned off patrons from independent Freret businesses.<sup>91</sup> Against this competitive consumer landscape, the cooperative grocery store was immediately popular, with 50 members contributing the one-dollar membership fee.<sup>92</sup> Worried that the changing commercial landscape threatened their livelihoods, Freret shop-owners and residents enthusiastically joined the CCU movement.<sup>93</sup>

The CCU was part of a broader effort among independent retailers to resist growing chain store and supermarket competition and protect the vitality of their communities. For example, the Independent Grocers Alliance was a national purchasing association and voluntary chain of grocers formed in 1926 to combat chain store competition.<sup>94</sup> However, the IGA was openly hostile to cooperative enterprise, so cooperatives were forced to create separate umbrella organizations to withstand

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89 "Hermes, Henry W.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, LA: Soards Directory Co., 1933); Ad, "Semi-Commercial Bldg," *Times Picayune* (May 21, 1944): 39.

90 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 64; "Our Store," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 1.

91 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 50; Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 135-137.

92 Midlo, letter to Secretary of State, 28 Jul. 1941.

93 "Improved Garbage Collection Asked," *Times Picayune* (April 4, 1945): 24.

94 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 117.

competition from large retailers and independent grocers alike.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, in 1931, southeastern Louisianan independent grocers established the Louisiana Grocers' Cooperative (LGC), which provided warehouse facilities and brokered directly with producers and suppliers.<sup>96</sup> It reduced overhead costs for struggling members as chain stores proliferated.<sup>97</sup> Unlike the LGC, however, the CCU explicitly protected consumers rather than grocery store owners.

That ordinary Freret citizens supported the CCU also speaks to the broad appeal of the consumer movement nationwide. The rank-and-file cooperative member was, according to Deutsch, part of a “broader network of liberal (though not necessarily leftist)” citizens who organized advocacy groups to oppose a range of consumer abuses.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, Freret cooperators were Lizabeth Cohen’s prototypical “citizen consumers.”<sup>99</sup> Inspired by New Deal consumer-oriented legislation, they believed that the federal government should not only intervene in the market to shield consumers, but that consumers had a moral responsibility to protect their own economic interests. CCU members held that average citizens could curb exploitative producers and retailers’ power by boycotting chain stores, pressing for consumer legislation, and eventually creating a

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95 Ibid.; Anwarul Hoque and Leroy Davis, *Survey of Cooperatives in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Southern University and A&M College, 1980), 4.

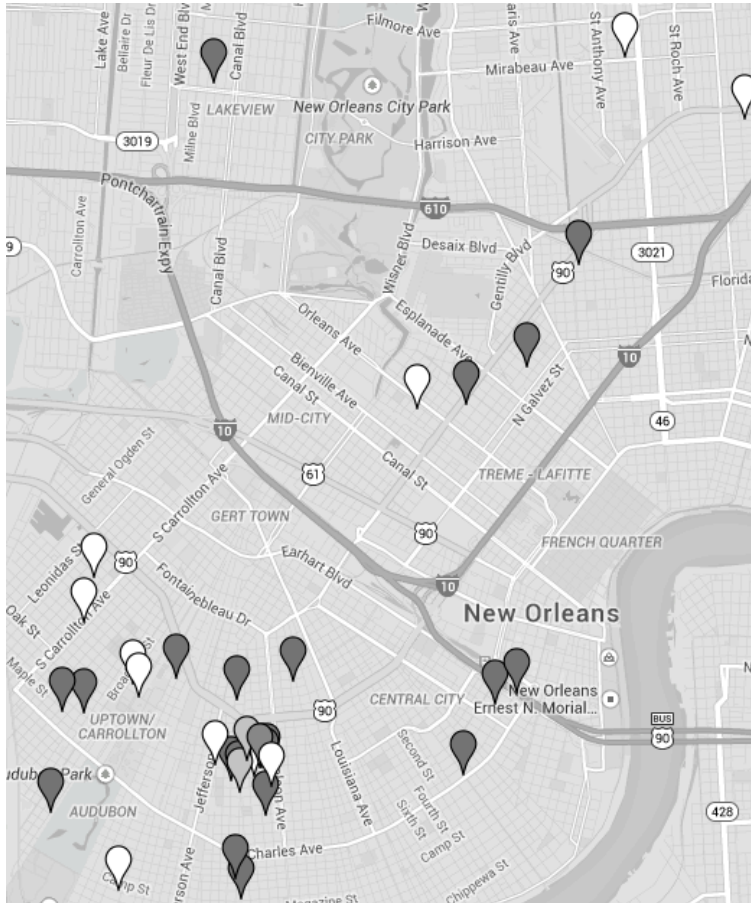
96 Hoque and Davis, *Survey of Cooperatives*, 5, 14; Louisiana Grocers' Cooperative, *Annual Report* (January 28, 1983), 1. Business Vertical File: Louisiana Grocers Co-op Inc., New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA; “Julia Street,” *New Orleans Magazine* (December 2008), accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.myneworleans.com/New-Orleans-Magazine/December-2008/Julia-Street/>.

97 Maggie H. Richardson, “A Grocer and a Gentleman,” *Greater Baton Rouge Business Report* (April 6, 2009), accessed September 21, 2012, <http://www.businessreport.com/article/20090406/BUSINESSREPORT01/304069956/0/businessreport0403>.

98 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*, 105.

99 Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 8.

mandate for a national cooperative government and economic program. To do so, Hermes wrangled a diverse set of allies around the consumer cooperative movement's tenet “everybody is a Consumer, from the day of birth until we die.”<sup>100</sup>



**Figure 4:** Demographic map of Consumers’ Co-operative Union members’ addresses. White dots represent known Popular Front members. Light gray are African Americans. Dark gray are unaffiliated with the Popular Front.

### Female Consumer Activists in the CCU

Accounting for half of the CCU's board of directors, radical female consumer activists embraced economic cooperation. As Deutsch suggests, the consumer movement

<sup>100</sup> “The ‘New Orleans Co-operator’,” *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 2-3.



was enriched by the frank exchange of ideas between moderate, liberal, and radical female activists of the late 1930s.<sup>101</sup> Likewise, three CCU leaders, Lillian Muniz, a YWCA clubwoman; Angelina Prior, a unionist; and Mary Allen, a Socialist, were important figures in both Popular Front activism and consumer advocacy.

Social worker Lillian Muniz illustrates the YWCA's ties to the consumer movement and cooperative economics. A working-class New Orleanian of German and Spanish parentage, during the 1930s Muniz headed Louisiana State University's YWCA chapter and served on the board of the southern regional organization.<sup>102</sup> Anne Firor Scott argues that beginning in the 1920s, the YWCA radicalized young southern women "seeking...to Christianize the social order" by critiquing labor relations and using cooperatives to reform an exploitative capitalist system.<sup>103</sup> Since 1920, working-class members of the YWCA had endorsed collective bargaining and federal labor legislation as the logical manifestation of Protestant social justice and American patriotism.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Muniz supported the 1943 United Mine Workers strike, declaring that mining companies' "limitless appetites for profit" were aiding "Axis powers"; by undermining organized labor, corporations jeopardized miners' safety and economic wellbeing.<sup>105</sup>

Further, during the Great Depression and World War II, YWCA members were active in federal consumer agencies like the Office of Price Administration's Consumer

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101 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 112.

102 "Leaders in State Student Conference," *Times Picayune* (November 9, 1934): 34; 1920 United States Census, s.v. "Lillian Muniz," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

103 Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 192.

104 Dorothea Browder, "A 'Christian Solution of the Labor Situation': How Workingwomen Reshaped the YWCA's Religious Mission and Politics," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 103-105.

105 Lillian Muniz, "Defends Position of Coal Miners," *Times Picayune* (November 7, 1943): 40.

Division, as well as national consumer organizations like the National Consumers' League.<sup>106</sup> Given its commitment to consumer protections, it is unsurprising that the YWCA was a staunch ally of the southern cooperative movement and the CCU.<sup>107</sup> For example, both the New Orleans YWCA and the CCU belonged to the SCEA.<sup>108</sup> In fact, the CCU's first public meeting was held in a YWCA auditorium in September 1941.<sup>109</sup> Lillian Muniz's YWCA affiliations undoubtedly secured an important institutional ally for the cooperative grocery store.

Female labor activists were also integral to the consumer movement, and unionized women in the CCU were no different. For example, during the Great Depression, Mexican native and CCU president Angelina Lopez Prior had worked as a machinist for a textile company and headed the New Orleans chapter of the United Garment Workers Union.<sup>110</sup> Prior and her brother participated in Popular Front protests and campaigned for Socialist and cooperative enthusiast Norman Thomas's 1936 presidential campaign.<sup>111</sup> Demanding collective bargaining for unions as well as

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106 Landon Storrs, "Left-Feminism, The Consumer Movement, and Red Scare Politics in the United States, 1935-1960," *Journal of Women's History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 52.

107 Lee Brooks, letter to Southeastern Cooperative Educational Association, 21 Feb. 1941, folder 4, box 1, SCL Records.

108 Membership List, 1942, folder 51, box 2, SCL Records.

109 "Consumers Cooperative Union, Inc. Joins SCEA," 3.

110 Prior also persuaded her sister and fellow seamstress, May LaBurthe, to join the CCU, despite living several miles away in Mid-City. See "LaBurthe, Mae L." *Polk's New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans, LA: R.L. Polk and Co., 1947); "Deaths," *Times Picayune* (June 24, 1981): 27; "Union Leader Will Address Socialists" *Times Picayune* (August 19, 1936): 22; Henry W. Hermes, letter to Herman Midlo, 26 December 1942, folder 2, box 1, Midlo Collection; 1920 United States Census, s.v. "Angelina Prier," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com; "Prior, Mrs. A.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1924); "Prior, Angelina Mrs.," *Soards' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Co., 1928).

111 "Garment Workers Hear Labor Chiefs," *Times Picayune* (July 30, 1933): 5; "Union Leader Will Address Socialists," 22; "Arrest of Seven Pickets of Film Arouses Protest" *Times Picayune* (December 16, 1935): 8; 1920 United States Census, s.v. "Alfred Lopez," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana,

consumer empowerment, Prior also championed the National Industrial Recovery Act.<sup>112</sup> Notably, the National Recovery Administration enabled both consumers and unions to influence recovery efforts by creating the Consumer Advisory Board and Consumers' Counsel.<sup>113</sup> Consumer advocates like Prior believed the federal consumer agency would enforce product quality standards and integrate "citizen consumers" into an expanded democracy. However, soon after World War II, non-war-related industries cut employees' wages by ten percent, igniting a wave of strikes nationwide.<sup>114</sup> Amidst widespread economic instability and hardening government policies on industrial relations, female unionists organized cooperatives to protect laborers and consumers.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, throughout the 1940s, board member Prior lauded the CCU for fostering a national cooperative economy.<sup>116</sup>

Finally, Newcomb College history professor Mary Bernard Allen reflects the central role that Socialists played in the New Orleans cooperative movement. An ardent Socialist and founding LLPCR member, Allen met Hermes through the League of Industrial Democracy (LID), a Socialist organization of college faculty and students that

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accessed through Ancestry.com; "Arrests, Permit Fee Ordinance Draw Fire," 4; "Socialist Leader Will Speak Here," *Times Picayune* (September 2, 1934): 12.

112 "Garment Workers Hear Labor Chiefs," 5.

113 Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 19.

114 Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 228.

115 Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 40.

116 "Garment Workers Hear Labor Chiefs," 5; "Union Leader Will Address Socialists," 22; Mrs. A. Prior, "Greetings to the Co-op on its Second Anniversary," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944), 4.

posted Hermes's bail in 1937.<sup>117</sup> Repeatedly weathering state probes into the Communist infiltration of higher education, Allen built a career defending academic freedom and free speech.<sup>118</sup> Like Hermes, she was committed to anti-fascism, anti-racism, Socialism, and cooperative economics.<sup>119</sup> At the same time Hermes and the Socialist Party were exploring cooperative models of organizing, LID also hosted a variety of lectures on radical cooperative economics.<sup>120</sup> As a LID member, Allen believed that the nation desperately "need[ed]...a cooperative social order."<sup>121</sup>

### **African Americans in the CCU**

Further, the CCU's interest in economic equality dovetailed with black civil rights activists' interest in cooperative economics. As black New Orleanians began to suffer disproportionately during the Great Depression, civil rights activists hailed black-run consumer cooperatives as the most expedient means by which to eliminate racialized economic injustice.<sup>122</sup> African Americans accounted for half of the city's unemployed, while only comprising a third of the city's population. Further, New Deal social welfare programs were segregated, inefficient, and ultimately inadequate.<sup>123</sup> In response, long-established African American mutual aid and benevolent associations provided low-cost

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117 Louisiana Coalition of Patriotic Societies, Inc, "Letter to All Members," nd, folder 2, box 3, Dreyfous Papers; League for Industrial Democracy, pamphlet, "Democracy in Action" (nd): 4, Vertical File, Political Organizations, League for Industrial Democracy, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as LID Vertical File.

118 Louisiana League for the Preservation of Constitutional Rights, list, "List of Original Members of the LLPCR (1937)," 1, Vertical File, Political Organizations, Louisiana League for the Preservation of Constitutional Rights, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

119 Clarence L. Mohr and Joseph E. Gordon, *Tulane: The Emergence of a Modern University, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 54-55.

120 League for Industrial Democracy, "Democracy in Action," 1.

121 League for Industrial Democracy, pamphlet, "What is the L.I.D.?" (nd): 2, LID Vertical File.

122 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 129.

123 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 40.

medical insurance to black members otherwise excluded from health care services.<sup>124</sup> Setting a precedent for interracial collaboration, Ella Baker and George Schuyler's Young Negroes' Co-operative League (YNCL) created a host of cooperative enterprises in black neighborhoods, including in New Orleans.<sup>125</sup> Between 1930 and 1934, the YNCL cooperatives bought wholesale from white distributors to provide black consumers low-cost produce.<sup>126</sup> Later, operating in tandem with the NAACP's national "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns, which protested racial discrimination in stores, a new generation of black cooperatives helped members circumvent exploitative retail companies and circulate profits within their communities.<sup>127</sup>

Significantly, CCU's cooperative mission also embraced racial justice. Like the SCL, the cooperative proposed that sustained economic development in the South would end racism and prevent the spread of fascism among southern segregationists.<sup>128</sup> In fact, the SCL provided a model for CCU's integrationist politics. African Americans such as Dillard University president A.W. Dent, served on the SCL's board of directors, attended workshops and conferences, and delivered speeches on cooperatives' role in building a

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124 "Historical Notes," 2, box 1, JCFBMMA Records.

125 Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 83; Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 114.

126 Oscar Renal Williams, *George S. Schuyler: Portrait of a Black Conservative* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 84.

127 Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 142; Deutsch, *Building a Housewives' Paradise*, 109, 129.

128 "Win the War and Win the Peace," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 2-3, folder 2, box 1, Midlo Collection; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 269; The Cooperative League, press release, "Southeastern Cooperative Education Association" (May 16, 1940), folder 46, box 2, SCL Records.

biracial civil rights movement.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, the CCU recruited black members, while its events, held at integrated or black institutions, often featured prominent civil rights activists.<sup>130</sup> For example, at its January 1947 annual board of directors election meeting, the CCU invited the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) to address its members.<sup>131</sup> An integrated, pro-labor organization, the SCHW sought to bring New Deal reforms to the South, including civil rights, electoral reform, and social justice.<sup>132</sup> Like the SCHW, the CCU proposed that sustained economic development in the South would end racism and prevent the spread of fascism among southern segregationists.<sup>133</sup> Most importantly, while disenfranchised at the state level, black members enjoyed equal voting privileges within the cooperative. Consequently, they consistently elected people of color to the board of directors.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, New Orleans's 1940s cooperative movement offered the potential for lasting interracial collaboration.

Fletcher Sherrod, an African American Freret resident and CCU director, participated in both the cooperative and civil rights movement in New Orleans.<sup>135</sup> Sherrod was a mail carrier, a traditionally black middle-class position.<sup>136</sup> While postal workers were at the forefront of NAACP leadership in the 1940s, they carried a legacy of

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129 "New Board of Directors," *Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 10 (February 1942): 10, folder 43, box 2, SCL Records; "The First Baton Rouge Conference on Cooperative Education: A Report," (April 14-15, 1941), 8, folder 68, box 2, SCL Records.

130 "Tomorrow' Film to be Exhibited," *Times Picayune* (April 4, 1943): 24.

131 "Consumers' Union to Install Staff," 18.

132 Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 269.

133 "Win the War and Win the Peace," 2-3; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 269; Wallace J. Campbell, quoted in The Cooperative League, press release, "Southeastern Cooperative Education Association," 2.

134 Helen Godfrey-Smith, "Oral History: Helen Godfrey Smith of Shreveport Credit Union," Credit Union History, <http://cuhistory.blogspot.com/>.

135 "Consumers' Group Plans Celebration," 16.

136 1930 United States Census, s.v. "Fletcher Sherrod," New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana, accessed through Ancestry.com.

organized black political activism.<sup>137</sup> For example, the National Alliance of Postal Employees formed in 1913 to prevent racial discrimination in the field. As Hasan Kwame Jeffries argues, cooperative and mutual aid societies established strong social bonds among members and fostered a democratic atmosphere congenial to launching radical economic reform and racial equality measures.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, Sherrod was a recording secretary for the Postal Relief and Benevolent Association of New Orleans during the Great Depression, a mutual aid society providing medical and burial benefits to postal workers and their families.<sup>139</sup> Also, Sherrod's brother was a doctor at Dillard University's Flint Goodridge Hospital, which served the city's black population and offered cooperative hospitalization services for the poor.<sup>140</sup> While Sherrod encountered cooperatives through his benevolent association, his family's experience in the medical field also dramatized the need for an integrated, progressive cooperative economy.

### **Community Culture**

Despite the CCU's heterogeneity, Hermes crafted an imagined community of cooperators through social events, educational programs, member services, and a monthly newsletter, *The New Orleans Cooperator*. First, as newsletter editor, Hermes reiterated the cooperative store's economic and political principles, thereby unifying members around their shared commitment to the systemic transformation of corrupt economic and political systems.<sup>141</sup> For example, in 1944, Hermes predicted that postwar

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137 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 57.

138 Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 41.

139 "J.W. Mason Heads Postal Relief Body" *Times Picayune* (April 10, 1938): 12.

140 "Deaths," *Times Picayune* (February 12, 1950): 10.

141 "Centennial!!! 1844-1944," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 6.

America faced a grave political and economic crisis. He warned that unscrupulous corporations will be “enriched by wartime profits” and “Race and minority problems will be loaded with dynamite. Much of the World [will] hate or fear us.”<sup>142</sup> Hermes argued that citizens should immediately elect a Socialist government and implement a national cooperative economic system. The state should control fundamental industries, regulate employment, heavily tax corporations, maintain wartime price controls and rationing, and finally, regulate farm and city land speculation to stabilize property values.

To ensure long-term economic growth, Hermes declared, the federal government should return industries to “the people” as large-scale worker cooperatives.<sup>143</sup> Echoing Socialist leaders Norman Thomas and George Nelson, Hermes proposed a national network of cooperatives would stimulate the postwar economy, improve workers' standards of living, eliminate racial tension, and foster democratic feelings among Americans.<sup>144</sup> For Hermes, too, only a system of “international economic co-operation based on democracy and economic justice” could create “the opportunity for the people to help themselves to permanent peace.”<sup>145</sup> By making Socialist and consumer cooperative arguments accessible, Hermes appealed to a broad range of audiences who otherwise had little in common.

Second, *The New Orleans Cooperator's* monthly “Gossip” column highlighted CCU members' shared experience of World War II to cement a nascent sense of

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142 “Win the War and Win the Peace,” 2-3.

143 Ibid.; “Cooperatives and Their Promotion to be Studied in Louisiana,” *The Southeastern Cooperator* supplement (April 1942), 1, folder 46, box 2, SCL Records.

144 “Norman Thomas Would Organize ‘Useful Workers,’” *Times Picayune* (March 9, 1936): 13; “U.S. Needs New Economic Order, Nelson Asserts,” *Times Picayune* (September 11, 1936): 3.

145 “Centennial,” 6.



community. Bordering the Gulf of Mexico and featuring many war production facilities and training camps, Louisiana was considered vulnerable to Axis attack; several torpedo explosions on the mouth of the Mississippi and the Gulf thus fanned public suspicions of any group appearing anti-American.<sup>146</sup> By illustrating politically, ethnically, and racially diverse cooperators' commitment to the war effort, Hermes could head off any claims of subversion. For example, columnists bade farewell to members deployed for active duty, noted that Henry Hermes's daughter was employed as a nurse while his son had enlisted in the Navy, and reported that CCU member Angelina Prior was sewing uniforms for the war effort.<sup>147</sup> Hermes himself joined the National Defense Council of Louisiana as an air-raid warden in Freret.<sup>148</sup> Additionally, the CCU credit union sold war bonds, explaining that they "belong in every budget, as Democracy belongs in every heart."<sup>149</sup> Effectively, the CCU associated cooperation with patriotism and civic duty.

Third, Hermes constantly highlighted the cooperative movement's progress to rally members' support for their own grocery store. Accordingly, Hermes discussed other cooperative models he encountered after attending SCEA conferences and touring eastern cooperatives.<sup>150</sup> Further, CCU's public meetings and member picnics featured representatives from labor unions, churches, and civic organizations who spoke on the

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146 Jerry Purvis Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II: Politics and Society, 1939-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 251-253.

147 "Gossip," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 7.

148 "Bond Buyer Signs," *Times Picayune* (May 19, 1942): 2; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 252.

149 P.N. Biewer, "Our Credit Union," *New Orleans Co-operator* (January and February 1944): 3.

150 "Consumers Cooperative Union, Inc. Joins SCEA," 3; *Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 6 (1941): 4, folder 43, box 2, SCL Records; Henry Hermes, "A Personal Message to All of Our Members, From the Editor and Secretary," *New Orleans Co-operator* (June and July 1942), 2, folder 1, box 1, Midlo Collection.

individual's role within the cooperative movement.<sup>151</sup> Echoing the SCEA, Hermes declared that cooperatives could break the cycle of consumer dependency by “supplying the inspiration and the ‘know how’ for folks to help themselves.”<sup>152</sup> By attending CCU workshops and taking advantage of its financial services, citizens could attain economic independence. By extension, the CCU argued that members’ daily economic activities would aid the broader cooperative movement.

Finally, Hermes believed that CCU membership would foster civic pride necessary to reform corrupt economic and political institutions. For this reason, *The New Orleans Cooperator* covered city and national politics and urged readers to vote in upcoming elections. Rejecting the Rochdale principle of neutrality, Hermes threw himself into political campaigning. He was politically pragmatic, however. In the wake of the Soviet Union's Great Purge of 1937, the Socialist Party severed ties with CPUSA. Consequently, the Socialist Party disintegrated amidst generational factionalism.<sup>153</sup> Similarly, Hermes abandoned the Socialist Party in 1939 and joined the Democratic Party to achieve New Deal reforms in the South.<sup>154</sup> To that end, after winning his home district’s endorsement, Hermes ran for state representative on an anti-Earl K. Long administration ticket.<sup>155</sup> He supported Roosevelt's Economic Security Act, and along with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Sam Houston Jones, promoted homestead

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151 *Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 6 (1941): 4; “Consumers Cooperative Union, Inc. Joins SCEA,” 3.

152 “Centennial,” 6.

153 Raymond F. Gregory, *Norman Thomas: The Great Dissenter* (United States: Algora Publishing, 2008), 177, 186.

154 “13th Ward Group Backs Candidates,” *Times Picayune* (October 12, 1939): 6.

155 “Independents Set Rally for Monday,” *Times Picayune* (December 10, 1939): 11; “13th Ward Group Backs Candidates,” *Times Picayune* (October 12, 1939): 6.

associations, social security, old age pensions, and an end to government corruption.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, Hermes continued to advocate for a socialized government, even as he campaigned alongside mainstream political parties.

Although Hermes lost the election, he ran again for State Senate in 1943, representing the Twelfth and Thirteenth Wards.<sup>157</sup> He broadcast his Democratic platform on station WNOE, summarizing a decade of political activism: along with his fellow Independent Democrats, Hermes would repeal the city and state sales tax, which he believed were sponsored by large corporations. Additionally, he would pass legislation to create jobs for civilians and veterans after the war, “provide a slum clearance program,” and lower utilities rates in New Orleans.<sup>158</sup> The CCU closely followed Hermes’s political activities, reporting in January 1944, “our Secretary was a candidate for the State Senate in the recent election, well, he is still running. Did you hear him on the radio?”<sup>159</sup> While his party lost during the first state primary, Hermes informed CCU members that their electoral participation was crucial: “To preserve Democracy we MUST preserve the ballot-box—and vote.” Consumer political involvement and economic empowerment were foundational to Hermes's cooperative philosophy.

### **Food and CCU Philosophy**

Even as New Orleans’s wartime munitions factories, military bases, and shipyards provided civilians higher wages and spurred greater consumption, the CCU’s humble

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156 “Why Jones, Noe Joined Forces in Drive Explained,” *Times Picayune* (January 25, 1940): 3.

157 “Hermes Announces Senate Candidacy,” *Times Picayune* (October 30, 1943): 2.

158 *Ibid.*, 2; Ad, “Tonight—WNOE,” *Times Picayune* (January 10, 1944): 18; “Gossip,” 7.

159 “Gossip,” 7.

grocery store sustained a loyal clientele throughout the war.<sup>160</sup> Appealing to working-class women juggling war jobs and domestic duties, the CCU sold convenience foods like chocolate syrups and Jell-O.<sup>161</sup> Additionally, the CCU purchased produce and dry goods in bulk to offer patrons quality items at chain store prices. Elevating the CCU above avaricious corporate retailers, Hermes asserted, “We give the service that people are entitled to and paying for but not receiving in the ‘chains.’”<sup>162</sup>

At the same time, the CCU joined national consumer activists who parlayed their influence within federal food agencies to press for national social welfare and public works programs curbing capitalism’s excesses.<sup>163</sup> As a consumer-owned grocery store, it fully supported the central concerns of the wartime consumers’ movement, particularly federally mandated rationing, grade labeling, and price controls, to protect Americans against unhealthful food, inflation, the black market, and hoarding.<sup>164</sup> In contrast, unscrupulous New Orleans retailers inflated their prices, and grocers blacklisted consumer activists who protested.<sup>165</sup> While other independent grocery stores threatened that the Office of Price Administration’s (OPA) “red tape and technicalities” would force them to use the black market, the CCU faithfully followed federal rationing policies.<sup>166</sup>

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160 Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 9.

161 Ibid.; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 37-38.

162 “Our Store,” June and July 1942, 1.

163 Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 246.

164 Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 15.

165 Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 259.

166 “Grocers Blamed for Point Losses,” *Times Picayune* (July 29, 1945): 11.

During World War II, Americans conflated domestic consumption with good citizenship, and the CCU was no different.<sup>167</sup> Key to the cooperative's patriotic identity was female food consumption. While both men and women belonged to the CCU, American women were responsible for daily food purchases, often squeezing shopping trips between wartime work shifts.<sup>168</sup> For example, when food administrators encouraged Americans to reduce their dependence on scarce canned items by purchasing or growing their own produce, Hermes reported that women flocked to purchase CCU's fruits and vegetables, sourced from open-air city markets.<sup>169</sup> The store also persuaded women to adhere to federal meat substitute campaigns, which featured fruits, such as the avocado. Wartime Californian growers marketed avocados to women as a healthful and elegant salad topping as well as a viable meat substitute for rationing families: avocados were "veritable grenades of glamor."<sup>170</sup> Similarly, the CCU crowed, "we were the first on Freret Street with Avocados which sold like hot-cakes."<sup>171</sup> The CCU constructed its members as female citizen consumers dedicated to upholding OPA regulations and the greater war effort.

CCU women's patriotic character was further bolstered by their status as ethnic paragons of wartime consumption. Government food administrators urged native-born Americans to frequent Italian markets and emulate "Deep South" cooks to procure

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167 Charles McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 302.

168 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 166.

169 "Our Store," January and February 1944, 1; Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 115.

170 Jeffrey Charles, "Searching for Gold in Guacamole," in *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*, eds. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2014), 143, 146.

171 "Our Store," June and July 1942, 1; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 257.

inexpensive food substitutes and eliminate food waste.<sup>172</sup> Broadening the definition of American identity, the CCU stocked foods that honored its members' ethnic and racial diversity. For example, the grocery store supplied New Orleans staples such as fresh fish, lobster, and Carnival, Easter, and picnic hams, while catering to immigrant families with imported specialty goods like sardines packed in oil and Pompeian olive oil.<sup>173</sup> The CCU's delicatessen also served ethnic and African American customers by providing organ meats, neck bones, and hot sausage.<sup>174</sup> While the general public long distained spicy, garlicky foods or mixed stews as redolent of inassimilable otherness, food reformers now hailed immigrant and black housewives for their efficient food-stretching methods born out of pre-war economic necessity.<sup>175</sup> The CCU's food selections reflected its belief that a racially and ethnically heterogeneous cooperative could demonstrate patriotic values while still promoting systemic political and economic transformation.

### **Culture Clashes and Compromises**

Nonetheless, competition from chain stores and supermarkets, military conscription, and wartime rationing plagued the CCU's operations. Like many small grocery stores during World War II, the CCU struggled to keep basic items in stock, maintain adequate staff, and manage store rushes. As Deutsch observes, shopping could be a peculiarly tense experience as limited supplies of paper, coffee, and other items

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172 Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 144-147; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 257.

173 Elizabeth M. Williams, *New Orleans: A Food Biography* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press 2012), 92; "Our Store," June and July 1942, 1; "Our Store," January and February 1944, 1; "These Dealers Are Featuring Swift's Premium Ham," *Times Picayune* (April 7, 1950): 18; "R.O. Peace Meat Markets," *Times Picayune* (February 27, 1949): 14.

174 "R.O. Peace Meat Markets," (February 27, 1949), 14; "Grand Opening," *Times Picayune* (January 7, 1949): 38.

175 Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 64; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 145.

sparked arguments and even scuffles between harried clientele and store employees.<sup>176</sup>

Stores were frequently mobbed with anxious shoppers waiting in long lines for frazzled, short-staffed cashiers to count their ration points and purchase totals.

Hermes enumerated similar wartime headaches. When the CCU's delivery truck broke down in 1944, the store was unable to procure fresh produce, which measurably decreased its sales.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, the CCU struggled to retain grocery clerks because war industries offered higher wages. Hermes conceded, "no-one desires to work behind the counter at a minimum pay," despite the cooperative's ethical mission. Like many Louisianan stores, the CCU was also forced to scale back its delivery service "as we are unable to get delivery boys to work all during the day."<sup>178</sup> To reduce staff workloads, Hermes implored members to take customer phone orders during the store's busiest hours on Sundays and weekday mornings. For their part, customers should "not wait to be called for your order; call up early and daily."<sup>179</sup>

Given the moral and economic benefits that consumer cooperation offered, Hermes was confounded by many members' apparent indifference to the store's survival. He frequently bemoaned, "It is a big job to make people co-op minded...WHY???"<sup>180</sup> While the CCU's sales trebled between 1941 and 1944, profits remained flat, guaranteeing that the CCU existed on a shoe-string budget.<sup>181</sup> Although the CCU kept its

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176 Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise*, 166.

177 "Our Store," January and February 1944, 1.

178 Ibid; Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II*, 245.

179 "Our Store," June and July 1942, 1.

180 Ibid.

181 "CCU Profit Statement for July 1, 1943 to April 30, 1943," folder 2, box 1, Midlo Collection; "Our Store," January and February 1944, 1.

prices consistent with those of larger retail operations, its narrow profit margin meant that the store could not afford to cut prices any lower. Consequently, looking for bargains, “some of our members are still running to that store at the corner or go way out of the way to a chain store.”<sup>182</sup> Hermes reminded members that by purchasing more shares in the company, the CCU could lower prices and increase its inventory.<sup>183</sup> Yet Freret residents continued to “patronize their competitors” rather than “protect[ing] their investment and interest, not mentioning CO-OPERATION.”

Hermes confronted two divergent understandings of the CCU’s purpose. While Socialists hoped to dismantle capitalism, most Freret residents, like the majority of the cooperative movement’s rank-and-file, patronized the CCU primarily to reduce their grocery bill.<sup>184</sup> Consequently, the CCU, like its cooperative contemporaries, struggled to remain relevant after World War II. Fearing that the CCU would compromise its ideals to retain members, Hermes lamented, “We had not expected that the co-op would become just another neighborhood grocery-store. But that’s what it is to-day.”<sup>185</sup>

### **The End of the CCU**

Despite Hermes’s worries, the postwar future initially seemed promising for the CCU. By 1949, it had expanded to include at least four other cooperative enterprises clustered along Freret Street. In addition to the CCU’s credit union and cooperative laundry service next door, Mrs. Myrtle Crow managed the Consumers’ Co-operative Ice Cream Parlor inside the grocery store, while independent meat dealer Rusty Rusbridge

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182 “Our Store,” June and July 1942, 1.

183 “Our Store,” January and February 1944, 1.

184 Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*, 26.

185 “Our Store,” January and February 1944, 1.



ran the cooperative's deli.<sup>186</sup> Unfortunately, even as the CCU demonstrated that a comprehensive cooperative economy was not only possible but also profitable, the political and economic conditions sustaining the cooperative were rapidly eroding. In 1951 the CCU closed, and, ironically, a deli chain opened in its place.<sup>187</sup>

The CCU began disintegrating against a backdrop of growing political polarization, the ascension of the supermarket model, Freret Neighborhood's demographic change, and Hermes's shifting cooperative priorities. By the late 1940s and 1950s, it was increasingly dangerous to be a cooperative activist fighting for economic and political equality in the South. Desperate to preserve "the southern way of life," conservative white Southerners attempted to quash civil rights and unionizing efforts by raising the dual specter of black rebellion and foreign agitation. According to Jeff Woods, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) initiated the southern red scare, a twenty-year period in which "southern nationalists," politicians committed to stamping out Communist-led racial equality, consolidated their hold over the region's politics.<sup>188</sup> Established in 1938, HUAC investigated Roosevelt's New Deal coalition of labor, Jewish, Popular Front, and black activists. By 1947, federal legislators attempted to outlaw the Communist Party, while President Truman initiated a federal loyalty program that barred employees from affiliating with "subversive" organizations.

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186 Ad, "R.O. Peace Meat Markets," *Times Picayune* (February 10, 1949): 8; "Consumers' Co-operative Ice Cream Parlor," *Polks' New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: R.L. Polk and Co., 1949); "Co-operative Laundry and Linen Service, Inc.," Louisiana Companies, accessed August 21, 2014, available at <http://labusiness.us/co-operati.list-of-louisiana-companies.az>; Peter N. Biewer, "Our Credit Union," 3-4.

187 "These Dealers Are Featuring," 18.

188 Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1949-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004): 26-27.

Cooperatives did not escape anti-Communist scrutiny. For example, during a Congressional Ways and Means Committee investigation into the tax status of cooperatives between 1949 and 1950, Louisianan businessmen wrote to Representative Hale Boggs protesting the “socialistic movement” of unions and cooperatives that threatened to “destroy the [capitalist] system which has been in effect almost ever since this nation was founded.”<sup>189</sup> Critics claimed that cooperatives were tools of wealthy plantation owners and entrepreneurs seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of “the small business man and the small farmer...the backbone of the Country.”<sup>190</sup> One insurance agent complained that cooperative insurance companies purposely undersold traditional corporations and had exploited tax loopholes to swindle the federal government out of billions of tax dollars.<sup>191</sup>

Similarly, Republican Ways and Means Committee member Noah M. Mason claimed that “Co-ops run a vast machine” of the nation's production and distribution networks, avoided taxes, and colluded with unions to dominate the consumer market.<sup>192</sup> He charged, “Our biggest unions are planning to operate giant co-op supermarkets in union towns throughout America, in competition with taxpaying grocers” and would “capture” half of domestic retail trade. A New Orleans manufacturer's agent summed up the general tenor of cooperative opponents when he observed that U.S. Senator Allen

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189 F.W. Sinclair, Sr., letter to Hale Boggs, 28 Feb. 1950, folder 9, box 530, Hale Boggs and Lindy Boggs Papers, 1914-1998, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as Boggs Papers.

190 E.H. Murphy, letter to Hale Boggs, 17 Jan. 1950, folder 9, box 530, Boggs Papers.

191 F.W. Sinclair, letter to Hale Boggs.

192 Noah M. Mason, “Uncle Sam’s Untapped Millions,” *Readers Digest* (April 1950): 108, folder 10, box 530, Boggs Papers.

Ellender, a conservative segregationist from Louisiana, “has said that if Communism comes to this country, it will come from within.”<sup>193</sup>

Criticism of cooperatives was so virulent that in 1950 CLUSA representative Jerry Voorhis testified before Congress, maintaining that cooperatives were bulwarks against Communism and totalitarianism, which he defined as the “concentration of economic power in the hands of private individuals, depriving the people of economic opportunity and causing them to lose the right to determine their own course of action.”<sup>194</sup> He posited that corporate monopolies were more Communistic than were cooperatives. To preserve democracy, a system of cooperatives would decentralize economic and political power and “both ownership and responsibility [are] restored to the people once again.” Rather than operating as agents of extremism, voluntary cooperatives were “a middle road between dependence upon government on the one hand and control by private concentrations of power on the other.” Despite Voorhis's impassioned defense of cooperatives, numbers of non-agrarian cooperatives dwindled over the course of the 1950s, while agricultural cooperatives purged radical activists critical of American domestic and foreign policies from their membership rolls.<sup>195</sup>

Unapologetic radical cooperators faced severe political repercussions. During the Great Depression, Louisiana Farmers' Union organizer Gordon McIntire worked with the CPUSA and the Share Croppers Union to unionize black sharecroppers and establish

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193 E.H. Murphy, letter to Hale Boggs.

194 “Testimony of Jerry Voorhis, Executive Secretary of the Cooperative League of the USA, Before the Ways and Means Committee--House of Representatives, February 23, 1950,” cited in Jerry Voorhis, letter to Hale Boggs, 4 Mar. 1950, folder 9, box 530, Boggs Papers.

195 Curl, *For All the People*, 191.

farmers' cooperatives.<sup>196</sup> In 1953 anti-Communist federal investigators targeted McIntire, now a United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) official, for his former Popular Front affiliations. McIntire described the federal probe's circular logic, which conflated leftist activism with subversive activity:

All they have against me is that I went to [Socialist labor school] Commonwealth College and sponsored the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and worked for the Farmers Union. But all this seems to build up to Communist conspiracy....The La.F.U. is said to have been Communist because I was its Secretary and I am said to be a Communist because I worked for the La.F.U.<sup>197</sup>

Nonetheless, the FAO fired McIntire, and the FBI tapped his phone and monitored his mail. Also, claiming McIntire was a security risk, the State Department restricted his passport and many countries refused him entry.<sup>198</sup>

The revanchist Cold War political climate decimated integrated leftist political organizations as white and black New Orleans liberals fled the ranks of alleged Communist fronts. Further, the successors of radical New Deal organizations such as Americans for Democratic Action, an integrated anti-Communist liberal organization, feared alienating moderate white political supporters and were hamstrung by their tentative and ambivalent integrationist policies.<sup>199</sup> At the CCU, as redbaiting became increasingly pervasive, overtly Socialist members faded from view, and Hermes's fellow

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196 Greta de Jong, "With the Aid of God and the F.S.A.' The Louisiana Farmers' Union and the African American Freedom Struggle in the New Deal Era," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 111.

197 Gordon McIntire, letter to Clyde and Anne Johnson, 14 Apr. 1956, folder 1938-1956, box 9, Clyde Johnson Papers, 1930-1990, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC. Hereafter cited as Johnson Papers.

198 "Italy Lifts Expulsion Order Against Former FAO Officer," *Associated Press* (February 18, 1956), folder 1938-1956, box 9, Johnson Papers.

199 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 141.

barbers and Freret business owners were elected to the cooperative's board of directors.<sup>200</sup> Further, while key African American CCU members like Fletcher Sherrod and Condy Sartor continued to agitate for greater racial equality within New Orleans, Henry Hermes moderated his fiery political rhetoric to advocate social justice through legislative reform.<sup>201</sup> Finally, by the 1950s, the CCU ceased publicly calling for total economic and political transformation to concentrate on the logistics of running a business as dramatic population change and economic stagnation swept Freret.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, many postwar cooperatives eschewed politics altogether, instead applying modern business methods to compete within a capitalist framework.<sup>203</sup>

As the CCU struggled to maintain a clear sense of purpose, shifting demographics patterns in New Orleans siphoned white Freret members from the CCU and the neighborhood in general. New suburban tracts sprung up along Lake Pontchartrain and the outskirts of New Orleans, and large numbers of working- and middle-class whites left urban communities in the Ninth Ward, Mid-City, and the Irish Channels to maintain segregated lifestyles.<sup>204</sup> Inner city black neighborhoods now encircled exclusively wealthy white neighborhoods.<sup>205</sup> While housing stock boomed for affluent whites, racial covenants and inadequate public housing resulted in a housing crisis for African Americans, who squeezed into dilapidated, overcrowded housing stock. By 1950 vacancy

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200 "Consumers' Union to Install Staff," 18.

201 "Hermes Renamed by District Group," *Times Picayune* (March 17, 1955): 7, 80.

202 Ad, "R.O. Peace Meat Markets," *Times Picayune* (February 10, 1949): 8.

203 Giese, "How the Old Co-ops Went Wrong," 320.

204 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 30.

205 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 187.

rates for African American housing dipped to only 0.3 percent.<sup>206</sup> Finally, the 1960 mandate to integrate Orleans Parish public schools only accelerated the white exodus from Freret and other neighborhoods.<sup>207</sup>

Postwar settlement patterns permanently altered Freret Neighborhood's consumer culture as well. After the Freret street car line closed in 1946, CCU lost significant patronage from cross-town shoppers, while the popularity of the family car drew Freret residents to the suburbs and away from the pedestrian-oriented neighborhood.<sup>208</sup> Supermarkets populated new, car-centric suburbs that made Freret Street's community of family-owned businesses and racially diverse residents seem shabby and outmoded in comparison.<sup>209</sup> Across the city, the rise of the large grocery store spelled the end of corner grocery stores, street vendors, and city markets operating without the support of larger commercial associations like the Louisiana Grocers Cooperative. Nationally, most neighborhood cooperatives failed in the midst of the postwar economic boom and dropping food prices.<sup>210</sup> Under these conditions, the CCU could not successfully compete with supermarkets and chains. It disbanded quietly in 1965, after the store itself had been shuttered for over a decade.<sup>211</sup>

## **Henry Hermes and the Credit Union Movement**

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206 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 31; "Negro Housing Steps Planned," *Times Picayune* (April 2, 1953): 26.

207 Warner, "Freret's Century," 350-351; Justin Poché, "Separate but Sinful: The Desegregation of Louisiana Catholicism, 1938-1962," in *Louisiana Beyond Black and White: New Interpretations of Twentieth-Century Race and Race Relations*, ed. Michael S. Martin (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011), 35-36.

208 Warner, "Freret's Century," 348.

209 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 50.

210 Curl, *For All the People*, 189.

211 "Legal Notices," *Times Picayune* (October 3, 1965): 108.

Although the CCU failed amidst proliferating chain stores and supermarkets, its credit union launched the next phase of Henry Hermes's cooperative career. As the CCU floundered, Hermes co-founded the Freret Business Men's Association (FBMA) credit union, which he believed would help working-class citizens achieve financial security and stabilize the spiraling local economy. Offering easy loan repayment and low interest rates, credit unions successfully competed against commercial banks, department stores, and small loan companies.<sup>212</sup> Soon thereafter, Hermes joined the Louisiana Credit Union League (LCUL), a statewide cooperative organization serving low- and moderate-income residents.<sup>213</sup> While Hermes tempered his Socialist worldview with a more moderate vision of cooperative-led reform, he consistently demanded economic and political change. As a Freret Credit Union and LCUL representative, Hermes balanced his efforts to rebuild Freret Neighborhood with a dedication to improving average Louisianans' economic wellbeing and political influence. Employed by a state credit union body, Hermes could now lobby influential political leaders at city, state, and federal levels to shape legislation that promoted credit unions across Louisiana, and by extension, better integrate low-income earners into state political and economic institutions.

First established in 1900, credit unions are cooperative financial institutions dedicated to redressing the gap in consumer lending for low-income individuals.<sup>214</sup> While credit unions populated Louisiana in the 1920s, the passage of the Federal Credit Union Act of 1934 facilitated a national system of federal credit unions. The act further

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212 Edgar Wallace Wood, "Credit Union Development in Louisiana" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1967), 54.

213 "Deaths: Henry W. Hermes," *Times Picayune* (June 1, 1987): 19.

214 Wood, "Credit Union Development in Louisiana," 5-19.

encouraged credit union formation by permitting the organizations to be chartered and regulated under either state or federal law. In Louisiana, for instance, credit unions are chartered, regulated, and supervised by the Office of Financial Institutions or by the National Credit Union Administration (NCUA), an independent federal agency. Consequently, in 1934, cooperators formed the Louisiana Credit Union League (LCUL), a state organization of credit unions that promoted economic cooperation, liaised with regulatory agencies, provided legal aid for credit union members, and affiliated with the Credit Union National Association (CUNA), a national trade and lobbyist organization. Further, as president of the Farm Credit Administration Credit Union, LCUL co-founder Harold Moses helped shape New Deal federal credit union legislation. Under his guidance, credit unions rapidly spread across the Louisiana and the nation.

Like radicals and labor unionists around the country, Hermes also believed credit unions would expand working-class access to consumer credit.<sup>215</sup> In the 1930s and 1940s, interest rates at loan offices and financial companies could be three times higher than credit union interest rates, and fixed administrative costs often made consumer loans prohibitively expensive for less affluent Americans.<sup>216</sup> In contrast, credit unions helped vulnerable individuals and communities maintain financial solvency by avoiding predatory lending agencies.<sup>217</sup> Therefore, in keeping with its pursuit of economic justice,

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215 Gunnar Trumbull, *Consumer Lending and America: Credit and Welfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 19-20; Lee Brooks, letter to SCEA Office, 2 Feb. 1941, folder 4, box 1, SCL Records.

216 Biewer, "Our Credit Union," 3-4.

217 Wood, "Credit Union Development," 1, 7.



in 1944 the CCU opened a credit union to “help a member help himself.”<sup>218</sup> Members pooled money from inexpensive stock shares to open savings accounts, obtain loans at moderate interest rates, and receive dividends in proportion to their stock investment. For manager Peter Biewer, the CCU credit union was “a miniature democracy” because “through group activity we can do much to solve common problems.”

Part of credit unions’ great appeal among working-class Americans was that they were run by and for the members themselves, unlike for-profit financial institutions.<sup>219</sup> First, directors and committee members were democratically elected, and each member had one vote, regardless of how much stock he or she held in the institution. Second, because new credit unions tended to be small, members were dependent on each other to stay solvent, so credit unions limited their membership to those who shared common bonds. For example, while most credit unions were occupational, like Henry Hermes’s Barbers’ and Beauticians’ Credit Union, others were residential or associational, such as the FBMA Credit Union. Therefore, unlike at large financial institutions, credit union members were likely to have established mutual trust.

Significantly, the Louisiana credit union community was a refuge for Popular Front and New Deal activists run underground by Cold War anti-Communist hysteria. In October 1951, LCUL’s Credit Union Day revealed New Orleans’s Depression-era cooperative network still intact, twenty years later.<sup>220</sup> After being inducted into the Founders Club, Henry Hermes hob-knobbed with old cooperators like Right Reverend

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218 Biewer, “Our Credit Union,” 4.

219 Wood, “Credit Union Development,” 3-7.

220 “Credit Unions Will Celebrate: Editor of International Publication to Speak,” *Times Picayune* (October 15, 1951): 18.

William J. Castel, one of the Southeastern Cooperative Educational Association (SCEA)'s "key people in the Roman Catholic Church."<sup>221</sup> Hermes also reunited with former LCUL organizer E.K. Watkins, who had worked closely with the CCU in the 1940s and was now an international credit union leader.<sup>222</sup> In fact, Louisiana credit unions had championed the southern cooperative movement. In turn, the SCEA believed credit unions demonstrated "the growth of the cooperative philosophy and what it might do to help the South."<sup>223</sup> Like other blacklisted or otherwise unemployable leftists in search of meaningful work during Cold War anti-Communist hysteria, former cooperative New Dealers and Popular Fronters alike gravitated to the credit union movement. While its rhetoric of "self-help" seemed less controversial than radical cooperatives' call for comprehensive economic and political revolution, it still filled a pressing need among low-income Americans for both consumer credit and political empowerment.<sup>224</sup>

Even as Louisiana's postwar industrializing economy expanded middle-class purchasing power and access to consumer credit, working-class whites and people of color remained excluded from mainstream lending institutions.<sup>225</sup> Shreveport Federal Credit Union head Helen Godfrey-Smith recalls, "there was no opportunity for African Americans to have legitimate access to financial services that were responsive to what

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221 Lee M. Brooks, letter to The Right Reverend John L. Jackson, 2 Feb. 1941, folder 4, box 1, SCL Records.

222 "Consumers' Union to Install Staff," 18; "Credit Unions Will Celebrate," 18.

223 Brooks, letter to Jackson; Brooks, letter to SCEA Office.

224 Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 4-5; "Officers Installed at Meeting of Freret Business Men's Group," *Times Picayune* (June 19, 1958): 54.

225 Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 122-124, 160-161; Wood, "Credit Union Development," 5.

they needed.”<sup>226</sup> Considering African Americans “high risk” clients, private banks frequently denied them low-interest loans and mortgages.<sup>227</sup> Further, while white veterans secured federally-provided housing financing through the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, African Americans were forced to pay large monthly payments and high interest rates on exorbitantly-priced homes.<sup>228</sup> While black credit unions had traditionally offered their communities’ a measure of financial stability, white-run credit unions finally perceived this service gap and began consciously recruiting African Americans to join their cooperatives.<sup>229</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, LCUL enrolled thousands of working-class whites and African Americans into credit unions, extending reasonable loans to combat rampant inflation and job insecurity.<sup>230</sup> Significantly, as Godfrey-Smith asserts, “in spite of the segregation of the external world, within...[community] credit unions, there was some integration.”<sup>231</sup> Because all members had the same account policies and voting privileges, African Americans could be elected to otherwise majority white credit union boards. Committed to securing vulnerable Americans’ economic wellbeing, Louisiana credit unions granted increasing numbers of low-rate loans even during periods of economic recession between 1957 and 1962.<sup>232</sup> Consequently, by 1962, credit unions had

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226 Godfrey-Smith, “Oral History.”

227 Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*, 170-171.

228 Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 60, 196.

229 Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 101; Godfrey-Smith, “Oral History.”

230 Wood, “Credit Union Development,” 36-39.

231 Godfrey-Smith, “Oral History.”

232 Wood, “Credit Union Development,” 41; Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 160-161.

superseded small loan companies as the second important purveyors of consumer loans in the state, eventually enrolling 200,000 Louisianans in financial cooperatives.<sup>233</sup>

However, although the Louisiana credit union movement embraced expanding consumer credit to low-income groups, its state governing bodies resisted racial integration. Even progressive white credit union and cooperative activists had trepidations about socializing with black peers.<sup>234</sup> Further, while local credit unions were sometimes integrated, state credit union meetings were strictly segregated. Richard Turnley, a civil rights activist who founded the Baton Rouge-based Southern Teachers and Parents Federal Credit Union in 1959, recalled that black board of directors and managers were forced to wait outside LCUL meetings in the late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>235</sup> Sympathetic white credit union members snuck out to share the League's debates, literature, and research so that African American colleagues might disseminate the information to their constituents. These cases reveal the disjuncture between the credit union movement's ideological commitment to racial equality and the realities of operating within a racist society.

### **Freret Business Men's Association Credit Union**

Similarly, while Henry Hermes was committed to racial and class equality, his membership in the segregated FBMA reflects the complicated racial politics of cooperative organizing in New Orleans. The FBMA credit union was an entry point into Hermes's statewide cooperative organizing over the course of the 1950s and 1960s.

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233 Wood, "Credit Union Development," 47-48, 51.

234 Ed Yeomans, letter to Lee M. Brooks, 27 Sept. 1940, folder 1, box 1, SCL Records.

235 Godfrey-Smith, "Oral History"; "Headline News," Louisiana Credit Union League, accessed August 20, 2014, [http://www.lcul.com/Headline\\_News\\_102.html?article\\_id=2667](http://www.lcul.com/Headline_News_102.html?article_id=2667).

However, while Hermes was committed to the wellbeing of Freret Neighborhood, he nevertheless became entangled in a segregationist system he and his Socialist colleagues were feverishly working to dismantle.

In need of sustained community support, the CCU had joined the FBMA around 1945.<sup>236</sup> The CCU's crusade against chain stores and large retail operations appealed to the FBMA's small business owners also suffering from corporate competition. In fact, financial institutions repeatedly denied Freret storeowners' loans because they viewed the racially diverse community as a liability. The FBMA realized that "the businessmen on [Freret] street had to have something to help themselves. Unless the small businessman has real estate, he has trouble getting money."<sup>237</sup> In response, in 1951, Hermes formed the FBMA Credit Union to foster neighborhood self-reliance.<sup>238</sup> While Hermes envisioned a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and gender inclusive cooperative system that would revitalize the democratic process and reject capitalism's exploitative profit motive, the FBMA limited credit union membership to white businessmen. Its mission was to protect the economic interests of its storeowners within a capitalistic system, not to abandon it.

As a director of both the FBMA and the Freret Civic Association, Hermes was also complicit in segregationist opposition to Freret's changing racial demographics. For example, in 1949, in the midst of a severe housing crisis, the Freret Civic Association unsuccessfully proposed using Federal Housing Act funds to demolish several predominantly black residential blocks as part of a "slum clearance" program.

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236 "Improved Garbage Collection Asked," *Times Picayune* (April 4, 1945): 24.

237 Frank Barreca, quoted in Warner, "Freret's Century," 342.

238 Warner, "Freret's Century," 341-243.

Additionally, the FBMA credit union held its meetings at Frank's Steak House, a social center for white residents.<sup>239</sup> Its Italian owners, the Barreca family, belonged to the credit union. They hosted city and state credit union meetings and conventions at the restaurant to draw money into the declining neighborhood economy and physically bring the credit union movement to Freret.<sup>240</sup> However, the steak house remained segregated into the 1960s, effectively excluding African Americans from the credit union.<sup>241</sup>

The FBMA and the Freret Civic Association's commitment to preserving Freret Neighborhood translating into upholding white supremacy. When the Orleans School Board decided to convert the Edwin T. Merrick Elementary into a black school in 1952, the Freret Civic Association filed a civil suit against the board. White organizations like the FBMA claimed that the board would not have to alter the racial composition of Merrick if it were to build schools "where they were most badly needed," in black neighborhoods.<sup>242</sup> The suit argued that the school board had purposely transferred white students to other schools to justify the conversion.<sup>243</sup> Contending that the school was in the heart of a white section of Freret and thus constituted "a natural community center," 90 white families threatened to move rather than accept the school's transformation.<sup>244</sup>

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239 "Freret Credit Union Re-elects Barreca," *Times Picayune* (January 16, 1952): 24.

240 "Local's Credit Union to Meet," *Times Picayune* (January 23, 1963): 8; "Meeting Planned for Credit Union," *Times Picayune* (January 5, 1957): 15; "Magnolia Room in Frank's Steak House Caters to All Organizations," *Times Picayune* (November 10, 1955): 49.

241 Warner, "Freret's Century," 344-346.

242 "School Location Policy Defended," *Times Picayune* (April 17, 1951): 3.

243 "Merrick School Restraint Asked," *Times Picayune* (June 21, 1952): 10.

244 *Ibid.*, 10; Warner, "Freret's Century," 346-347.

Renowned civil rights lawyer A.P. Tureaud successfully defended the Orleans Parish School Board, and Merrick became the Samuel J. Green Elementary School that year.<sup>245</sup>

Unwilling to accept the conversion, nearly 1,000 whites fled the neighborhood, spurring Freret's descent into decades of decades of disinvestment, crime, and racialized poverty.<sup>246</sup> Although Mayor DeLesseps S. Morrison had stimulated the postwar city economy by reforming government, facilitated international trade, and attracted new construction projects such as railroads, bridges, and public housing, Freret began to deteriorate.<sup>247</sup> Between 1952 and 1972, the commercial district lost a third of its businesses, and vacant lots depreciated property values and encouraged street crime.<sup>248</sup>

### **Louisiana Credit Union League and the War on Poverty**

Although the FBMA remained resolutely segregationist, Henry Hermes's participation in LCUL provided the institutional support he needed to continue fighting against racialized political and economic inequality. In 1955, Hermes became a board member of LCUL and was elected Louisiana director of the Credit Union National Association (CUNA) in 1966.<sup>249</sup> Because the LCUL supervised hundreds of credit unions across the state, it depended on a network of field service district representatives to work

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245 Warner, "Freret's Century," 347; "A.P. Tureaud Papers, 1798-1977," Amistad Research Center, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/archon/?p=collections/findingaid&id=6&q=&rootcontentid=1870#id1870>.

246 Warner, "Freret's Century," 347; "Freret Street is Wearing a New Look," *Times Picayune* (November 7, 1981): 13.

247 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 23.

248 Warner, "Freret's Century," 352.

249 "Hermes Renamed by District Group," 80; Photograph, "International Credit Union Day, New Orleans, 1967, 'A Happy Occasion,'" 17 October 1967, folder 56, box 114, Victor Schiro Papers, 1904-1995, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as Schiro Papers; "Credit Union Heads to Meet," *Times Picayune* (March 3, 1966): 40.

with credit unions directly.<sup>250</sup> Field representatives organized credit unions, gave operating procedure advice, arranged inter-credit union loans, suggested personnel placement, helped liquidations and acted as liaisons between LCUL and member credit unions. Hermes was one of these representatives and belonged to both the New Orleans Credit Union and the East Orleans Parish Credit Union, subdivisions of LCUL.<sup>251</sup> During the 1950s, Hermes coordinated credit union activity in Lafourche, Plaquemines, St. Bernard and Terrebonne Parishes, and supervised a third of New Orleans's 110 credit unions.<sup>252</sup> Before he died in 1987, Hermes organized over 20 new credit unions in Louisiana as LCUL's national director.<sup>253</sup> His cooperative work therefore integrated neighborhood credit unions into the city, state, and national credit union movement.

LCUL's postwar concern for working-class consumers extended to its engagement with federal Great Society and War on Poverty anti-poverty initiatives. In 1965, managing director Edgar Fontaine explicitly linked LCUL's New Deal past and Great Society present: not only would LCUL continue to assist low-income Americans, but "we have been pioneering Christian principles and practices in the market place long before the giants of finance became responsive to consumer needs."<sup>254</sup> In fact, President Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 galvanized cooperative activists confronting the effects of poverty and institutionalized racism within their communities.

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250 Wood, "Credit Union Development," 5.

251 "Day Dedicated to Credit Union," *Times Picayune* (October 16, 1957): 39; "Credit Unions Will Celebrate," 18.

252 "Henry W. Hermes," *Times Picayune* (March 18, 1955), 7; "Credit Unions Will Celebrate," 18; "About the League," Louisiana Credit Union League, accessed on September 18, 2012, [http://www.lcul.com/Chapter\\_Information\\_210.html](http://www.lcul.com/Chapter_Information_210.html).

253 "Deaths: Henry Hermes," 19.

254 "Credit Unions in Poverty War," *Times Picayune* (May 23, 1965): 6.



EOA's Title II had particularly far-reaching implications for cooperative organizations. Seeking to "eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty...by opening to everyone the opportunity to live in decency and dignity," it called for "maximum feasible participation" among low-income and marginalized populations in planning and administering local poverty initiatives.<sup>255</sup> Between 1964 and 1970, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funded a constellation of community programs across the country and enabled cooperatives to act as grant agencies supervising anti-poverty initiatives.<sup>256</sup> Similarly, cooperative and community action programs in New Orleans established credit unions and cooperative health programs, housing, and buying clubs to stimulate consumption among black, elderly, and impoverished citizens.<sup>257</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, New Orleans was an important test-site for low-income federal and state credit unions looking to expand across Louisiana. For example, in 1967, the city hosted the OEO's "Project Moneywise," a Bureau of Federal Credit Unions initiative to train leaders of marginalized communities in "wise money management" to

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255 U.S. Public Law 88-452, 88th Congress, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, 1, 9.

256 Rebecca Tiger, "A Bitter Pill Indeed: The War on Poverty and Community Action in New Orleans, 1964-1970" (Masters Thesis, The University of New Orleans, 1997), 5; Charles D. Tansey, "Community Development Credit Unions: An Emerging Player in Low Income Communities," Brookings Institute, September 2001, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2001/09/metropolitanpolicy-tansey>.

257 Germany, New Orleans *After the Promises*, 111. Martin E. Segal, "Senior Citizens Trained in Consumer Education," *Times Picayune* (June 24, 1968): 10. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 355; F.J. Tellez and E.P. Roy, "Economic and Socio-Economic Relationships Between Farmer Cooperatives and Low-Income Farmers in Louisiana," *Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness Research Report*, no. 359 (December 1966): 34; Terse Boasberg to Fred Hayes, et al, memorandum, March 8, 1966, 4, file "Admin. Confidential," box 34A, Local Problem Area File, 1966, Records of the Office of the Director, Office of Economic Opportunity, Records of the Community Services Administration, RG 381, National Archives, Washington, DC (RG 381).

achieve neighborhood “economic survival.”<sup>258</sup> Officials hoped that community leaders would in turn educate low-income residents to be smarter consumers by carefully budgeting, patronizing cooperatives and buying clubs, and borrowing at community-owned financial institutions. During month-long training sessions held in the Old Federal Building, participants made “comparative shopping trips,” studied materials, and watched educational films like *Moneywise Family*, in which “Mr. Mighty Wise” saves a family of mice from the depredations of “Mr. Tiger Shark,” an unscrupulous loan shark.<sup>259</sup>

Henry Hermes was part of two state and national credit union conferences that wholeheartedly endorsed the War on Poverty. In March 1966, the Eighth District of CUNA, representing the southern branch of the national credit union organization, announced an anti-poverty initiative that entailed lobbying for federal credit union legislation and increased low-income membership.<sup>260</sup> Two months later, LCUL met to discuss its role within the War on Poverty, and key members organizing inner city credit unions in New Orleans reported on their efforts.<sup>261</sup> President Johnson, as well as high-ranking Louisiana and federal officials who had 15 years prior attacked cooperatives for harboring Communists, now publicly congratulated the credit union cause.

Representing credit unions at the local, city, state, and national level, Hermes was for the first time able to execute lasting economic policy by working closely with the

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258 “History of SSA During the Johnson Administration 1963-1968,” Social Security Administration, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/history/ssa/lbjoper7.html>.

259 “Credit Unions to Have Program,” *Times Picayune* (January 6, 1967): 16.

260 *Ibid.*; “Credit Union Heads to Meet,” 40.

261 “Credit Union League Meets,” *Times Picayune* (May 29, 1966): 13.

Democratic Party.<sup>262</sup> For example, after Hermes convened a 1968 LCUL conference, United States Representative Hale Boggs discussed the role credit unions would play in increasing low-income consumers' purchasing power.<sup>263</sup> While Boggs had been wary of the "socialistic" tendencies of cooperatives, he now claimed that credit unions were "the most essential parts of our consumer economy" and should be established "wherever possible." For Boggs, social welfare programs were springboards to greater personal responsibility and civic engagement. Low-income credit unions in "ghetto areas" were crucial to ameliorating economic inequality because credit unions, "rather than offering a handout, offer a helping hand." Outlining his plan to pass several credit union measures and form an independent federal credit union administration to supervise the nation's 12,000 federal credit unions, Boggs proclaimed that credit unions had "virtually eliminated" the loan shark and "sharp practice operators."<sup>264</sup> Mirroring the language of consumer empowerment, Boggs incorporated credit unions into a reformed, ethical capitalism. Systemic poverty required incorporating black and marginalized individuals into the consumer market.

However, rather than investing in broader welfare programs, white government and credit union officials exploited the cooperative movement's principle of self-help because it resonated with their calls for the black community to develop greater self-reliance.<sup>265</sup>

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262 "Hermes Renamed by District Group," 80.

263 Hale Boggs, speech, "Remarks of US Rep. Hale Boggs Before the Louisiana Credit Union League, New Orleans, Louisiana," (June 8, 1968): 1, folder 11, box 1008, Boggs Papers.

264 Boggs, "Remarks," 3, 6-7, 10.

265 de Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 163; Tiger, "A Bitter Pill Indeed," 1; John Wofford, "The Politics of Local Responsibility: Administration of the Community Action Program-1965-1966," in *On Fighting Poverty*, ed. by James L. Sundquist (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 71.

As War on Poverty Taskforce member John Baker concedes, “We were just absolutely in a system, because we were convinced that in a really tough social structure intertwined with economic structure, the only solution for poor folk was to get co-ops.”<sup>266</sup> For example, in 1967 Project Moneywise director William O'Brien argued that to break the cycle of poverty, communities would need extensive job training and consumer education. It was credit unions' duty to train “economic illiterates” to “save for the first time in their lives,” because the poor could not distinguish their needs from their desires.<sup>267</sup> Similarly, LCUL director Edgar Fontaine echoed white politicians' atomized perspective when he contended that a successful black credit union movement would require “[developing] a savings habit in these people; [and changing] their entire concept of economics.”<sup>268</sup> Although the LCUL was committed to eradicating systemic poverty in New Orleans and Louisiana, it conflated economic and racial justice with consumer protections.<sup>269</sup> Ultimately the onus was on individuals to become better citizen consumers.

Despite officials' often condescending and racialized characterization of the poor, Louisiana credit unions offered African Americans important avenues for economic and political influence as directors of OEO-sponsored cooperative financial institutions and nurturing future black political leaders.<sup>270</sup> For example, in 1966, LCUL began working with War on Poverty organizations such as Total Community Action (TCA), New Orleans' official administrator of OEO funds, the Bureau of Federal Credit Unions, and

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266 Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*, 308.

267 “N.O. Moneywise Project Begins,” *Times Picayune* (January 10, 1967): 35.

268 “Four Areas to Get Credit Unions,” *Times Picayune* (February 26, 1966): 22.

269 Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 356-357; Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 112-113.

270 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 393.

the Social Welfare Planning Council to establish federally-chartered, community-run credit unions in Desire, St. Thomas, Melpomeme, and Fischer public housing projects.<sup>271</sup> LCUL regularly spoke before black and low-income public housing residents, offering advice for starting credit unions and following prudent saving and credit programs.<sup>272</sup>

For their part, black civil rights organizers used credit unions as tools to engender community self-sufficiency, autonomy, and individual political empowerment.<sup>273</sup> As Greta De Jong observes, many Community Action Programs (CAP) across Louisiana combined antipoverty work with political action among poor constituents.<sup>274</sup> Ninth Ward community organizer Mrs. George Ethel Warren further demonstrates how black community leaders used credit unions and civic organizations to prepare them for mainstream political action.<sup>275</sup> In 1971, Warren ran for state representative, contending that her “background and participation in varied activities in the community” best qualified her to represent the Lower Ninth Ward. A board member of TCA and the TCA-administered Ninth Ward Federal Credit Union, Warren was also active in black civic, voting registration, and educational organizations serving the Ninth Ward, New Orleans, and Orleans Parish.<sup>276</sup> Her community organizing experience made Warren “certain I know the problems and have some of the solutions” to pervasive economic and political

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271 “4 Areas to Get Credit Unions,” *Times Picayune* (February 26, 1966): 22; Quick Facts: TCA Target Areas [nd]: 2. Vertical Files, Organization Total Community Action, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, La; Tiger, “A Bitter Pill Indeed,” 2.

272 “Consumer Credit Session Today,” *Times Picayune* (October 16, 1966): 16.

273 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 120.

274 de Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 36.

275 “Neighborhood Activist of Lower 9th Ward Dies,” *Times Picayune*, December 28, 1996, <http://files.usgwarchives.net/la/orleans/newspapers/00000161.txt>

276 “Mrs. George Ethel Warren,” *Times Picayune* (October 7, 1971): 60.

disparity in the neighborhood. Black activists like Warren thus envisioned black-run credit unions as part of a wider civil rights agenda to improve neighborhood infrastructure and municipal services.<sup>277</sup>

However, despite credit unions' clear potential for black political and economic empowerment, black civil rights activists keenly felt the limits of War on Poverty's racially inclusive credit union initiatives. Even as African Americans increasingly assumed credit union leadership in the 1970s, they were isolated and misunderstood within the white male-dominated movement. For example, in 1970, tensions flared between smaller black credit unions and the National Credit Union Administration (NCUA) when the national regulating body attempted to close nearly a quarter of registered credit unions under the National Credit Union Share Insurance Fund.<sup>278</sup> Often serving low-income and disadvantaged members, black credit unions lacked crucial resources needed to adequately function, and ignoring the racial dimensions of their insolvency, regulators advocated their closure. Many CAP, OEO, and NAACP-sponsored black credit unions buckled under competition from other financial institutions and NCUA's strict regulatory environment. The War on Poverty offered African Americans only a tenuous entry into credit unions and, by extension, economic solvency.

### **Freret Credit Union and Changing Demographics**

In Freret, the neighborhood's growing black population and attendant rise in black-owned businesses forced the community's segregated civic organizations to cater

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<sup>277</sup> Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 75-76.

<sup>278</sup> Godfrey-Smith, "Oral History"; "NCUA Share Insurance Fund Information, Reports, and Statements," National Credit Union Administration, accessed August 22, 2014, <http://www.ncua.gov/dataapps/pages/si-ncua.aspx>.

to African Americans and admit them as members.<sup>279</sup> While initially a bastion of white Southern segregationist thought, the FBMA and its credit union were soon swept up in the Great Society's War on Poverty. For example, credit union member and lawyer Joseph Barreca served as LCUL's legal counsel and legislative representative in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>280</sup> He worked closely with U.S. Congresswoman Lindy Boggs in 1973 to pass the Federal Credit Union Act, which protected federally chartered credit unions and expanded their insurance services for low-income Americans.<sup>281</sup>

Even as Hermes moved out of Freret in 1960 to the ethnically heterogeneous, working-class neighborhood of Broadmoor, he and fellow Freret residents continued to create neighborhood initiatives that provided mechanisms for social, economic, and political change.<sup>282</sup> By the 1970s, Freret's community organizations like the FBMA Credit Union became an outlet for biracial cooperation for the first time since the Consumers' Cooperative Union closed in the early 1950s. For example, in 1971, long-time African American resident August Weber attempted to stem declining business by opening a successful garden store in an abandoned Church's Chicken along Freret Street.<sup>283</sup> To attract middle-class customers to the neighborhood, Miler cultivated personal relationships with patrons: "Being nice to people, picking up the package for the little old

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279 Warner, "Freret's Century," 349, 351.

280 Louisiana Credit Union League, "34th Annual Meeting and Convention Program, Jung Hotel, New Orleans," 1 Jun. 1968, folder 11, box 1008, Boggs Papers; Louisiana Credit Union League, photograph, "39th Annual Meeting and Convention, June 22-24," 22-24 Jun. 1973, folder 14, box 2096, Boggs Papers.

281 Edgar L. Fontaine, letter to Lindy Boggs, 9 Oct., 1973, folder 19, box 2682, Boggs Papers; Lindy Boggs, letter to Edgar L. Fontaine, 16 Oct. 1973, folder 19, box 2682, Boggs Papers.

282 "Henry W. Hermes," U.S. Public Records Index, Volume 1, accessed through Ancestry.com.

283 Warner, "Freret's Century," 353; "August Weber Garden Center," *Times Picayune* (October 24, 1971): 79.

lady...Satisfy the customers...and they'll come back."<sup>284</sup> His commitment to reviving the neighborhood led to his election as co-president of the FBMA's successor, the Freret Street Merchants Association (FSMA), in 1981.<sup>285</sup> Between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, the integrated organization worked with city and federal government revitalization programs in an effort to halt the area's population loss among both blacks and whites. Heartened, Weber watched as "everybody [did] some facelifting."<sup>286</sup>

Freret's efforts to stabilize its community were similar to those of other civic leaders striving to save their disinvested neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s. As sociologists Chava Nachmias and J. John Palen have documented, community activists partnered across affected neighborhoods and between public and private sectors in order to coordinate local revitalization campaigns.<sup>287</sup> In 1978, Ernest "Dutch" Morial, the city's first black mayor, established the Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Program in the ailing neighborhood.<sup>288</sup> Three years later, the FSMA and the Freret Street Development Corporation (FSDC), a non-profit comprised of multiracial residents and storeowners, received nearly \$2 million in federal and city grants to improve the neighborhood's appearance and infrastructure.<sup>289</sup> The FSDC granted commercial facade improvement loans to businesses, allowing the Barrecas to renovate Frank's Steak House,

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284 August Weber, quoted in Lovell Beaulieu, "Friendly Service Makes Nursery a Success," *Times Picayune* (October 7, 1984): 15.

285 "Freret Street is Wearing a New Look," 13.

286 August Weber, quoted in Joan Kent, "Closing of Freret Street Canal Villere Upsets Revitalization Boosters," *Times Picayune* (August 14, 1984): 10.

287 Chava Nachmias and J. John Palen, "Membership in Voluntary Neighborhood Associations and Urban Revitalization" *Policy Sciences* 14, no. 2 (Apr. 1982): 191.

288 Warner, "Freret's Century," 353.

289 "Freret Street is Wearing a New Look," 13.



still a beloved community institution, as well as the aging Freret Credit Union building. Other “rat-infested buildings” were fumigated and renovated.<sup>290</sup> While Freret did not fully regain financial stability until after Hurricane Katrina, it provides a model for how credit unions and neighborhood associations can pursue a range of funding sources to prevent neighborhoods’ physical decay and social dissolution.<sup>291</sup>

### **Henry Hermes, Cooperatives, and the NOPSI Debate**

While Hermes had largely retired from the barbering business and the credit union movement by the 1980s, he participated in one last interracial protest to protect low-income New Orleanians. His involvement in a heated debate over the reorganization of New Orleans Public Service (NOPSI) reveals the extent to which Hermes's cooperative career had come full circle. Since 1934, Hermes and other New Orleans Socialists had demanded that the public manage its own utilities and that NOPSI impose fair rates for individual and corporate customers.<sup>292</sup> In 1943, when Hermes ran for Louisiana Senate, he again called for rate reductions.<sup>293</sup> Socialists argued that rural electric cooperatives, which had been at the forefront of rural electrification in Louisiana between 1937 and 1940, were competitive alternatives to exploitative private utilities companies.<sup>294</sup>

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290 Ed Anderson, “Holman Center Ready to Move into Ex-Grocery,” *Times Picayune* (May 4, 1985): 7.

291 Nachmias and Palen, “Membership in Voluntary Neighborhood Associations,” 179; Robert Morris, “The Redevelopment of Freret Street,” *The Gambit*, August 13, 2013, <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/the-redevelopment-of-feret-street/Content?oid=2238586>.

292 The Socialist Party of New Orleans, “Two Packs of Cigarettes a Month.”

293 “Hermes Announces Senate Candidacy,” *Times Picayune* (October 30, 1943): 2.

294 Gary Alan Donaldson, “A History of Louisiana's Rural Electric Cooperatives, 1937-1983” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1983): vii, ix, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

In response to NOPSI utility rate increases, between the 1970s and 1980s, a diverse coalition of citizens again rallied for public-owned utilities as NOPSI consistently raised utility rates. In 1972, the grassroots coalition New Orleanians Fight Against Rate Excesses (NOFARE) promoted an explicitly anti-capitalist and cooperative platform similar to that of Depression-era Socialists.<sup>295</sup> The New Orleans Socialist Union and the Community Alliance for Radical Education (CARE), a collective of young, middle-class leftists, led the coalition.<sup>296</sup> In 1974, CARE declared that rate increases would enrich NOPSI while harming poor residents.<sup>297</sup> Similarly, dependent on Social Security to support himself and his aging wife, Hermes announced to the City Council that exorbitant telephone, water, and gas fees “have taken 20 percent of his Social Security check.”<sup>298</sup> Socialists denounced NOPSI as a “monopoly” controlling “some of our basic necessities of life.”<sup>299</sup> Committed to the “power of working people organized to fight together as a class,” NOFARE asked unions to conduct a one-day work stoppage against NOPSI.

NOFARE hoped for a complete economic and political transformation. Arguing that public utilities companies were only one aspect of the “immensely powerful energy industry, dominated by the big oil companies [controlling] most of the world’s governments,” NOFARE demanded that NOPSI and “all other corporations” be

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295 Charlie East, “Rain Dampens Protest Meet,” *Times Picayune* (January 31, 1972): 25.

296 Ibid.; New Orleans Socialist Union, pamphlet, “Jim Stodder Public Service: Public Enemy Number 1,” Vertical File, Political Organizations, New Orleans Socialist Union, Jones Hall Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as New Orleans Socialist Union Vertical File.

297 Community Alliance for Radical Education, pamphlet, “An Important Message to the Customers of New Orleans Public Service” [nd], Vertical File, Political Organizations, Community Alliance for Radical Education, Jones Hall Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

298 “S&WB Charges Said Due City August Review,” *Times Picayune* (June 29, 1972): 14.

299 New Orleans Socialist Union, “Jim Stodder Public Service,” 1.

transformed into worker cooperatives owned and operated by power plant laborers and consumers alike. Coalition members believed “rank-and-file” community and workplace cooperatives would spark a “national revolutionary democratic socialist movement.” Finally, a “new socialist society” would embrace “collective ownership and democratic control” over economic production.<sup>300</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1980, NOPSI announced it was again increasing prices, as well as constructing a nuclear power plant.<sup>301</sup> Further, the Louisiana Public Service Commission would supplant the New Orleans City Council as NOPSI’s regulating body. Fearing the environmental impact of nuclear power and the economic burden rate increases placed on small consumers, a diverse body of African American feminists, students, Socialists, and environmentalists packed City Hall meetings. The 82 year-old Hermes declared that exorbitant bills have “given people I know high blood pressure and heart attacks.”<sup>302</sup> Characteristically dramatic, he predicted “riots in the streets in New Orleans.” In contrast, this loose coalition urged the City to institute flat, “lifeline” rates, or “standards providing for the essential needs of residential electric customers below actual cost of the service” and again suggested cooperative control over public utilities.<sup>303</sup>

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300“Where We Stand,” 11; C.E., “To the Editor,” *Louisiana Worker* 2, no. 9, (September-October 1975): 16, Williams Research Collection, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA.

301 Jim Hodge, “NOPSI Rate Boost Plan is Protested,” *Times Picayune* (December 3, 1980): 3.

302 Ibid.

303 Ibid.; Susan Feeney and Lynn Cunningham, “Social Ecology Group Forms,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1 (January 1983): 1; James H. Gillis, “Ciaccio Target of Some Blacks,” *Times Picayune* (July 30, 1977): 19.

Despite sustained public opposition, in 1981 the Louisiana Public Service Commission began supervising NOPSI.<sup>304</sup> Furious, progressive organizations called for a referendum to keep NOPSI under city supervision and prevent NOPSI mismanagement and rate increases.<sup>305</sup> The New Orleans Social Ecology Group (NOSEG), a radical collective formed in 1983 to preserve “human and natural communities,” argued that NOPSI should either become a citizen-owned cooperative or City Council should regain control to keep the utilities company responsive to consumer needs. NOSEG’s cooperative utilities proposal reflected members’ interest in anarchist and social ecologist Murray Bookchin’s “libertarian municipalism” theory. Bookchin argued that capitalism, warfare, urban sprawl, and pollution caused the contemporary environmental crisis.<sup>306</sup> To restore social and ecological harmony, citizens should create a decentralized network of municipal confederations and eradicate the nation-state.<sup>307</sup> Similarly, NOSEG advocated a utopian, cooperative society that rejected “rampant consumerism and irresponsible growth-at-all-costs mentality of capitalism.”<sup>308</sup> Consequently, the group established childcare and buying cooperatives to foster an “organic, non-dominating community.”<sup>309</sup>

While the City Council eventually wrested control from the Commission in 1983, two years later NOPSI again raised rates by \$123 million to pay for its share of a

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304 “October Meeting: NOPSI Referendum and Peace Sunday March,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 5 (October 1983), 1; “Get NOPSI Back!” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 5 (October 1983), 3.

305 “Get NOPSI Back,” 2-5; Feeney and Cunningham, “Social Ecology Group Forms,” 1.

306 Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007): 19.

307 Murray Bookchin, “Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview,” *Green Perspectives* 24 (October 1991).

308 “Bookchin Speaks in New Orleans,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1 (January 1983): 4.

309 Feeney and Cunningham, “Social Ecology Group Forms,” 1.

Mississippi-based nuclear power plan.<sup>310</sup> Activists argued that the proposal was too burdensome for poor customers and would cripple the city's economy.<sup>311</sup> Hermes declared, "When I look at my utility bill, I could just holler." Responding to 28,000 petitioners' similar fears, City Council barred NOPSI from elevating rates, instituted a prudency review of its operations, and threatened to assume control over NOPSI's nuclear shares to protect small customers. While NOPSI never became a cooperative, Hermes and his fellow citizens successfully pressured city officials to address their concerns.

### **Conclusion**

The story of Henry Hermes and the Consumers' Co-operative Union illustrates both the promise and the limits of local cooperatives to transform economic and political institutions. For two decades, Freret Neighborhood's social, political, and economic context nurtured Hermes's Socialist and cooperative ideals. Simultaneously, Hermes's network of progressive allies comprised the CCU's core membership, maintaining its radical economic and political outlook. However, as Freret Neighborhood deteriorated in response to white flight and disinvestment, the political will sustaining the CCU evaporated. Nonetheless, Hermes never strayed from his belief that cooperatives could provoke systemic change. Joining LCUL as the state credit union movement gained momentum, Hermes and his compatriots used War on Poverty antipoverty programs to

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310 "Council Raps Morial on Rate Boost," *Times Picayune* (September 7, 1985): 23; Lynn Cunningham, "NOPSI Rate Bid Blasted at Hearing," *Times Picayune* (July 26, 1985), 3.

311 "Consultants May be Asked to Run Utilities," *Times Picayune* (September 18, 1985): 21.

legitimize cooperative economics, even as southern Cold War conservatives conflated economic justice with Communist plots to subvert white supremacy.<sup>312</sup>

Protesting 1980s NOPSI's rate hikes, Hermes joined a new breed of cooperators: university-based student collectives aiming to emancipate citizens from capitalism and its attendant environmental, social, and political abuses. While there was a profound ideological gap between the aging Hermes and student collectives, both sought to reclaim public control over dominant economic and political systems. Emerging out of ecological, feminist, and anarchist philosophy, radical cooperatives paired their desire for spiritual and personal growth with visions of larger social transformation.<sup>313</sup> By the 1970s, New Orleans brimmed with alternative educational, political, artistic, and entrepreneurial spaces that would reshape New Orleans's cooperative landscape. My next chapter examines this next stage in New Orleans cooperative development. Between the 1970s and early 2000s, universities and public housing became major nodes of cooperative organizing, a pattern that would persist until Hurricane Katrina dramatically redrew the physical and intellectual geography of urban cooperatives in 2005.

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312 "Cox, Minter 'Bewildered' by Requests by Citizens," *Times Picayune* (October 2, 1955): 29.

313 Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 280-282.

## **Chapter 4: Fathers and Sons: A.W. Dent and Tom Dent and Black Cooperative Organizing, 1932-1980**

In *Southern Journey*, noted playwright Thomas Dent meditates on his New Orleans roots, his family's personal struggles to overcome racial oppression, his own civil rights activism, and oral history interviews he conducted with movement veterans in 1991. As Dent travels across Mississippi, reflecting on his childhood as well as the impact of the long civil rights movement, his swirling narrative traverses time and space. Entangled in the movement, Dent's life mirrors the Mississippi River, itself a central motif in the work: gazing into the "strange muddy currents of the river," the young Dent imagines the "past hidden beyond the curve downriver, the future upriver...It was a great highway out into the world beyond the street corners, beyond the limitations and boredoms of the world I was growing up into."<sup>1</sup>

Like *Southern Journey*, this chapter shifts between the past and the present, the personal and the institutional, to examine how the legacy of black cooperative organizing frames the long civil rights movement in New Orleans. I analyze how, over the course of 50 years, Dillard University president Albert W. Dent, and Tom Dent, his playwright son, painstakingly constructed a network of cooperative institutions in order to advance their particular visions for black political and economic empowerment. Charting the evolution of black cooperative institutions from Albert Dent's medical insurance cooperative to Tom Dent's cultural liberationist Free Southern Theater Collective, I trace cooperatives'

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Dent, *Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), 1-2.

response to change and continuity within the civil rights movement and the city's economic and political conditions.

For example, influenced by black benevolent associations as well as New Deal social welfare policy, Albert Dent formed the Flint-Goodridge “Penny-a-Day” Medical Cooperative in 1936 to provide access to hospitalization services to New Orleans’ black residents. Bookended by the deprivation of the Great Depression and mounting calls for black political rights during World War II, Dent’s cooperative depended on a constellation of white liberal philanthropists and cooperative activists to fund its low-cost medical services. Yet as patronage withered in the face of postwar anti-Communist and racist hysteria, Dent abandoned cooperative organizing to support the NAACP’s legislative campaigns and platform of moderate institutional reform. However, black cooperative organizing did not cease in the mid-twentieth century.

Indeed, Tom Dent echoed his father’s attempts to build a regional cooperative movement; after moving to New York City in 1959, working for the NAACP, and co-founding the Umbra writers’ collective, Dent returned to New Orleans in 1965.<sup>2</sup> There, he joined the Free Southern Theater (FST), which traveled throughout the South between 1963 and 1982, performing plays featuring local student-activists and documenting the civil rights struggle for black audiences. Modeling a participatory ethic of collective action through art, the integrated FST married civil rights protest with music, theater, and creative writing. Locating its offices in disinvested Ninth Ward and Central City

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<sup>2</sup> “Tom Covington Dent,” *ChickenBones: A Journal*, accessed October 27, 2014, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/tomdentbio.htm>.



communities, the FST provided low-cost, politicized community theater and poetry workshops to the city's poorest citizens. It also allied with southern cooperative leagues, theater collectives, War on Poverty agencies, and non-profit funding sources to advance its project of cultural resistance. However, when Richard Nixon began slashing antipoverty budgets in the 1970s, the FST could no longer remain solvent. Although it collapsed in 1982, FST members continued to organize politically conscious cooperatives to demonstrate the power of democratic decision-making to reshape society.

In particular, I examine the similarities and divergences in father and son's cooperatives' efforts to 1) build cooperative institutions at the local, state, and national level, 2) pursue patronage sources such as government, philanthropic, and church institutions, 3) cultivate a black working class as a membership base, and finally, 4) address local racial justice and economic issues while confronting or negotiating political realities. These factors concretely impacted the Flint-Goodridge Hospital and FST's ability to improve the economic and political status of impoverished New Orleanian African Americans. By extension, when we analyze the historical trajectory of black cooperative activism in New Orleans, we also gain a more nuanced view of the city's civil rights movement between the 1930s and 1980s.

Indeed, as a common thread running through Albert and Tom Dent's lives, cooperatives directly link the two interwar and postwar generations, while providing a lineage for social movements more broadly. While scholars have sometimes suggested that a social movement coalesces when "the time is right" or is inspired by the zeitgeist, in reality, on-the-ground grassroots activism has been continuous. As they mobilized to

provide black members with essential medical care, work relief, food, and education, New Orleans' ongoing tradition of black cooperatives created the conditions for mass civil rights movements.

While Louisiana historians like Adam Fairclough and Greta de Jong have explicitly discussed the importance of cooperatives in sustaining the civil rights movement in the state, their discussion is episodic or contained to rural agricultural cooperatives. Further, de Jong's 1960s farm cooperative sources admit that they were ignorant of earlier efforts to organize rural Louisianans during the Great Depression. The result is a portrayal of the Louisianan cooperative movement as fractured, short-lived, and rooted in rural communities. Yet when one examines the cooperative careers of the Dent family, the cooperative movement narrative suddenly becomes fluid, its tendrils connecting New Orleans to rural Louisiana and outward throughout the South and the rest of the country. In essence, the Flint-Goodridge Hospital medical cooperative and FST are anchors in a civil rights story that examines ruptures and continuities in cooperative organizing across time and place.

#### **A.W. Dent and the Politics of White Patronage**

Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, Dillard University president Albert W. Dent's conviction in cooperative organizing as the basis for institutional change undergirded his racial justice activism. Further, the connections he made with progressive white and black city, state, and national leaders ensured that the Flint-Goodridge medical cooperative transcended the local to be an integral part of New Deal social justice and civil rights organizing. The elder Dent's reliance on a diverse support

network and his faith in grassroots community cooperation formed the foundation of Tom Dent's cooperative politics decades later.

Born in 1905 to a Georgian day laborer and housecleaner, Albert Dent had a “starkly realistic sense of political and economic power. His racial strategies were based on the realization that blacks had very little of either.”<sup>3</sup> Conceding that large-scale institutional change might not be achieved in his or his children's lifetime, Dent took a moderate, pragmatic approach to racial justice reform. As Dillard University trustee Fred Brownlee remembers, Dent was a “past-master in the art of applying the methods of the sun. Some would storm the walls of segregation; Mr. Dent would melt them down.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, Dent's civil rights and cooperative work focused on cultivating relationships with well-positioned black and white educators and philanthropists who would become crucial agents in molding the southern civil rights movement. As a student at Morehouse College, Dent was mentored by John Hope, the institution's president and renowned civil rights activist.<sup>5</sup> Hope hired Dent as alumni secretary of Morehouse, where he was introduced to Reverend William W. Alexander, Dillard University's acting president.<sup>6</sup> In 1932, Alexander hired the 27 year-old to manage the new Flint-Goodridge Hospital, a teaching hospital for black doctors, and Dent moved his young family to New Orleans.

It was as superintendent of Flint-Goodridge Hospital that Dent emerged as a leader in black cooperative organizing. Managing the small, poorly funded hospital run

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3 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35; Joe M. Richardson, “Albert W. Dent: A Black New Orleans Hospital and University Administrator,” *Louisiana History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1996), 309.

4 Fred Brownlee, quoted in Richardson, “Albert W. Dent,” 312.

5 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35.

6 Richardson, “Albert W. Dent,” 310-312.

out of Dillard University, Dent struggled to maintain the institution's educational integrity and autonomy in the Jim Crow South.<sup>7</sup> Private black institutions were often supported by moderate white liberals who held prominent government, religious, and business positions in New Orleans, as well key posts in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon Baines Johnson's War on Poverty administrations. They created a political climate that expanded black participation in government and business, and most importantly, they supported Albert and Tom Dent's forays into cooperative organizing. However, depending on the financial support of white liberals had serious repercussions for both generations of cooperative efforts, constraining their social and political goals.

Edgar Stern and the Julius Rosenwald Fund are names that reappear over and over in both Dents' organizing history. The Julius Rosenwald Fund, a northern philanthropy funding programs benefitting African Americans, and the General Education Board, a charity funding medical and educational programs, together campaigned to create a medical and educational center for black New Orleanians.<sup>8</sup> In 1930, they merged Flint-Goodridge Hospital, New Orleans University, and Straight University, a Congregational Church Reconstruction college into a new university and hospital complex for African Americans. With the assistance of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC), white philanthropist Edgar B. Stern gathered black and white financial support for the new institution.<sup>9</sup> However, the school was immediately embroiled in controversy: White

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<sup>7</sup> Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Dent, *Southern Journey*, 28; Claire and George Sessions Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," *Saturday Evening Post* (September 2, 1939), 30, folder 2, box 2, Albert Walter and Ernestine Jessie Covington

citizens were unhappy that the university was located in Gentilly, a white middle-class neighborhood, and were scandalized by rumors that a black president might supervise white faculty.

In light of public approbation, Dillard board of trustees member Edgar Stern recommended Reverend William W. Alexander serve as acting president as a compromise. Alexander, a white progressive preacher, led the university from 1934 to 1936.<sup>10</sup> Alexander was a member of the CIC, a white liberal organization committed to exposing the travesties of racism, including lynching, mob justice, and tenant system.<sup>11</sup> As a member of the Resettlement Administration and head of the Farm Security Administration in 1937, Alexander strove to ensure that New Deal programs addressed African Americans' needs, particularly farm tenants, and worked to incorporate black leadership into New Deal agencies.<sup>12</sup>

As both acting president of Dillard University and administrator for the Resettlement Administration, Alexander was uniquely positioned to integrate the young Albert Dent into a network of New Deal agencies establishing antipoverty programs for southern blacks. In 1935, for example, Elizabeth Logan, Assistant Director of the

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Dent Family Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA. Hereafter cited as Dent Family Papers; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 11.

10 Louise Bernard and Radiclan Clytus, *Within These Walls: A Short History of Dillard University* (New Orleans: Dillard University, 1999), 11, "Corner Stone Laying Library Building Dillard University," pamphlet, 27 May 1934, folder 8, box 2, Dent Family Papers.

11 Anne Ellis Pullen, "Commission on Interracial Cooperation," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, last modified December 23, 2004, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/commission-interracial-cooperation>.

12 Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: the New Deal Communities in Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 183.

National Association of Housing Officials, recommended Dent as manager of a Public Works Administration (PWA)-sponsored public housing complex in Atlanta.<sup>13</sup> Dent asked Alexander for his advice on accepting the post.<sup>14</sup> While confident that Dent could “handle management of housing project admirably,” Alexander believed Dent’s work in public health and hospital administration provided “an opportunity for your greatest usefulness.”<sup>15</sup> He averred, “I do not think there is anyone available who has your background and experience with hospitals and public health.” Convinced that he was needed in New Orleans, Dent remained at Flint-Goodridge.

Despite Alexander’s accolades, Dent faced significant challenges as Superintendent of Flint-Goodridge. While contemporary commentators hailed Flint-Goodridge as an “outstanding example of interracial cooperation,” the hospital suffered the same racial inequalities most other black medical institutions experienced in the segregated South.<sup>16</sup> When Dent assumed his managerial position, the hospital lacked experienced medical personnel: out of its staff of 35 licensed black doctors, only 10 had completed an internship. Further, while many modern southern hospitals included segregated wards, in New Orleans, no accredited hospital would hire black doctors as part of its regular staff.<sup>17</sup> Assessing its precarious position, Dent announced that the hospital would now serve two functions: it would provide low-cost health care to black

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13 Miss Elizabeth Logan, letter, to Mr. Albert Dent, 23 Oct. 1935, folder 1, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

14 A.W. Dent, telegram, to Dr. W.W. Alexander, 28 Oct. 1935, folder 1, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

15 Dr. W.W. Alexander, telegram, to A.W. Dent, 28 Oct. 1935, folder 1, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

16 Raymond P. Sloan, “Five Years of Negro Health Activities,” reprinted from *The Modern Hospital* 48, no. 4 (April 1937): 3, folder 2, box 2, Dent Family Papers.

17 *Ibid.*, 179; Sloan, “Five Years of Negro Health Activities,” 3.

New Orleanians while operating as a postgraduate school of medicine for black doctors.<sup>18</sup> Dent was forced to rely on the support of white philanthropists and medical leaders as he struggled to establish Flint-Goodridge's reputation. Consequently, the hospital's history is inseparable from the politics of white philanthropy and patronage.

To that end, in the early 1930s, Dent persuaded Dr. C. Jeff Miller, the president of the American College of Surgeons and professor of gynecology at the Tulane University School of Medicine to provide Flint-Goodridge with medical consultants culled from Tulane and Louisiana State University faculty members.<sup>19</sup> While black doctors were appointed heads of their departments once they completed their internships, administrators worried that "the Negro population would think a Negro doctor was good enough for minor complaints, but that really sick people had best call a white doctor." Indeed, across the South, black hospitals fiercely battled the assumptions among rural African Americans that white physicians possessed superior skills and resources.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, white consultants remained "de facto heads of each department" and served as liaisons between white medical institutions and Flint-Goodridge.

Despite such limitations, Dent believed that Flint-Goodridge should be a center for medical training and practice for Louisiana's black physicians, and to that end, in 1936 he organized a free two-week summer course for any black doctor.<sup>21</sup> By 1939, he estimated that one-third of Louisiana's black doctors had attended the course, as had one-

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18 Thomas J. Ward, Jr., *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 67.

19 Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 30.

20 Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*, 123-124.

21 Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 30.

fifth of doctors from six surrounding states. Dent's efforts paid off by the late 1930s: Flint-Goodridge Hospital was admitted to the Fully Approved List of the American College of Surgeons, the highest rating for American hospitals. It was also on the Approved for Internship list of the American Medical Association.

Dent's support of New Deal policies stemmed from his understanding that the hospital and its patients suffered from "poverty and the fruits thereof: tuberculosis, syphilis, a great need for maternal and infant welfare."<sup>22</sup> He believed that Flint-Goodridge had a responsibility to provide preventative care as well as to treat existing medical problems. For example, to reduce cases of venereal disease such as syphilis, hospital dietitians and social workers hosted lectures and distributed sex educational films to colleges and schools.<sup>23</sup> As part of its preventative care program, hospital staff combatted the social and cultural causes of poverty and illness. By 1937, the hospital offered seven outpatient clinics, treating ailments plaguing poor African Americans, such as syphilis, tuberculosis, infant mortality, diphtheria, and diabetes.

Additionally, committed to expanding job opportunities for disadvantaged youths, Dent established Flint-Goodridge as an employment center for young black men and women. However, the hospital's training program was fundamentally constrained by the realities of the city's oppressive racial politics; students funded by the National Youth Administration were taught to be orderlies and nursemaids. In the 1930s, all New Orleans hospitals employed black orderlies, while nursemaids attended convalescents and

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<sup>22</sup> Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 30.

<sup>23</sup> Sloan, "Five Years of Negro Health Activities," 6.



performed domestic work. As Tom Dent recalls, while his father's generation believed that the South would eventually end segregation and racial inequality, "who knew when *eventually* would occur?"<sup>24</sup> Fearing black exclusion from medical services, most southern African American physicians reluctantly accepted the terms of segregated hospitals.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, even as he publicly denounced racial discrimination, Dent's training program perpetuated the city's racialized workforce.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Flint-Goodridge Hospital Medical Cooperative**

Believing that the role of the "modern health educator" was to "help people work out their own solutions to their health problems," Dent began experimenting with medical cooperatives as a means of improving Louisiana's abysmal prenatal care for black women.<sup>27</sup> A central part of rural southern black culture, inexpensive midwives performed 90 percent of women's deliveries in rural Louisiana and 22 percent of black women's deliveries in New Orleans.<sup>28</sup> Competing for patients, Dent claimed that many midwives lacked knowledge of basic sanitation or sterilization. The Rosenwald Fund supplied Dent with a social worker to create Mothers Clubs that taught women basic prenatal care and advised them to avoid midwives in favor of hospital births.<sup>29</sup>

However, conceding that rural African Americans would continue to solicit midwives in the absence of black physicians, Dent also trained Dillard nurses in

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24 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 1.

25 Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*, 174.

26 Darlene Hine, "Flint-Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University: The Development of Black Collegiate Nursing, 1932-1950," folder 2, box 2, Dent Family Papers.

27 A.W. Dent, "The Need for Public Understanding and Support," *Public Health Reports* 67, no. 4 (April 1952): 327.

28 Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 67; Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South*, 123.

29 Hine, "Flint-Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University," 178.

midwifery to limit African American women's exposure to poorly trained practitioners.<sup>30</sup> Establishing mobile clinics, Dillard midwives visited parishes lacking black doctors in order to reduce high infant and maternal mortality rates. Additionally, to increase rural patronage, Dent offered \$10 deliveries at Flint-Goodridge Hospital (the same price as a midwife's services) and provided patients doctors, medicines, hospitalization for a week.<sup>31</sup> By 1939, Dent boasted, "More white women than Negro women in New Orleans now employ [untrained] midwives," and births had increased 400% at the hospital.

Yet Flint-Goodridge remained too expensive for low-income black Louisianans seeking other basic medical services. To expand access to hospital care, Dent researched cooperative insurance plans such as Dallas's Baylor Hospital medical insurance policy, and in 1932 he unveiled Flint-Goodridge's new medical insurance cooperative for black public school teachers.<sup>32</sup> In return for a small annual fee, members received free hospital care for a set number of days per month. Dent quickly enlarged his group insurance plan to cover Pullman car porters, mail carriers, department store workers, hotel employees, nurses, church members, and black medical society members, who paid between \$7.50 and \$9 a year for the privilege of being admitted to any hospital in New Orleans.<sup>33</sup>

In order to reach destitute black New Orleanians, in 1936 Dent received a \$4,500 grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund to implement a "penny-a-day" hospital insurance plan, which charged members \$3.65 a year for full hospital services, including board, nursing care, interns, operating rooms, x-ray, routine medicines, and lab work. Members

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30 Ibid., 178; Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 68.

31 Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 67.

32 "Hospital Insurance," *Negro Star* (December 9, 1932): 1; Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 67.

33 Perry, "Penny-A-Day Hospital," 68; and Hine, "Flint Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University," 182.

received three weeks of hospital care per year “as a private patient in a ward bed.”<sup>34</sup> Finally, to reach rural patients to whom black doctors still remained inaccessible, Dent planned to use profits from the insurance cooperative to reopen Dillard’s nursing school.<sup>35</sup> By 1943, over 5,000 people had enrolled in the cooperative insurance plan.

### **The Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association**

The rise of the Flint-Goodridge Hospital medical cooperative occurred in tandem with that of many other contemporary black medical insurance cooperatives operating throughout New Orleans. While Atlanta native Dent looked to large-scale, hospital-run medical cooperatives in other cities when shaping his cooperative plan, there were a myriad of black benevolent associations in New Orleans serving low-income black patients shut out of segregated insurance companies. It is useful to discuss one such benevolent association: the Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association, active between 1894 and 1967. While Dent may not have been aware of the Juvenile Co-operators, it supported Flint-Goodridge Hospital’s efforts to promote quality healthcare for the city’s African American population. In 1958, for example, it contributed to the annual Flint-Goodridge Hospital Drive.<sup>36</sup> Although the Juvenile Co-operators and the Flint-Goodridge Hospital cooperative were contemporaries and strove to provide low-cost medical insurance for black citizens, their divergences are striking.

Confining its membership to young men under the age of 25, the Juvenile Co-operators was tied to a very different constituent and support network than Flint-

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34 Perry, “Penny-A-Day Hospital,” 67.

35 Hine, “Flint Goodridge Hospital of Dillard University,” 183, 188.

36 “Journal of Minutes,” April 27, 1958. Box 2, folder 1, JCFBMAA Records.

Goodridge. Extending its services to the Catholic Creoles of color residing in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, the Juvenile Co-operators operated within a black world bounded by religion and place. While Dent regularly worked with white professionals at the city, state, regional, and national level to secure funding and staff for Flint-Goodridge Hospital, the Juvenile Co-operators supported black institutions and attended black functions, served black constituents, and was itself an all-black organization.

Like Albert Dent, the Juvenile Co-operators combatted the brutal effects poverty and racism inflicted on their young members' health. The cooperative records are littered with accounts of members suffering from bullet wounds, venereal disease, chronic ailments, diphtheria, and tetanus.<sup>37</sup> Others were chronically unemployed and could not afford basic treatment. When the cooperative's president, J.B. Prados, contracted a fatal throat disease in 1918, he asked the Juvenile Co-operators to contribute to his medical bills because "I have not made a dollar in three months [and] not being able to work, [it] would be somewhat hard to face this alone."<sup>38</sup> Recognizing the high cost of funerals for poor families, the Juvenile Co-operators and funeral director and embalmer Emile Labat provided members a respectful funeral. For \$50, they received, "One white or black coffin, neatly trimmed, one automobile hearse, 2 limousines, crepe, candles, veil for face, recording of death certificate with the Board of Health, etc."<sup>39</sup>

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37 State of Louisiana Charity Hospital, letter, 15 Feb. 1934, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMA Records; Mrs. F. Coleman, letter to JCFBMMA, 26 Nov. 1911, 50, folder 3, box 1, JCFBMA Records; F.A. Remanjon, letter to Officers and Members of JCFBMMA, 22 Jan. 1921, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMA Records; "Journal of Minutes," (September 27, 1914): 122, folder 3, box 1, JCFBMA Records.

38 J.B. Prados, letter to JCFBMA Board of Directors, 12 Feb. 1918, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMA Records.

39 Emile Labat, letter to JCFBMAA, 10 Jan. 1934, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMAA Records.

By promoting local black-owned businesses and contracting with politically conscious African American doctors, funeral directors, and pharmacists operating along the North Claiborne black business district, the Juvenile Co-operators were crucial to maintaining the neighborhood's identity, autonomy, and economic stability. As one long-time resident recalls, because Claiborne Avenue contained a "vast amount of black businesses that catered to us and that we patronized," Tremé's middle- and working-class residents could avoid discriminatory stores along the segregated Canal Street.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, the Juvenile Co-operators ensured that black service providers were clearly committed to their young patients as well as to the progress of African Americans in general. During annual election campaigns, prospective and incumbent medical professionals appealed to the cooperative board of director's interest in racial justice and race pride. For instance, in 1933, Dr. Ernest Cherrie, a black general practitioner, countered a smear campaign alleging that he had hired a white contractor to build his new home.<sup>41</sup> Cherrie successfully assured the Juvenile Co-operators that both his architect and general contractor were experienced "men of color" and that Cherrie himself was "a RACE man in every detail."

Finally, Juvenile Co-operators members actively participated in the larger civil rights movement, promoting black economic independence as well as political rights. For example, the cooperative financially supported black educational institutions, believing that scholarship was a direct means of achieving civil equality. African

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40 Harvey Reed, interview with author, June 26, 2012. Cooperative Oral History Project.

41 Dr. Ernest Cherrie, letter to JCFBMAA President, Officers and Members, 6 Sept. 1933, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMAA Records.

Americans' lack of educational opportunities in New Orleans and Louisiana was dire: Until 1940, black Louisianans were served by only four high schools in comparison to white children, who had access to 383 high schools.<sup>42</sup> To close this education gap, in 1919 the cooperative donated to the Congregation of Corpus Christi Parish, which planned to construct a school and church "to meet the needs of the Colored People in the down town section of the city," specifically, "the large number of children who do not attend school through lack of accommodation."<sup>43</sup> Until its dissolution in the late 1960s, the Juvenile Co-operators regularly donated to black scholarship funds and even created a small fund of its own for college-bound members.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Juvenile Co-operators was securely bound to the Seventh Ward, the organization was not insular. Just as Albert Dent saw Flint-Goodridge's hospitalization insurance as part of a larger effort to ameliorate structural equality, the Juvenile Co-operators funded national organizations and programs improving the socioeconomic and political status of all African Americans. Many members belonged to the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Knights of Peter Claver, a large Catholic black fraternal and service organization whose offices constituted a central social and political space for Tremé's African Americans.<sup>45</sup> The Juvenile Co-operators' involvement with civil rights

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42 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 37.

43 Adolph J. Moret, letter to Lucien H. Fortune, Henry Tio to "Friends," April 1919, box 1, folder 1, JCFBMAA Records.

44 "Journal of Minutes," (May 24, 1959), 29, box 2, folder 1, JCFBMAA Records; "Journal of Minutes," (November 22, 1959), 43, box 2, folder 1, JCFBMAA Records.

45 Civic Worker is Taken by Death," *Times Picayune* (May 29, 1970): 20; "Dejoie Funeral Rites Planned," *Times Picayune* (April 3, 1967): 7; Vice President, letter to Officers and Members of JCFBMAA Board of Directors, 23 Feb. 1919, folder 1, box 1, JCFBMAA Records; "Journal of Minutes, 1935-1944," (April 23, 1944), 264, folder 5, box 1, JCFBMAA Records; "Journal of Minutes," (April 23, 1961), 74, box 2, folder 1, JCFBMAA Records.

and economic self-determination projects demonstrates historian George Lipsitz's observation that low-income black neighborhoods have historically been "resource poor but network rich"; their geographically-bounded support networks have long fostered economic and cultural survival.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the *Juvenile Co-operators* is an important intervention into scholars' declension narrative, which posits that Cold War anti-Communism and relative economic affluence either crushed leftist consumer cooperatives or forced them to compromise their radical politics in order to stay solvent.<sup>47</sup> Mirroring Jessica Gordon Nembhard's study of mid-twentieth black cooperative activists such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Halena Wilson, and Ella Jo Baker, *Juvenile Co-operators* helped ensure their community's economic survival well into the 1960s. Their cooperative activities dovetailed with civil rights work with the NAACP and similar organizations.<sup>48</sup>

### **Medical Cooperatives, Public Health, and Public Housing**

At the same time, the story of the Flint-Goodridge medical cooperative is also closely linked to the rise of "slum clearance" and the construction of public housing projects as part of New Deal efforts to address urban poverty. While Albert Dent endorsed housing projects as a means of improving black New Orleanians' living standards, and even applied as manager of an Atlanta housing project, the dual impact of

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46 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 243.

47 Curl, *For All the People*, 191; Paula Giese, "How the Old Coops Went Wrong," in *Workplace Democracy and Social Change*, eds. Frank Lindenfeld and Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1982): 327.

48 Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 149.

urban renewal and public housing construction between the 1930s and the 1950s dramatically redrew racial lines and exacerbated racial and class disparities.

Beginning in the 1920s, public housing for low-income residents drastically reshaped the racial and class demographics of the city. Environmental historian Beverly Hendrix Wright argues that while New Orleans had historically been relatively racially integrated, segregated public housing sparked a demographic shift in which the most desirable neighborhoods were now exclusively white.<sup>49</sup> Public housing construction was aided by technological advancements in levee and water management systems that expanded New Orleans development as well as intensified racially segregation. The invention of the wood pump to drain swamp water out of low-lying areas encouraged development into previously uninhabitable land and sparked new racial settlement patterns. Further, as Wright notes, extended street car lines enabled whites to move into newly constructed suburbs in once flooded areas, while blacks moved closer into the city.

Further, under the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) began demolishing older neighborhoods and erected segregated public housing projects for poor families in their place.<sup>50</sup> While white housing projects were located on higher ground closer to the more developed and affluent “front-of-town” along the Mississippi River, black projects were situated in lower elevations in the “back-of-town,” or the impoverished sections of the city spreading away from the Mississippi River. Previously, while many African Americans were concentrated in less desirable

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49 Hendrix Wright, “New Orleans: A City That Care Forgot,” 48-49.

50 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 183.



neighborhoods, others who worked for affluent whites populated lots behind their employers. Only later, as geographer Richard Campanella observes, did “deed covenants restrict home ownership to whites only, affecting city’s racial geography, as middle-class white families ‘leapfrog[ged]’ over black back-of-town to settle in drained marshes.”<sup>51</sup>

The city’s public housing projects disrupted the relatively balanced racial and economic landscape of New Orleans by displacing former “slum” residents. In certain cases, although half of a neighborhood’s displaced population was black, the new, segregated public housing project accommodated only white families.<sup>52</sup> Because HANO did not compensate former inhabitants or equitably replenish housing stock, it considerably hindered black residents’ ability to locate similarly affordable housing.

Initially, however, black social agencies and progressive organizations supported HANO housing projects. New Orleans’ new housing complexes were attractive: well built brick apartments, they reflected local architecture and incorporated green spaces and oak trees.<sup>53</sup> For his part, Dent believed that the projects were improvements over decaying black neighborhoods. Observing the adverse impact of poor housing on health, Flint-Goodridge Hospital even promoted a federal slum clearance program to benefit black New Orleanians.<sup>54</sup> Dent also believed the Flint-Goodridge medical cooperative provided a model for hospital insurance among low-income public housing populations. In May 1936, Dent wrote to Atlanta University administrators, proposing that they the

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51 Ibid., 44.

52 Hendrix Wright, “New Orleans,” 56.

53 Capanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 183.

54 Sloan, “Five Years of Negro Health Activities,” 8.

institute the Flint-Goodridge medical plan at a PWA public housing project.<sup>55</sup> He explained that rather than forcing impoverished residents to pay for hospitalization services out-of-pocket, officials should create a medical cooperative that “would place complete medical care at the disposal of the Housing Project’s Health Service.” This advisory committee would supervise the resident’s health services.<sup>56</sup>

Echoing the Flint-Goodridge cooperative structure, Dent’s generalized medical insurance model would charge 50 cents per month per member and would provide hospitalization and other essential medical services.<sup>57</sup> For instance, Flint-Goodridge “[rendered] about one day of hospital service for each member of the group.” Further, if Atlanta University lacked fellowships to hire physicians for the public housing complex, Dent recommended they follow the Flint-Goodridge clinic plan: “arrangements would be made for the association of a few of the best qualified Negro physicians with some white physicians, probably teachers at Emory.”<sup>58</sup>

Yet despite its success, Dent’s medical cooperative plan ended in 1943 when Flint-Goodridge joined the Hospital Service Association of New Orleans, which offered a comprehensive hospitalization insurance plan covering the entire city.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Dent became Dillard University president in 1941, a position for which board of trustees member Edgar Stern had been grooming Dent since 1935.<sup>60</sup> While the medical

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55 A.W. Dent, memorandum, to Miss Read, 23 May 1936, folder 2, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

56 A.W. Dent, letter to Miss Florence M. Read, 23 May 1936, folder 2, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

57 Dent, memorandum, to Read.

58 Dent, letter to Read.

59 *Ibid.*, 183.

60 Richardson, “Albert W. Dent,” 317.

cooperative soldiered on two years after Dent's departure, it did not ultimately survive the loss of its charismatic head.

Ironically, given the rapid dissipation of the Flint-Goodridge Hospital insurance plan, it was Dent's cooperative politics that swayed the Dillard board of trustees to hire him as president. In the fall of 1940, university trustees began discussing Dent as a potential presidential candidate.<sup>61</sup> Fred L. Brownlee, Executive Secretary of the American Missionary Association, recommended Dent because he was an excellent business manager. Yet the board worried that Dent was not sufficiently interested in "the educational game," and that, despite his humble upbringing, "the Negroes of New Orleans for the most part have not accepted him, feeling that he is an aristocrat, etc."<sup>62</sup>

However, Brownlee decided that Dent was sufficiently committed to higher education and community service when the presidential candidate attended a student work camp at the Delta Cooperative Farm, an institute created to economically stabilize poor black and white farmers. He was invited to speak on health and community problems "and did a corking good job educationally and humanly speaking."<sup>63</sup> Dent even "inquired about community service educational projects which he would like to visit" at the cooperative farm. In addition to his membership on the Board of Directors of the CIC and the New Orleans Council of Social Agencies executive committee and his

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61 Fred L. Brownlee, letter to Mr. Phillips Bradley, 20 Sept. 1940, folder 3, box 1, Dent Family Papers.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

accomplishments as Flint-Goodridge Hospital superintendent, it was his passion for cooperative development that clinched Dent's candidacy.<sup>64</sup>

### **Building a Biracial Cooperative Network**

Even as Dent used his position at the Flint-Goodridge Hospital to address racialized poverty within New Orleans, he was just as dedicated to building an integrated regional cooperative movement, and by extension, a national integrated society. Dent's participation in biracial cooperative organizing dovetailed with his civil rights activities and offered more concrete avenues for social change than did his frustrating experience with timorous white liberals in New Orleans' moderate antiracist organizations.

Throughout his career, Dent levied his position as hospital superintendent and president of Dillard University to pressure white business and government interests of New Orleans to address black political and economic rights. To Dent, working with biracial organizations to achieve legal integration for blacks was a moral obligation. Ultimately, he believed, "the [white] man who keeps me out because of my color is very foolish and frequently denies himself the privilege of knowing a real person."<sup>65</sup> Central to Dent's civil rights strategy was his faith that middle-class black community leaders could apply "measured pressure" on policymakers to achieve incremental racial progress.<sup>66</sup> To

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64 "Dent is Elected New President of Dillard College," *Defender* (June 7, 1941), folder 19, box 2, Dent Family Papers.

65 Albert Dent, quoted in John LaFarge, S.J., "The Development of Cooperative Acceptance of Racial Integration," *The Journal of Negro Education* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1952): 436.

66 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35.

do so, Dent allied with prominent black leaders as well as white southern liberals, or as he called them, “intelligent Southern whites.”<sup>67</sup>

Yet white resistance and timidity often marred these collaborations. For example, after a year of mounting racial tensions and vicious police brutality, in November 1943, the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce feared explosive race riots and convened an all-white committee to quickly harmonize the city’s race relations.<sup>68</sup> Dent and NAACP leaders A.P. Tureaud, Edward Wright, and Revered A.L. Davis demanded that the committee integrate and concretely redress black disenfranchisement and mounting police violence. However, the Chamber of Commerce insisted on focusing on economic issues rather than political inequality, and, most damningly, refused to meet with them.

Angered by his experience with the Chamber of Commerce, Dent and the Council of Social Agencies organized another integrated race relations committee, the Citizens Committee on Race Relations. It campaigned to desegregate Lake Pontchartrain, pressured the City to hire black police, and arranged French Quarter hostel arrangements for black seamen. Yet the Citizens Committee dissolved in 1945 without affecting any policies. Adam Fairclough argues that integrated racial justice organizations failed to change the racial dynamics of wartime New Orleans because blacks had little political or economic leverage, while Jewish, northern, and immigrant white liberals’ small numbers and social ostracism made them fearful of aggressively opposing Jim Crow laws.<sup>69</sup>

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67 Albert Dent, quoted in LaFarge, “The Development of Cooperative Acceptance of Racial Integration,” 436.

68 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 81-82.

69 Ibid.

Yet their transience does not mitigate the significance of interracial civil rights organizations in the 1930s and 1940s, especially if one considers contemporary biracial cooperative activity. Dent's participation in integrated cooperative institution-building reveals the significant overlap between antiracist cooperative activism and the southern civil rights struggle. While white southerners belonging to mainstream political organizations were largely unwilling to seriously tackle institutional racism, the Southern Cooperative Educational Association (SCEA)—of which Dent was an early member—attempted to foster dialogue with its black and white members. It believed that African Americans should be integrated into a new, community-driven cooperative economy. Further, the SCEA argued that economic collaboration would lead to political equality, regardless of one's race. Cooperation was part of a moral economy in which all Americans participated in democratic institutions.<sup>70</sup>

Initially, the SCEA worried that an integrated membership and commitment to political and economic equality would hinder its coalition work in the Deep South. Director Ed Yeomans prevaricated, an integrated convention is “all fine and dandy as far as our immediate group goes, but here we are hoping that key people in labor, agriculture, etc. will come, many of whom will be people whom we don't know at all. Mightn't some of them, upon finding themselves in a mixed dinner, suddenly go back to the old reaction and give us a terribly black eye as far as the rest of the meeting was concerned?”<sup>71</sup> To white SCEA officers' credit, however, they did not allow such fears to prevent coalition

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70 Morton, letter to Ed Yeomans, 28 Nov. 1940.

71 Ed Yeomans, letter to Lee M. Brooks, 27 Sept. 1940, folder 1, box 1, SCL Records.

building with black cooperative activists.

As he sought to improve medical and educational services to black New Orleanians, the SCEA connected Dent to state, regional, and national networks of black and white government, religious, educational, and labor organizations. In 1941, at the SCEA's "first bi-racial 'Conference on Co-op Education' ever to be held in Louisiana," 140 black and white attendees listened to New Dealers report on existing agricultural cooperatives, credit unions, and buying clubs and outlined methods for expanding the southern cooperative movement.<sup>72</sup> For example, Dr. Jacob L. Reddix, the president of Jackson College, a historically black university in Mississippi, spoke on the tremendous success of his Gary, Indiana-based Consumers' Cooperative Trading Company. It operated grocery stores, a gas station, and a credit union to help employ black residents thrown out of work by steel mill closings.<sup>73</sup> Reddix later contended that "black people in the United States could lift the burden of economic exploitation from their backs by organizing a nationwide system of cooperative businesses" for themselves.<sup>74</sup> The SCEA thus provided Dent another channel through which to press for racial equality.

Like many other black cooperative activists, Dent was an integral and respected member of the SCEA, serving on its board of directors for three years.<sup>75</sup> At the 1941 conference, the Dillard University president announced that the Flint-Goodridge's

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72 SCEA, *Digest of The Baton Rouge Conference* (April 25, 1941), folder 5, box 1, SCL Records; SCEA, report, "The First Baton Rouge Conference on Cooperative Education," (April 14-15, 1941): 4-5, folder 68, box 2, SCL Records.

73 "Baton Rouge Conference Exceeds Expectations," 4; Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 140.

74 Jacob L. Reddix, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: The Memoirs of Jacob L. Reddix* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1974), 119.

75 "New Board of Directors," *The Southeastern Cooperator* 1, no. 10 (February 1942): 10, folder 43, box 2, SCL Records.

cooperative hospitalization plan had successfully delivered low-cost, high quality hospital services to black patients.<sup>76</sup> He also assured SCEA leadership that, “Dillard will actively promote purchasing cooperatives on the campus and the teaching of cooperation, and will promote establishment of medical cooperatives in the New Orleans housing projects.”<sup>77</sup>

Further, as an active SCEA committee member, Dent collaborated with diverse, even surprising allies to promote cooperative economics for African Americans. For example, he joined an action committee to organize educational, religious, and labor organizations in New Orleans; fellow members included Reverend William J. Castell, a white pastor at St. Rita’s Catholic Church, and radical labor organizer F.C. Pieper, a United Transport Workers Industrial Union member and Highlander Folk School supporter.<sup>78</sup> Despite his seemingly moderate politics, Dent’s committee members reflect his embrace of New Deal and even Popular Front coalitional politics as he advanced economic and political justice for African American citizens.

### **Postwar Civil Rights Work**

However, Dent’s tolerance of radical politics as a measure of political expediency quickly waned. As a lifelong NAACP member and “staunch friend” of head lawyer

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76 SCEA, “The First Baton Rouge Conference,” 4.

77 SCEA, “Memorandum and Report Number 2: On Activities for Summer, 1941,” to SCEA Directors and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, 2, folder 53, box 2, SCL Records.

78 “History of St. Rita’s Church,” St. Rita’s Catholic Church, accessed September 18, 2013 <http://www.stritachurchnola.org/historyofstritaschurch.html>.; “Joseph R. Gregory and United Transport Workers Industrial Union, Local 806, Affiliated With CIO, 71” (1941), accessed September 18, 2013, <http://labor-relations-board.vlex.com/vid/gregory-individual-transport-affiliated-39958546>.; SCEA, “The First Baton Rouge Conference,” 8; “Federal Bureau of Investigation: Highlander Folk School,” accessed September 18, 2014, [https://archive.org/stream/foia\\_Highlander\\_Folk\\_School-HQ-3/Highlander\\_Folk\\_School-HQ-3\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/foia_Highlander_Folk_School-HQ-3/Highlander_Folk_School-HQ-3_djvu.txt).



Thurgood Marshall, he was unafraid to endorse direct action to confront racial injustice.<sup>79</sup> Yet over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, Dent grew increasingly suspicious of radical leftists and joined a conservative element in the southern civil rights movement that viewed Communists with great alarm.<sup>80</sup> The southern wing of the NAACP even pressed headquarters to purge membership of Communists and other radicals. Even so, Dent believed his position as the public face of Dillard University necessitated political moderation and worried that increased campus civil rights activism might reduce white philanthropic funding.<sup>81</sup> To that end, Dent began vetting faculty for “iconoclasts” and monitored student behavior.<sup>82</sup>

Although Dent shied away from radical activism, equitable access to education became the cornerstone of his civil rights work. At a 1950s educational conference, Dent contended that academics and teachers should unite to join the legal battle for school integration.<sup>83</sup> For Dent, education moved people to action: “I think very little of that form of education which gives only information to us. I think of education as being more important when it develops attitudes in people, and I think as we develop attitudes we are likely to develop along with the impulse to do something about our attitudes.” Further, not only did education provide the impetus for black mobilization, black institutions’ policies on racial non-discrimination should be models for the country’s entire educational system: “are we going to fail in our obligation to provide the type of

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79 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35-36.

80 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 143.

81 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 35-36.

82 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 143.

83 LaFarge, “The Development of Cooperative Acceptance of Racial Integration,” 436.

education for the young people in this country which in many instances the Negro school can provide?"<sup>84</sup> Explicit in Dent's articulation of the benefit that black colleges provided was the hope that integration would spur an exchange of ideas and values across races.

As Albert Dent promoted cooperative organizing as a hospital administrator and university president, he exposed his son, future civil rights activist Tom Dent, to a practical model for social justice activism the young man would use throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As the Free Southern Theater's (FST) chairman between 1965 and 1967 and an influential staff member until 1971, Tom Dent significantly impacted the collective's philosophical and aesthetic goals.<sup>85</sup> Like his father, who strove to connect the city's black population to the wider black intellectual and political world by hosting important international dignitaries such as Emperor Haile Selassie, Tom sought to connect local black writers to renowned national and international black artists, bridging New Orleans and the African Diaspora.<sup>86</sup> It is therefore crucial to understand how the FST bridged two generations of black cooperation to build a southern black arts movement.

### **A.W. Dent to Tom Dent: Two Generations of Cooperative Organizing**

Indeed, cooperative organizing framed Tom Dent's life: Albert and his wife, Ernestine Jessie Covington, began experimenting with cooperative Mothers Clubs to improve black prenatal care just as Tom was born at Flint-Goodridge Hospital in 1932.<sup>87</sup>

Albert's connections to formal cooperative, educational, medical, and civil rights groups

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84 Ibid., 437.

85 John O'Neal, letter to Dr. Samuel Hay, 12 May 1980, 2, folder 7, box 2, O'Neal Papers.

86 Walter N. Vernon, *Becoming One People: The History of Louisiana Methodism* (Bossier City, LA: The Everett Publishing Company, 1987), 271.

87 Rudolph Lewis, "Jessie Covington Dent: Concert Artist and Humanist," ChickenBones, last updated April 9, 2008, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/jessecovingtondent.htm>.

also instructed the younger Dent in the art of networking with funding institutions. For the Dents, cooperative organizing was inseparable from civil rights campaigning, and they inculcated in Tom a strong racial identity and political consciousness. While Albert Dent was reluctant to explain why racism existed to his children, who “were supposed to become aware of the more subtle and unpleasant vagaries of race via osmosis,” he nonetheless introduced his children to black intellectuals and instilled in them the importance of working within and for one’s community.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, as wife of the Dillard University president, Jessie Covington Dent regularly entertained and hosted national African American luminaries, while she was also active in women’s antipoverty and racial justice organizations throughout her life.<sup>89</sup>

Just as significant, Covington Dent was a concert pianist and music educator who imbued in her family a love of the creative and performing arts.<sup>90</sup> Growing up in the Creole of color Seventh Ward with a passion for music, Tom Dent confronted the city’s black, working-class, participatory musical traditions, such as jazz music and second line parades. For many black Seventh Ward residents, the neighborhood’s oak-shaded Claiborne Avenue was a magnet for community gatherings; camped out on the grassy median strip, residents held parties, picnics, and watched Mardi Gras parades roll past the street.<sup>91</sup> However, these radical, democratic, and often oppositional performative modes were at odds with the Dent family’s assiduously cultivated middle-class status.

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88 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 15.

89 Lewis, “Jessie Covington Dent.”

90 Bernadette Pruitt, “Dent, Ernestine Jessie Covington,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, last modified on July 18, 2013, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fdabp>.

91 Reed, interview with author.

Organized by black Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs and Benevolent Associations, second lines were confined to poor black neighborhoods. As Adam Fairclough explains, New Orleans' black middle class shunned jazz funerals and Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club's Mardi Gras parades, believing the "grotesque" expressions of "lower-class hedonism" threatened "middle-class respectability."<sup>92</sup> Nonetheless, Tom Dent was inspired by black working-class religious and cultural expression and later incorporated its participatory forms into his writing and the FST's organizational structure.<sup>93</sup>

Tom Dent's passion for indigenous religious and cultural forms reflected his simultaneous connection and deviation from his father's older civil rights and cooperative goals. Dent recalls that his family "anchored their lives in the church, [and] learned to read and write in schools that churches built and supported, education having become the religion of racial advancement after Emancipation."<sup>94</sup> Although by the 1940s members of both the clergy and the working-class became increasingly involved in NAACP's black voter registration movement, Fairclough contends that ministers sometimes failed to effectively lead the grassroots rank-and-file because they were steeped in class-based hierarchy.<sup>95</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, organized by experts and funded by middle-class religious leaders to help the deserving poor, the Flint-Goodridge Hospital medical cooperative exemplified the hierarchical structure of middle-class black institutions in the 1930s and 1940s. This top-down orientation was reinforced in SCEA, as Albert Dent

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<sup>92</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 49.

<sup>93</sup> Catherine Michna, "We are Black Mind Jockeys: Tom Dent, The Free Southern Theater, and the Search for a Second-Line Literary Aesthetic in New Orleans," *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* 1 (July 2011), accessed October 1, 2014, <https://catherinemichna.wordpress.com/we-are-black-mind-jockeys/>.

<sup>94</sup> Dent, *Southern Journey*, 15.

<sup>95</sup> Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 50, 54, 72.

worked alongside respected educators, ministers, rabbis, and priests to spread cooperative ideals among their students and congregants.<sup>96</sup>

Believing that education would lift African Americans out of poverty and racial oppression, Albert and Jessie Dent sent Tom to Gilbert Academy, an elite, private high school run by Methodists. Located on St. Charles Street, it was one of the few New Orleans secondary schools serving black children.<sup>97</sup> Other notable civil rights activists graduated from Gilbert before it closed in 1949, including the lawyer Lolis Elie and Southern Christian Leadership Conference vice president Andrew Young.<sup>98</sup> Further, to educate Tom about racial politics and current affairs, Albert sent Tom to work as a teen reporter for the *Informer*, a Houston black weekly newspaper.<sup>99</sup> There, Dent recalls, he “obtained a much more realistic sense of what life in the segregated world was like,” as well as how the country’s legacy of racial prejudice informed current events.

Albert Dent’s educational and professional networks connected his son to key black and civil rights organizations; these mainstream institutions would later be critical avenues for establishing the FST’s credibility on a national scale. Like his father, Tom Dent attended Atlanta’s Morehouse College in the early 1950s. He recalls that curricula was “designed to help us make the best of a restricted situation, and to overcome it via learning and accommodation, not confrontation. Change would come...but we had no

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96 *Southeastern Cooperative Education Association Newsletter* (February 8, 1941), folder 46, box 2, SCL Records.

97 Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 37, 489.

98 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 158, 224.

99 *Ibid.*, 224.

target date in mind.”<sup>100</sup> Accordingly, his family and instructors encouraged Dent to leave the South in search of better opportunities.

As expected, Dent moved to New York after serving in the Navy, where he began working as a reporter at a Harlem paper in 1959. His father’s friendship with Thurgood Marshall secured Dent’s position as press attaché for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund between 1961 and 1963. While living in New York, Dent co-founded the writer’s workshop and magazine “Society of Umbra” with prominent black writers like Ishmael Reed and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Bakara).<sup>101</sup> As FST artistic director between 1966 and 1970, Dent invited colleagues like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison to work with New Orleanian writers, while also establishing touring ensembles to perform New Orleanian plays across the country. Most importantly, he would transfer Umbra’s dedication to egalitarian collaboration to FST’s artistic process and organizational structure.

In 1965, Dent returned New Orleans, intending to stay there only briefly. However, while working with Mississippi’s civil rights movement, he encountered the FST.<sup>102</sup> The theatrical collective’s politically conscious living theater galvanized Dent, as did his encounters with second line and New Orleans jazz performances. As fellow FST member Kalamu ya Salaam recalls, shortly thereafter, Dent recommitted himself to living in New Orleans in order to advance the southern civil rights project, provide “a creatively nurturing environment for black youths,” and foster a strong black creative arts

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100 Ibid., 13.

101 Michna, “We Are Black Mind Jockeys.”

102 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 1-2.

movement in New Orleans.<sup>103</sup> Significantly, while performance scholars like Catherine Michna mark the late 1960s as the climax of the FST's cultural creativity, when antipoverty funding structures supported its cultural programming, examining the Dent family's cross-generational legacy of cooperative organizing places the FST's political work within a much broader civil rights history.<sup>104</sup>

### **Free Southern Theater**

Historians have often examined Southern radical black theater collectives such as the FST within the context of the cultural politics of black liberation. In the case of the FST, academics have argued that the organization's significance is grounded in its connection to the Black Arts Movement and more generally, the racial politics of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>105</sup> But FST's structure as a collective is also significant; FST's permanent ensemble of 8 to 16 actors strove to develop "a collective method of theater work" that would demonstrate the liberatory potential of democratic decision-making to reshape society.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, while Michna argues that second-line participatory traditions grounded the FST's theatrical aesthetic and defined its relationship to its audience, the collective was just as inspired by radical leftist and Communist cooperative

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103 Kalamu ya Salaam, "Enriching the Paper Trail: An Interview with Tom Dent," *African American Review* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 327-45.

104 Michna, "We Are Black Mind Jockeys"; Annemarie Bean. "The Free Southern Theater: Mythology and the Moving Between Movements," in *Restaging the Sixties*, 269-285; James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ellen Louise Tripp, "Free Southern Theater: There is Always a Message" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1986).

105 Cohen-Cruz, "Comforting the Afflicted"; Camara, "'There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters in New Orleans.'"

106 Free Southern Theater, "Basic Program Guidelines" (December 1976): 17-18, folder 42, box 26, O'Neal Papers.

organizing.<sup>107</sup> To that end, members practiced collective remediation, group writing sessions, and equitable distribution of roles. The FST selected actors for its repertory-touring ensemble based on their commitment to cooperative principles, Black Liberation, and the FST's revolutionary goals.

Further, even as the FST's programming and structure were marked by indigenous cooperative and radical collective principles, it also allied with moderate economic and civil rights-oriented cooperatives in order to build black democratic institutions across the South. In other words, the FST was concerned with more than politically conscious theatrical programs; it embraced cooperative economics as part of a broader program for black political and economic empowerment. Focusing on FST coalition building, we can better understand how shifting national social, political, and economic trends and city demographic change between the 1960s and 1980s reconstituted New Orleans' black collectives and influenced the direction of their local political projects. While it integrated an older African American cooperative tradition with an outward-looking political philosophy and experimental aesthetic, the FST reflects the challenges cooperatives faced as they transferred the national conversation about civil rights and citizenship to the local community.

Throughout its history, the FST struggled to reconcile a range of competing geographical, aesthetic, and political alliances within the group. Serious cleavages emerged concerning 1) whether the collective would rely on New York patronage sources and play aesthetics or relocate to New Orleans and serve black New Orleanians; 2)

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<sup>107</sup> Michna, "We Are Black Mind Jockeys."



whether the collective would remain a biracial organization with societal integration as its primary goal, or transform into an exclusively black organization performing black-authored material to a black audience; 3) how politics would be incorporated into the group's performances, and whether Marxism or the rhetoric of cultural nationalism politics would guide its creative process; and finally 4) which community the FST should serve and what role it would play within the collective.

Specifically, the FST, like the Flint Goodridge Hospital medical cooperative movement before it, balanced the needs of its New Orleans constituents with its desire to address rural poverty and political disempowerment in order to build a lasting black cooperative movement. To that end, I examine two moments in the FST's career that reflect the intergenerational connections between black cooperative movements in New Orleans. The FST's relationship to New Orleans community organizations in Desire and Central City and its work with the Episcopal Church's General Convention of Special Programs continued earlier African American efforts to create a network of black cooperatives across the city and nation. Ultimately, the FST was concerned with much more than its theatrical programs: like Albert Dent, it embraced a cooperative society as part of a broader program for expanding black political and economic power.

### **The Free Southern Theater's Collective Roots**

FST's early members reflect the intersection of civil rights activism and black theater. Founders Doris Derby, John O'Neal, and Gilbert Moses formed the FST in 1963

out of the Tougaloo Drama Workshop at Tougaloo College, Mississippi.<sup>108</sup> Initially the FST recruited “anyone who said ‘We dig civil rights’” to act in its touring repertory group.<sup>109</sup> Early member Woodie King was a founder of the Detroit-based Concept East Theater, a civil rights-influenced organization that embraced African Diasporic traditions and served as a model for the FST.<sup>110</sup> Moses was a reporter for the *Mississippi Free Press*, a weekly civil rights paper published by a multiracial activist coalition, including Medgar Evers, while Derby and O’Neal were Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field directors.<sup>111</sup>

In fact, the FST considered itself the “cultural arm” of SNCC; the collective’s communitarian structure and civil rights mission were directly informed by members’ participation in 1964’s Freedom Summer, and Mississippi’s Freedom Schools in particular.<sup>112</sup> Proposed by SNCC field secretary Charlie Cobb, Freedom Schools were alternative educational institutions that fostered black students’ civic engagement and community activism.<sup>113</sup> Presaging the quotidian setting of FST performances, classes were held in community spaces such as churches, homes, and parks. Most significantly,

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108 “John O’Neal and ‘Free Southern Theater,’” The People Say Project, last modified March 29, 2011, <http://www.thepeoplesayproject.org/john-oneal-and-free-southern-theater/>.

109 William Glover, “A Squad of Actors is Taking Special Training for a Back-Roads Tour of Dixie This Summer” (April 5, 1965): 1, folder 40, box 26, O’Neal Papers.

110 O’Neal, letter to Hay; Cohen-Cruz, “‘Comforting the Afflicted,’” 288; Michna, “We Are Black Mind Jockeys.”

111 John O’Neal, letter to Dr. Samuel Hay, 12 May 1980, 1, folder 7, box 2, O’Neal Papers; Jan Cohen-Cruz, “‘Comforting the Afflicted,’” 288; “Historical Overview,” *Restaging the Sixties*, 263; “Mississippi Free Press,” Mississippi Civil Rights Project, accessed October 21, 2014, [http://mscivilrightsproject.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=499:mississippi-free-press&catid=295:organization&Itemid=33](http://mscivilrightsproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=499:mississippi-free-press&catid=295:organization&Itemid=33).

112 “Ticket/Registration Information,” Junebug Productions, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.eventzilla.net/web/event?eventid=2138982928>.

113 Glover, “A Squad of Actors,” 1.

the volunteer-run schools rejected hierarchical instruction, instead promoting student-centered learning based on discussion, critical thinking, and leadership training.

Inspired by the Freedom Summer, the FST connected community theater with racial justice work. Interested in wedding cultural production with “the struggle of Black folk,” SNCC representative Cobb championed the FST’s political theatrics.<sup>114</sup> For example, Freedom School staff used FST’s performance of Martin B. Duberman’s *In White America* (1963) as the foundation for its curriculum.<sup>115</sup> The play attempted to describe to a white middle-class audience “what it has been like to be a Negro in this country (to the extent that a white man can describe it).”<sup>116</sup> As John O’Neal recalls, “The whole curriculum of the Freedom School was built around the play, because the play was built around the struggle of African American people...We’d read it and give a context to people who taught and organized the community that we were performing in.”<sup>117</sup> Reprising their experience as Freedom School and SNCC volunteers, FST’s actors performed in black neighborhoods and lived among local black families and civil rights activists while touring Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama.<sup>118</sup>

Ultimately, the collective sought to “stimulate creative and reflective thought” among southern African Americans by nurturing a black-directed theatrical movement

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114 O’Neal, letter to Hay; Cohen-Cruz, “Comforting the Afflicting,” 288.

115 Shani Jamila, “Creative Resistance: A Study of the Free Southern Theater,” *The Huffington Post*, last updated September 14, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shani-jamila/creative-resistance\\_b\\_5586443.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shani-jamila/creative-resistance_b_5586443.html).

116 Maura Troester, “In White America/Uhuru,” *The Chicago Reader* (February 11, 1933), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/in-white-america/huru/Content?oid=881390>.

117 Jamila, “Creative Resistance.”

118 Free Southern Theater, “A General Prospectus for the Establishment of a “Free Southern Theater,” quoted in “John O’Neal and ‘Free Southern Theater,’” The People Say Project.

combining “art and social awareness...which relate to the problems within the Negro himself, and within the Negro community.”<sup>119</sup> Additionally, FST’s community theater programs reflected its faith in cooperative structure and collective process. FST practiced participatory theater rooted in African “call and response” traditions and 1930s New Deal “living newspaper” plays.<sup>120</sup> For example, Dent recalled one 1965 improvised play about Bogalusa’s civil rights demonstrations and subsequent racial violence that featured local black students and demonstrators. Remarking that virtually “the entire Negro community has come” to see the FST perform “the determination of the Negro citizens to fight back, to fight for their rights, and to take action to insure their safety while protesting for their rights,” Dent noted that “the audience responds to the subtleties, humor, truth of every situation as it develops on the makeshift stage.”<sup>121</sup>

Interestingly, even as the FST propelled itself to the vanguard of black community theater, their early productions explicitly tied the collective to Old Left radical politics familiar to Albert Dent’s New Deal and Popular Front generation. For example, living newspaper plays were popular among progressive New Orleanians during the Depression. The New Orleans Group Theatre produced Lenox Antony’s

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119 Ibid.

120 Rachel Breunlin, “The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater in New Orleans: Interviews with Karen-Kaia Livers and Chakula Cha Jua,” ChickenBones, accessed October 2, 2013, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/legacyfreesouththeater.htm>; Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines,” 17.

121 Tom Dent, Report, “The Free Southern Theater: An Evaluation,” *Freedomways* (First Quarter, 1966), folder 15, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

*Headlines in Review* as an antifascist fundraiser.<sup>122</sup> Community members contributed to the production, both as actors and as audience members.

At the same time, the FST's dedication to collective theater reflected the radical theater movement of the 1960s. For example, Richard Schechner, the group's white producing director and a drama professor at Tulane University, was a strong proponent of community participation and the personally liberatory potential of experimental drama. After Schechner left the FST, in 1967 he started the experimental theater troupe The Performance Group, which rejected artifice in search of authentic bodily expressions and radical collective actions.<sup>123</sup> Audiences moved freely through the production space and were involved in the play.<sup>124</sup> Troupe members collaborated in encounter groups, physical and emotional exercises, and exchanged ideas on production decisions in order to bond creatively, while Schechner controlled the ultimate direction of the plays.<sup>125</sup>

Further, Schechner's interest in cooperative theater deeply influenced the FST's organizational structure. Offering free performances of socially relevant material, the FST mirrored guerrilla theater groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe. As democratic collectives, the Troupe modeled egalitarian social relationships and formed

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122 Mass mailer, "The New Orleans Medical Bureau and Spanish-American Ladies' Committee of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy" [nd], Vertical File: Organizations, North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

123 Martin Puchner, "The Performance Group Between Theater and Theory," in *Restaging the Sixties*, 314.

124 Theodore Shank, *Beyond Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 98, 99.

125 *Ibid.*, 103; Puchner, "The Performance Group," 322.

cooperative partnerships with like-minded organizations.<sup>126</sup> Other radical collectives like El Teatro Campesino fervently believed that collective creative organizations would confront repressive political and economic institutions that sought to dominate marginalized populations.<sup>127</sup> Finally, the Living Theater countered hierarchical power structures with communal and cooperative creative production. In the 1960s, members wrote plays together and lived communally to model their anarchist and pacifist ideals.

### **Desire Housing Project**

While initially the FST was committed to furthering the civil rights movement in the rural South, the theater's move to a disused New Orleans warehouse in 1964 presaged a sea change in the theater's political outlook and creative choices. As an influx of native writers and artists swelled its staff, the FST began to adapt the broader civil rights movement to the needs of the immediate New Orleans community. Its connection to the city's working-class black neighborhoods solidified in 1966, when the collective acquired an abandoned supermarket on Louisa Street near the Desire Housing Project; it had been badly damaged during Hurricane Betsy, a storm that disproportionately affected black communities in the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>128</sup> Desire was the one of the most dangerous and densely populated neighborhoods in New Orleans. Rapid white flight and large-scale urban redevelopment projects displaced and concentrated 13,000 black residents in the

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126 Michael William Doyle, "Staging the Revolution: Guerrilla Theater as a Countercultural Practice, 1965-1968," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

127 Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, "Reconstructing Collective Dynamics: El Teatro Campesino from a Twenty-First-Century Perspective," in *Restaging the Sixties*, 220.

128 Dent and Moses, ed., *Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963), 111.

increasingly dilapidated housing. While President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty initiatives aided anti-poverty programs in Desire, flooding and structural damage from Hurricane Betsy accelerated the area's decline.<sup>129</sup> Despite city and non-profit organizations efforts to provide social services, and Desire residents' urgent requests to help plan and evaluate those services, the housing project continued to suffer.<sup>130</sup> By 1973, Desire's young, black, and female residents experienced 1,000 percent jobless rates than did the middle-class white suburb of Lakeview.<sup>131</sup> Additionally, juvenile delinquency rates in Desire were some of the highest in the city.<sup>132</sup>

The collective was well aware of municipal hypocrisy; city and federal redevelopment programs segregated New Orleans' inner city black residents while giving lip service to an integrated society. The FST labeled Desire as "a forgotten ghetto," home to "thousands of imprisoned black people."<sup>133</sup> Foreshadowing the 1970 shootout between police, Black Panthers, and Desire residents, FST member Murray Levy predicted in 1966, "The situation is very close to exploding in the face of 'charming' New Orleans."<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in fellow member Roscoe Orman's poem, he describes Desire as girding for change: "All beauty in chains/Rumblings deep somewhere-between-the-stomach-and-the/brain."<sup>135</sup>

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129 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 3.

130 Economic Opportunity Committee, Desire Area Community Council, letter to Victor Schiro, 16 Mar., 1966, box S66-7, folder: Economic Opportunity-1966, Schiro Papers.

131 Department of Program Development, *Profile of Poverty in New Orleans* (New Orleans: Department of Program Development, April 1973), 20.

132 Ibid., 32.

133 Murray Levy, "Free Southern Theater Plans Afro-American Emphasis," *New Orleans Freedom Press* 1, no. 1 (May 1966): 7.

134 Ibid., 7; Arend, *Showdown in Desire*.

135 Roscoe Orman, in *Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater*.

To speed its liberation, the group strove to expose Desire's racialized disinvestment to the general public. Its poetry program *Ghetto of Desire*, which scathingly portrayed the housing project as "dreamed up by a city planner at Auschwitz," documents residents' spatial isolation—cut off from the city geographically by railroads and canals, and subjected to inadequate educational, occupational, and recreational opportunities.<sup>136</sup> Alerted that the program would be included in *Look Up and Live*, a 1966 CBS documentary about regional theaters, New Orleans mayor Victor Schiro, Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso, and HANO objected that *Ghetto of Desire* unfairly portrayed the city and project and "engenders racial disharmony."<sup>137</sup> While the show aired nationally, local media outlets censored the documentary.<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, the public response to *Ghetto of Desire* galvanized FST members, who discovered that their productions could potentially make powerful changes to the city's racial relations.<sup>139</sup>

At the same time, black members encouraged the collective to create a community-based theater that more accurately reflected Desire residents' political, economic, and social needs. As a result, the FST's offices on Louisa Street would eventually house both a theater and African American cultural center. Believing that the "Afro-American has been divided for too long from his background and has been alienated from his great culture," the center strove to educate residents about the "art and

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136 Allen Dowling, letter to Tom Dent, 1 Jul. 1966, *Ibid.*, 126; Breunlin, "The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater in New Orleans."

137 Dowling, letter, 1 Jul. 1966.

138 "Tom Dent Commentary," in *Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater*, 132.

139 Michna, "We are Black Mind Jockeys."



science of the non-white races of the world.”<sup>140</sup> Its objective was to instill ethnic pride in its black visitors. The theater collective performed original plays, host forums, poetry, song, improv, film nights, and “bull sessions.” For example, one 1967 touring poetry show featured Dent’s manifesto poem, “Uncle Tom’s Secondline Funeral,” which imagines a series of working-class second line parades celebrating the death of black intellectual, spiritual, and political “race traitors” hindering the civil rights movement. Dent asserts, “for the black public official who believes we have made enough progress...we bequeath lifted hats, three deep bows, a long, long memorial service replete with history of Harriet Tubman through Malcolm X.” We “lay him to rest—then jump with jubilation that he is dead and gone.”<sup>141</sup> The FST also performed plays in a range of working-class spaces, from stores and bars, to churches and schools, and attracted diverse audiences, including children, laborers, and the elderly.

Further, the FST offered workshops in acting, writing, and stagecraft so that it could eventually recruit actors and playwrights from the Ninth Ward. To allow greater access to FST resources, admission was free, supported by tax-deductible donations. The FST also promoted discussion and dialogue with community participants after shows. As an outgrowth of these conversations, O’Neal implemented the “story circle,” in which workshop attendees shared and exchanged creative ideas around a central theme.<sup>142</sup> Story circles often led to other collective activities such as dramatic composition.

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140 Levy, “Free Southern Theater Plans Afro-American Emphasis,” 7.

141 Tom Dent, quoted in Michna, “We are Black Mind Jockeys.”

142 Cohen-Cruz, “Comforting the Afflicted,” 299.

In response, Desire residents welcomed the collective. White FST member Murray Levy noted, “they will give us a chance to earn our keep. Why is it that black people in this country are always more gracious than white people?”<sup>143</sup> Because members believed they would enrich and be enriched by working-class citizens, they fervently advocated sustained resident participation: Levy continued that, the neighborhood “brings ideas to it, argues with it, and needs it.” For example, future member Kalamu ya Salaam had grown up in the Ninth Ward resident and regularly attended FST workshops. He infused his poetry with the improvisational and egalitarian imagery of brass bands and second line dancing of New Orleans. In 1969’s “Leader,” Salaam questions the legitimacy of middle-class African American civil rights leaders who reject working-class participatory culture. He “saw a Negro at a dance/ last nite who called himself/ my leader & that nigger/ couldn’t dance to save his life/ so how he gon lead me!”<sup>144</sup> Similarly, in “All in the Street” (1968) invoking the “tidal wave of us dancing in the street with brass bands,” Salaam declared that black mass performance would lead to revolution: “the cities are next.”

The FST also worked closely with Desire and Ninth Ward community organizations to more concretely address the area’s crushing poverty. While the mainstream consumer movement largely ignored politics, cooperative economics permeated the Ninth Ward’s network of government-funded community antipoverty and

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143 Levy, “Free Southern Theater Plans Afro-American Emphasis,” 7.

144 Kalamu ya Salaam, “Art for Life: My Story, My Song,” Chickenbones. Accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/artforlife7.htm>.

economic development organizations.<sup>145</sup> For example, during the late 1960s, the New Orleans Coalition's weekly newsletter reported on cooperative programming offered by Desire-area FST performances, the Desire Area Community Council, and Total Community Action's neighborhood tutoring programs. In order to "meet the immediate and long-range problems of residents," the Urban League successfully organized cooperative tenants unions in each of the city's public housing complexes, including Desire and Florida.<sup>146</sup> However, despite the support of like-minded community organizations, in 1965 the FST was forced to suspend operations for five months as it scrambled for funding. Although they welcomed its presence, low-income Desire residents did not have the resources to financially support FST. In contrast, the city's conservative black middle-class was reluctant to support black liberationist theater.<sup>147</sup>

The FST's struggles in Desire revealed serious internal rifts as well. Dent and more radical members claimed that the theater's early material reflected initial members' middle-class, northern background rather than their constituents' lived experiences. Native, often working-class New Orleanians argued that it was pointless to perform *Waiting for Godot* and *In White America* in black neighborhoods unfamiliar with theatrical conventions.<sup>148</sup> Further, the FST's exclusively black audiences needed few

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145 "Calendar of Events," *The New Orleans Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 9 (March 1, 1969), Vertical File: Organizations, New Orleans Coalition. Jones Hall Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA; "Calendar of Events," *The New Orleans Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 10, (April 1, 1969): 2; "Tutoring and Enrichment Programs for Young Children in New Orleans," *The New Orleans Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 11 (May 1, 1969): 2, 3, 6.

146 "What's Happening Where?" *The New Orleans Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 7 (Jan 1, 1969): 1.

147 Camara, "There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters," 60; Dent, "The Free Southern Theater: An Evaluation."

148 Glover, "A Squad of Actors," 1-2.

reminders of what it was like “to be a Negro.” While the FST originally supported the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement, by the late 1960s, New Orleans’ black creative writers rejected New York production aesthetics and philanthropic organizations they felt no embodied reflected FST’s evolving aesthetic and political mission.

### **Black Arts Movement**

Simultaneously, inspired by the coalescing black liberation and Black Arts Movement, between 1965 and 1967, Tom Dent and his allies demanded that FST become a community-based incubator for local black creative writers and performers in New Orleans and the South.<sup>149</sup> Historians of the Black Arts Movement claim that the black militant Revolutionary Action Movement, Maulana Karenga’s black nationalist US Organization, and the Nation of Islam influenced the Black Arts Movement’s ideological framework.<sup>150</sup> FST member Kalamu ya Salaam recalls that the Black Arts Movement was “a conglomeration of local initiatives throughout the country that all worked from their own similar vision of Black Arts, while being influenced by the national movement.<sup>151</sup> For example, black FST members concentrated on political practice and revolutionary theater influenced by the seven principles of Kwanzaa, or *Nguzo Saba*, a “holistic value system” one practices daily to become spiritually whole that stresses collective work, unity, creativity, and cooperative economics.<sup>152</sup> Drawing on

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149 Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines,” 3.

150 Kalamu ya Salaam, “Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement,” accessed October 7, 2013, <http://www.nathanielturner.com/kalamuessay.htm>.

151 Ibid.

152 Albert J. McKnight, C.S.Sp., *Whistling in the Wind: The Autobiography of The Reverend A.J. McKnight, C.S.Sp.* (Opelousas, LA: Southern Development Foundation, Inc., 1994), 112; Camara, “There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters,” 46.

revolutionary nationalist rhetoric, Gilbert Moses and Tom Dent rejected professional theater models and proposed that FST recruit actors from the black community while raising residents' consciousness about societal and political problems.<sup>153</sup> Similarly, John O'Neal began to critique the weaknesses of a civil rights movement focused on legislation and federal intervention and instead embraced black cultural liberation.

Galvanized by the black liberationist ideals of the Black Arts Movement and SNCC's efforts to build a radical black political apparatus, FST ousted its white members in 1968.<sup>154</sup> As Moses wrote to O'Neal in 1967, the FST should be "a theater for the Black people established by Black people—and not a white liberal idea established for the good of the Black people."<sup>155</sup> Accordingly, they dropped *In White America* from their repertoire and began performing black-authored plays such as Black Arts Movement founder Amiri Bakara's *Slave Ship* as well as original FST work. These plays explored racial identity to heighten audiences' self-awareness as politicized black people.<sup>156</sup>

For example, Tom Dent's 1968 play *Ritual Murder* reflects what FST member Quo Vadis Get calls "the yelling years" of the late 1960s: "Most of our performance pieces required raising our voice in one way or another and railing against one system or another...[yet] there was also a concerted effort to talk about the beauty of being member

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153 "Letter from Gilbert Moses to John O'Neal in March 1967," in *Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater*, 101.

154 Although it opened its membership to whites and other ethnicities after reorganizing in 1973, the FST remained focused on black social and political issues. Free Southern Theater, "Basic Program Guidelines," 3.

155 "Letter from Gilbert Moses to John O'Neal on March 1967," *Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater*, 101.

156 Free Southern Theater, "Basic Program Guidelines."

of a [black] community.”<sup>157</sup> Similarly, *Ritual Murder* examines the communal pleasures of black creativity as well as structural racism and classism that drive violence within the black community. Reflecting the FST’s black liberationist rhetoric, both themes are “unknown to the white world.”<sup>158</sup> Speaking in rhythm to the strands of “Summertime,” Ninth Ward characters deconstruct the brutal stabbing of a young black man by his friend Joe Brown Jr. While Brown’s teachers, lovers, family, social workers, and police officers fail to understand his “homicidal act,” Brown acknowledges that “Something began to come loose in me, like my mind would float away from my body...No one ever suspected, but my mind was trying to define me, to tell me who I was the way other people see me, only it couldn’t because it didn’t know where to begin.”

Yet black psychologist Dr. Brayboy underlines the play’s central argument, that Brown’s murder is “a form of group suicide,” born out of systematic racial oppression. After years witnessing a grisly procession of black bodies “bleeding, blood seeping from the doors of the taxicabs,...icepicks and knives,” he theorizes, “When murder occurs for no apparent reason but happens all the time...it is ritual murder.” However, while James Roberts, the victim, concedes that the hopelessness some African American communities feel inevitably leads to self-violence, he hints at the necessity of black militant action: “Friends kill each other all the time...unless you have an enemy you can both kill.”

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157 Gex-Breaux, quoted in Michna, “We are Black Mind Jockeys.”

158 Tom Dent, “Ritual Murder: A One Act Play,” *Calaloo* 2 (February 1978): 67-81.

*Ritual Murder* thus reflects the FST's new philosophical worldview that the daily experiences of working-class African Americans should drive liberatory theater.<sup>159</sup>

### **Central City**

No longer subscribing to integrationist goals, when the all-black FST relocated to Dryades Street in Central City in 1969, the collective abandoned its vision of biracial cooperation that it had previously propounded. Central City encompasses a broad area: it stretches into the downtown Central Business District, all the way to the Mississippi River, and is bordered by affluent, white, uptown communities.<sup>160</sup> Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Central City's demographics radically changed as white flight to the suburbs increasingly concentrated low-income blacks within the neighborhood.<sup>161</sup> In 1968, nearly 7,000 families lived in poverty, the largest number out of New Orleans' six most impoverished neighborhoods.<sup>162</sup> Further, integration throughout the city encouraged black businesses to leave Dryades Street, so that by 1969, what once had been a bustling commercial thoroughfare was now a disinvested, decaying street.<sup>163</sup> Once established, the FST devoted itself to creating specialized cultural and educational programs that would unite, educate, and mobilize black Central City residents to achieve radical self-reliance.

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159 Tom Dent, "Beyond Rhetoric: Toward a Blk Southern Theater," 13, folder 6, box 37, Tom Dent Papers; Tom Dent, "The Black Arts Movement in the South: Black Consciousness through Reality Mirrors," in *Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater*, 5.

160 "Central City Neighborhood Snapshot," Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.gnocdc.org/orleans/2/61/snapshot.html>.

161 Department of Program Development, *Profile of Poverty in New Orleans*, 2.

162 Social Welfare Planning Council, *Community Organization in Low-Income Neighborhoods in New Orleans* (New Orleans: Social Welfare Planning Council, December 1968), 19.

163 "Central City Neighborhood Snapshot."

FST joined a number of civil rights organizations confronting the neighborhood's abysmal economic state. For example, Total Community Action (TCA) established Central City as one of six "target areas" to receive federal Office of Economic Opportunity antipoverty funds providing job training, youth leadership and tutoring programs, and out-patient clinics.<sup>164</sup> TCA's Central City neighborhood council used a variety of methods to propel social and political change in the community, such as letter writing campaigns, marches and boycotts, and finally, citywide coalitions that pressured city officials to address civic concerns.<sup>165</sup>

Significantly, Central City's TCA branch also advocated cooperatives as a means to empower low-income citizens to improve their community and secure gainful employment. Not only did it establish cooperative stores, buying clubs, credit unions and producer cooperatives, but it also supported the FST's community-oriented educational goals.<sup>166</sup> For instance, it funded the library of the Congo Square Writers Association, a FST offshoot. Additionally, in 1971, student graduates of FST's community theater workshop performed African American playwright and Woodie King mentee Ron Milner's *The Warning: A Theme for Linda* before TCA's Lower Ninth Ward

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164 Tiger, "A Bitter Pill Indeed, 54-56.

165 Social Welfare Planning Council, *Community Organization*, 15.

166 "Suggested Guidelines New Orleans Committee on Economic Opportunity Program," September 16, 1964, box S64-10, folder: Economic Opportunity Program-1964, Schiro Papers; Marilyn Jane Celestine, "Volunteer in Service to America, VISTA as Agent for Social Change (A Case Study of VISTA in New Orleans)" (Masters Thesis, University of New Orleans, 1976), 18; "Hopeful Signs of New Social Action in the Irish Channel," *The New Orleans Coalition Newsletter* 1, no. 12 (June 1, 1969): 2; *Quick Facts: TCA Target Areas*, 2;



Neighborhood Improvement Council at Alfred Lawless Junior High School.<sup>167</sup> While set in Detroit, Milner grimly intones that the play “could be in any black neighborhood in any city in the country.”<sup>168</sup> *The Warning* chronicles the struggles of an idealistic young woman, Linda, and the hopes she pins on her boyfriend Donald, an aspiring writer, to deliver her from Detroit’s crushing cycle of poverty, neglect, and abuse.

Despite the TCA’s enthusiasm for FST programming, Dent felt the organization was too focused on individual political gains and lacked the political will to support far-reaching social and economic programs for African Americans.<sup>169</sup> Echoing resident concerns, Dent argued that for real political access, black New Orleanians needed revolutionary leaders who “answer primarily to the interests of the community—not the power structure.”<sup>170</sup> With homeless rates at 10 percent, Central City residents demanded more and better paying jobs, while pressing for improved public housing.<sup>171</sup>

While the FST largely dismissed War on Poverty institutions as reformist rather than revolutionary, it embraced the constellation of black-run progressive stores and activist organizations residing along Central City’s Dryades Street. Tom Dent recalls that in 1970, “There was the bookstore down the street, the poetry journal, activist and political newspapers, the beginnings of a network of artists and activists. There was the Nation of Islam, which was attractive to many ex-Movement people because of its

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167 Beunyce Rayford Cunningham, *Afro-American Writers After 1955: Dramatists and Prose Writers* (Detroit: Gale, 1985); “FST: Strong Black Hands...To Break the Shackles of the Mind,” 1972, folder 28, box 4, Nkombo Records.

168 Ronald Milner, “The Warning,” *Negro Digest* 18, no. 6 (April 1969): 53.

169 Tiger, “A Bitter Pill Indeed,” 65.

170 Thomas Dent, “New Orleans Versus Atlanta,” *Southern Exposure* 7, no. 1 (1979): 68; Social Welfare Planning Council, *Community Organization*, 14, 32, 33.

171 Social Welfare Planning Council, *Community Organization*, 27, 31.

philosophy of economic self-determination.”<sup>172</sup> Further, educated residents often volunteered within housing projects or disinvested communities. In short, the FST was part of a “small black cultural [center]...[which] helped provide a place where these activities and interactions could take place.” Central City’s cultural and political foment “happened within a black world with few white participants except for the most radical.”

Additionally, the FST partnered with established Central City religious or community non-profit organizations to administer community theater and creative writing programs.<sup>173</sup> As Beth Turner, founder-editor of *Black Masque*, notes, most black theater companies began as community-driven projects and were “allied to an antipoverty agenda.”<sup>174</sup> Some of these non-profits either were themselves cooperatives or were interested in starting cooperatives as part of a larger program of community survival. For example, the FST exchanged plays and actors with the Dashiki Theater, a community theater formed in 1968 by Dillard University graduates to provide black cultural and political role models for Central City residents.<sup>175</sup> The theater also ensured that more than half of its members were Central City residents. By assisting cultural liberation organizations, the FST “encourage[d] and support[ed] the revolutionary struggles of the Black Nation in America and oppressed people throughout the world.”<sup>176</sup>

### **FST and Working-Class Black Performance**

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172 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 45.

173 “Central City Neighborhood Snapshot.”

174 Beth Turner, interview with Jan Cohen-Cruz, New York City, February 4, 2002.

175 Pamphlet, “Dashiki Project Theatre,” (1972), 1, folder 10, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

176 Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines,” iv-23.

In order to appeal to African Americans otherwise unfamiliar with theater, Tom Dent and other native New Orleanians continued to push FST to incorporate working-class participatory musical and religious traditions. Performance scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz argues that the civil rights movement's connection to the black church, central to southern black culture, "provided the Free Southern Theater with a particular moral and spiritual orientation" immediately accessible to its neighborhood community members.<sup>177</sup> Similarly, John O'Neal believed that as they captivated their audiences, black artists and preachers were inspired by common spiritual, aesthetic, and moral qualities.<sup>178</sup> Reflecting their diverse religious backgrounds, FST members embedded black Baptist and Catholic call-and-response and other cooperative elements into plays, poetry, and music to ensure audiences' active participation.<sup>179</sup> Likewise, Karen Kaia Livers describes the impact of communal religious traditions on FST offshoot Alliance for Community Theater: "In community theater, the invisible wall [between performers and audience] was broken a long time ago. It excites us if somebody yells something from the audience...productions are very much involved in pulling them up and bring them on stage."<sup>180</sup>

Just as important, Dent and FST's working-class native New Orleanian members drew on the city's benevolent associations' jazz funerals and second line parades for creative inspiration and structural organization.<sup>181</sup> As cooperative structures rooted freedmen's benevolent societies, and religious reform groups after the Civil War, mutual

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177 Cohen-Cruz, "Comforting the Afflicted," 290.

178 Ibid., 293.

179 Steve Kent, interview by Jan Cohen-Cruz, Los Angeles, January 22-25, 2002.

180 Breunlin, "The Legacy of the Free Southern Theater in New Orleans."

181 Michna, "We Are Black Mind Jockeys,"

aid and pleasure clubs defray the cost of members' grocery, rent, and medical bills and funeral services.<sup>182</sup> The societies and their second lines, or the dancers and revelers who follow the club members and band, are neighborhood-specific and often tied to public housing complexes. Belonging to a mutual aid club or dancing in a second line, then, reflects one's community identity.

As the central community event of working class African Americans, mutual aid and pleasure clubs parade every Sunday down Central City's streets, and as many as a thousand people can dance for eight miles on a Sunday afternoon.<sup>183</sup> Member dues enable each club to hire a brass band and provide food during their annual two regular parades a year, as well as funeral marches for members. During the parades, brass bands play elegiac and celebratory music, while club members follow in coordinated suits. The second line is last, a body of community members who dance together but as the spirit moves them, revealing individual creative expression while solidifying community bonds. Cooperative activist Sally Stevens claims that the second line is "the most democratic activity happening in America today," not only because the barrier between performer and audience is low, but also because it embraces collective improvisation.<sup>184</sup>

To that end, the FST's 1985 jazz funeral reflects the culmination of the collective's celebration of black communal and religious musical genres. Marking the end of a twenty-two year career, former members of the FST and southern activist theater

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182 Joel Dinerstein, interview with author, July 1, 2012.

183 Dinerstein, interview with author.

184 Stevens, interview with author; Helen A. Regis, "Keeping Jazz Funerals Alive': Blackness and the Politics of Memory in New Orleans," in *Southern Heritage on Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity within Southern Regionalism*, ed. Celeste Ray (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003).

members paraded from the FST theater to Congo Square in Armstrong Park, while the seminal Rebirth Jazz Band played “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” After a eulogy, in which former members placed mementos into the FST coffin, a second line parade danced out of the burial site to celebrate FST’s life, playing “We Shall Overcome” and “Good Golly Miss Molly.”<sup>185</sup> Commemorating the FST through a New Orleans black working-class funeral tradition communicated the collective’s commitment to collectivity and common experience.

However, the FST’s jazz funeral nods to the second line’s history as a tool for black resistance to decades of urban disinvestment. As historian George Lipsitz argues, black mutualistic traditions turn “segregation into congregation,” by “fashioning ferocious attachments to place” in order to unite residents around ethnic and community survival.<sup>186</sup> Similarly, Mindy Fullilove contends that black New Orleanians’ neighborhood support networks constitute “emotional ecosystems” that bind residents by shared “space, place, and race.”<sup>187</sup> These ecosystems nurture community solidarity and mobilize resistance to institutionalized racism and classism.<sup>188</sup> Indeed, second line parades are often vehicles for organized protest around public housing shortage or demolition.<sup>189</sup> By holding the FST jazz funeral in Congo Square in Armstrong Park, collective members honored the musical roots of working-class blacks, as well as oppositional politics centered in black communities.

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185 Cohen-Cruz, ““Comforting the Afflicted,”” 267.

186 Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 243.

187 Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

188 Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 243.

189 Stevens, interview with author.

## **FST's Cooperative Structure**

At the heart of the FST was its collective structure, a conscious organizing decision that became a model for other Southern progressive black community theaters for decades. After ousting its white members, the FST adhered to a cultural nationalist philosophy, which united people of African descent according to a perceived common diasporic culture and a shared history of oppression and slavery.<sup>190</sup> Its mission was to help other organizations produce plays and other cultural products “of the highest artistic quality possible” to in order to advance domestic and international African Diasporic liberation projects.<sup>191</sup> As an educational resource, the FST hoped to use theater to “unify, educate, and inspire” black people in New Orleans and the Deep South to achieve self-determination and community autonomy. Its revolutionary labor was grounded in the precept that politics and culture were integrated: the FST existed as a “cultural organization whose artistic work is thoroughly and consciously political in all aspects.”

Further, to build a broad revolutionary movement, the FST allied with and helped form a range of politically conscious black cooperatives and community theater groups across the nation. In the early 1970s, activists interested in forming their own political, agricultural, or creative cooperatives requested O’Neal as a strategist and trainer.<sup>192</sup> Hired by the Cooperative College Center in Syracuse, New York, O’Neal flew FST poets to the institution to model the collective’s performance style and organizational

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<sup>190</sup> Dent, *Southern Journey*, 52.

<sup>191</sup> Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines.”

<sup>192</sup> John O’Neal, letter to Calvin Walton, 22 Dec. 1970, folder 4, box 2, O’Neal Papers.

principles.<sup>193</sup> Additionally, to assist their creative and political endeavors, the FST sent plays and literature to other non-profit theaters starting their own collectives or expanding their operations. For example, when the Miami-based Theatre of Afro-Arts and Battle Creek, Michigan's Black Theatre formed in 1969, they solicited John O'Neal for advice and to connect with similar organizations.<sup>194</sup> By sharing resources with other collectives, radical theater groups and cooperatives hoped to "keep abreast of what's really happening" in the black liberation struggle.<sup>195</sup>

The FST also researched other black theater collectives to improve its own operations. In 1972, Joe Stevens, the collective's technical director, toured black theater organizations around the country and reported on his findings. He visited theaters in New York as well as the South: Harlem's National Black Theater and New York City's Afro American Studio for Speech and Theater and Olantunji's School of African Culture were included in the itinerary, as were the Atlanta's Blk Image Theater and Boston's National Center for Afro-American Artists.<sup>196</sup> The extensive tour prompted the FST to seriously reevaluate its political and creative purpose, and it would lead to a completely revised mission statement the following year.

After John O'Neal assumed directorship over the FST in the early 1970s, the FST incorporated Marxist study groups and collective discussions alongside a renewed

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193 John O'Neal, letter to Bob Fullilove, 21 Aug. 1970, folder 3, box 2, O'Neal Papers.

194 Wendell Marcisse, letter to John O'Neal, 21 May 1969, folder 2, box 2, O'Neal Papers; Thelma Robinson, letter to FST, 17 Nov. 1969, *Ibid.*

195 Antoinette J. Escoe, letter to the Free Southern Theater, 17 Apr. 1969, folder 2, box 2, O'Neal Papers.

196 Joe Stevens, "Black Theater Study Tour Report, Part 1"; Joe Stevens, "Black Theater Study Tour Part 2," folder 28, box 4, Nkombo Records.

commitment to community-driven theater.<sup>197</sup> O’Neal’s embrace of Marxism echoed the political bifurcation within the black nationalist movement. Tom Dent recalls that Amiri Bakara argued that as colonized African nations struggled for independence, political and economic power for Africans and people of African descent would not heal extreme class divisions.<sup>198</sup> Rather, a Marxist critique of European and American capital was necessary to dismantle systems of economic and political oppression.

Similarly, O’Neal argued that poverty, political disempowerment, and racism were imbedded in the capitalist system.<sup>199</sup> Indeed, large corporations were responsible for global economic disparity, the 1970s recession, and imperialist wars.<sup>200</sup> As an antidote to a capitalist system that privileged the interests of the business and political elite, the FST envisioned a system of true democracy that protected the “collective interests of the oppressed masses” over the economic elite.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, as a tool for revolution, O’Neal advocated black economic cooperation to transform the competitive marketplace into a collective society.

However, while the FST envisioned itself as a “mass cultural organization” and aimed to recruit leaders from the “working class masses of the Black Nation,” it was not a purely grassroots collective. Although Michna asserts that the FST featured a “second-line epistemology” that celebrated working-class cultural forms, by the late 1960s, the collective was structured as a cadre organization, a small group of activists striving for

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197 Camara, “There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters,” 73.

198 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 52.

199 Camara, “There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters,” 73.

200 Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines,” 5.

201 *Ibid.*, 7.



liberation.<sup>202</sup> Matt Robinson, former Common Ground volunteer who worked with founder and Black Panther Malik Rahim, observes how Rahim defined cooperation:

[To] the Black Panthers in the '60's, a "collective" meant a group of people that was outside of the social systems...with a very sturdy chain of command. You know, everybody works for the collective good, and the collective good is...organized almost along hierarchical principles....[W]hen Malik Rahim said, "We have a collective,"...what he was really saying was, "We have a collective, and I am at the top, and you are collectively...granting me your power—or the power to act on your behalf."<sup>203</sup>

Similarly, because the FST believed that "all people are not at the same stage of development," activists who had attained a revolutionary consciousness through dedicated work and study had a responsibility to instruct community members.<sup>204</sup> While collective member Gilbert Moses believed the black New Orleans community would eventually support FST, it needed to be awakened to the necessity of such support: "We're grafting the idea [of socially conscious theater] onto a community. The graft will slowly heal and FST will become one with the community. Finally the community will change and create its own type of theatre."<sup>205</sup> Until the community was sufficiently educated, the collective was divided into two levels of membership: the central leadership and the masses, or those sympathetic to the FST's cause.

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202 Michna, "We are Black Mind Jockeys"; Christopher Leon Johnson, "The Spirit that Protects the Youth: Maroonage, African-Centered Education, and the Case of Kamali Academy in New Orleans, Louisiana," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2012), 137.

203 Matt Robinson, interview by author. Cooperative Oral History Project. June 5, 2012.

204 Free Southern Theater, "Basic Program Guidelines," 6.

205 "Gilbert Moses Commentary," *Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater*, 33.

Reflecting its Marxist orientation, in 1976 the FST published its “Basic Program Guidelines,” hoping to inspire other black cultural organizations to develop their own collective process and theoretical framework to guide their radical activities.<sup>206</sup> First, the FST required members to democratically discuss and agree upon their statement of purpose. For example, in the FST’s evaluation sessions, core and supporting staff defined the organization’s purpose and philosophical principles. Second, cooperative ideals also guided FST theatrical workshops and productions. The FST’s permanent ensemble followed a collective labor model; roles were equitably distributed among members, and actors were hired based on their specific “utility to the group.” The collective selected actors for its repertory touring ensemble based on their demonstrated commitment to black liberation and the FST’s revolutionary goals, as well as their ability to work with the collective and abide by its principles. Third, the FST’s remediation policies were rooted in democratic process. While members addressed concerns about individual policies with appropriate director heads, the staff collectively assessed flaws in the group’s overall directives and presented revision recommendations to the Board of Directors. If the Board rejected the proposal, it was required to explain its decision to the entire collective. Committed to consensus and democratic decision-making, FST collective members continued to organize cooperatives long after the FST folded in 1982.

### **Funding Struggles**

The FST’s outspokenly radical ideology and creative aesthetic made securing sufficient funding for its operations a serious and recurring issue. The FST’s radical,

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<sup>206</sup> Free Southern Theater, “Basic Program Guidelines.”

cultural liberationist theater operated against a shifting political landscape in 1960s community organizing. Embracing individual and community direct action as curatives for deeply institutionalized racism, poverty, and inequality, President Johnson's War on Poverty administration supported cooperatives and community organizations.<sup>207</sup> Specifically, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 mandated the creation of Community Action Agencies at the state and local level to administer antipoverty programs.<sup>208</sup> By forcing neighborhood organizations, unions, non-profits, educational institutions, and municipal and federal governments to embrace an integrated society, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) stimulated Louisiana's stagnating economy and opened new political channels to black citizens at the city, state, and federal level.<sup>209</sup>

While OEO and northern philanthropies funded the FST until the late 1960s, the collective's cultural liberation programming increasingly perturbed its white, New York-based funding sources. By 1969 Dent observed, "The white financial establishment seems to love to fund a craft and techniques program, they love that more than they can possibly accept the critical and militant work the professional theater should be doing...It's saying 'we give these people some money to hold workshops so they won't go out and riot and generally make trouble.'"<sup>210</sup> Equally troubling, by the early 1970s, federal officials had largely ceased antipoverty aid to black community development after

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207 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 8.

208 "The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964," 1.

209 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 10.

210 Tom Dent, quoted in Clarissa Myrick Harris, "Mirror of the Movement: The History of the Free Southern Theater as a Microcosm of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, 1963-1978" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1988), 92.

President Richard Nixon abolished Title II of the Equal Opportunity Act.<sup>211</sup> Consequently, without reliable sponsorship, few radical black organizations survived.

In contrast, the connection between New Orleans social justice activism, community organizing, and faith-based oppositional traditions remained intact. Desperate to fill the funding gap, FST and other black cooperatives appealed to religious institutions for financial support. For example, in 1970, the FST received funding from the General Convention of Special Programs (GCSP), an initiative within the Episcopal Church to financially “support the liberation struggles of oppressed people.”<sup>212</sup> It did not evaluate an applicant’s political radicalness, but rather the extent to which the organization would spur marginalized communities’ development and political empowerment.<sup>213</sup> Granted a measure of financial stability, the FST continued its creative operations, while O’Neal began working with the institution to advance the rural black cooperative movement.

### **Southern Rural Cooperatives and Regional Institution Building**

In addition to serving black New Orleanians, the FST had an abiding interest in the wellbeing of rural southerners; throughout the 1960s and 1970s they helped civil rights and antipoverty activists establish black self-help agricultural and consumer cooperatives throughout the region. Consequently, the FST’s radical program directly influenced more moderate regional cooperative leagues’ philosophical and political goals. Therefore, examining the FST and mainstream cooperatives’ extensive interactions substantially narrows the gap between black nationalist thought and integrationist civil

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211 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 44.

212 Jim Lee, letter to Mrs. Roberta Jones, 13 Jul. 1970, folder 2, box 2, O’Neal Papers.

213 Dent, *Southern Journey*, 43; “History,” North Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://ncacdc.org/history.cfm>.

rights organizing. At the same time, the FST's work with rural cooperatives illustrates reflects the legacy of cooperative organizing on the long civil rights movement.

Civil rights activism, antipoverty initiatives, and rural cooperative organizing each developed out of pre-existing black mutualistic institutions; by the 1960s and 1970s, they were inextricably linked together. For example, what started as a grocery buying club for Reverend Albert McKnight's rural black congregation led to the formation of the Southern Consumers Cooperative, which eventually organized 2,000 Louisiana residents into 20 cooperatives.<sup>214</sup> Black farmers already broadly familiar with cooperative principles flocked to civil rights cooperative associations, believing that agricultural cooperatives, stores, and credit unions would circumvent exploitative white businesses and landowners.<sup>215</sup> Like New Orleans' urban community action programs, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC) received considerable OEO funding to help impoverished, mostly black, farmers regain economic stability within a rapidly industrializing agricultural system.<sup>216</sup> To do so, it formed a network of cooperatives and retraining centers in the Deep South. Accordingly, the FSC partnered with McKnight's Southern Cooperative Development Fund, which also organized low-income cooperatives and credit unions across the region.<sup>217</sup>

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214 Greta de Jong, "From Votes to Vegetables: Civil Rights Activism and the Low-Income Cooperative Movement in Louisiana after 1965," in *Louisiana Beyond Black and White*, 146-147.

215 Ibid.; De Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 163; Harvey Reed, "Welcome, Cooperatives in New Orleans and Louisiana: Ted Quant, Harvey Reed," (speech given at the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, June 21, 2008), <http://www.pdfio.com/k-2694397.html#>.

216 De Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 163.

217 Ibid.; Cecilia A. Moore "Writing Black Catholic Lives: Black Catholic Biographies and Autobiographies," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 52; Charles Prejean, "Louisiana State Association of Cooperatives: Articles and Bylaws" (Lafayette: LSAC, 1967).

While criticized on the left for being insufficiently revolutionary, civil rights and antipoverty cooperatives were also hounded by conservative politicians.<sup>218</sup> Because they participated in civil rights organizing, rural cooperative organizers were targets of segregationist leaders. Local and state political elites found cooperative organizing, when paired with social, political, and economic justice activism, deeply disruptive to the status quo. For example, the Louisiana Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities' denounced Father McKnight and progressive members of the OEO-sponsored community action program Acadiana Neuf as communistic, and FBI and police surveilled CORE cooperative organizers working with McKnight.<sup>219</sup> Because McKnight worked with civil rights organizations like CORE and NAACP to secure black citizens' political rights and economic autonomy, political leaders decried Louisianan and southern cooperatives as subversive and racially divisive institutions.

Although the Federation of Southern Cooperatives primarily organized rural agricultural and consumer cooperatives, it nonetheless frequently collaborated with FST members. Interested in the Federation's mission, the FST subscribed to its newsletters, attended the organization's meetings, and corresponded with Father McKnight about the future of southern black cooperatives.<sup>220</sup> Additionally, the Federation benefitted from FST's funding role. As the GCSP's funding advisor, John O'Neal visited black-run

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218 John Zippert, interview by Greta de Jong (June 28, 1998). Transcript, 34-40, Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

219 Joint Legislative Committee on un-American Activities, State of Louisiana, *Report No. 8: Aspects of the Poverty Program in South Louisiana* (April 14, 1967).

220 Rev. A.J. McKnight, letter to John O'Neal, 21 Apr. 1971, folder 5, box 2, O'Neal Papers; Federation of Southern Cooperatives, memorandum, 4 Jun. 1971, *Ibid.*

cooperatives throughout the South and reviewed their grant applications.<sup>221</sup> While he preferred funding politically radical cooperatives, O’Neal recommended the GSCP support any organization that fostered concrete community development and political engagement. For example, in 1971, O’Neal debated funding the Grand Marie Vegetable Co-op, a Louisiana sweet potato cooperative that had offered indigent black farmers a steady source of income since 1965.<sup>222</sup> While it was one of the oldest civil rights movement-affiliated cooperatives still operating, O’Neal complained that white CORE organizer John Zippert had founded Grand Marie. After grudgingly conceding that Zippert’s “influence did not appear detrimental to the project,” O’Neal approved the cooperative’s application.

However, feeling betrayed by vanishing government funding, O’Neal was reluctant to approve grant applications from mainstream cooperatives, fearing that they were hamstrung by precarious funding and conservative political views. Reflecting a common feeling among young, radicalized urban civil rights activists of the 1970s, O’Neal displayed both “a respect for indigenous [rural] black culture...[and] a profound skepticism about the possibilities for meaningful political change” from mainstream movement leadership.<sup>223</sup> For example, when the OEO-sponsored Southeast Alabama Self-Help Association at the Tuskegee Institute applied for GCSP monies, O’Neal sniped, “the operators are, in my judgment, off base ‘politically’. In the jargon of the day they

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221 John O’Neal, memorandum to Herb Callender, 18 May 1970, folder 3, box 2, O’Neal Papers;

Federation of Southern Cooperatives, memorandum, 4 Jun. 1971.

222 John O’Neal, memorandum to Herb Callender, 18 May 1970.

223 Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 111.

would be identified as ‘negroes’ rather than Black.’<sup>224</sup> However, he observed approvingly that the association registered rural voters and organized community-driven cooperative businesses. Mollified, O’Neal eventually approved the association’s application because “their motive is a good one. Their continued involvement [in cooperative economics] will teach them” political consciousness.” Ultimately, O’Neal hoped that a cooperative economy would “create a political power vane” for rural Southerners; once registered to vote and economically stable, they could attend to the larger project of societal transformation.

Similarly, the FST-offshoot BLCKARTSOUTH, initially a workshop for New Orleans creative writers, looked outward to the broader South.<sup>225</sup> In 1970, Dent partnered with Mississippi-based Delta Ministry and Mary Holmes College to develop a community-centered arts program cultivating creative and artistic talents.<sup>226</sup> After several years organizing black educational and economic cooperatives with OEO support, Delta Ministry and Mary Holmes College had access to a network of Mississippi cooperative and community-based organizations that BLCKARTSOUTH lacked. Together they created a poetry and drama program, while a touring troupe hosted poetry readings and discussions in Mississippi towns. Relying on religious institutions throughout the 1970s,

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224 John O’Neal, memorandum to Herbert Callender 7 May 1970, folder 3, box 2, O’Neal Papers.

225 Free Southern Theater, press release, “BLCKARTSOUTH Workshop Organized in New Orleans” (July 1, 1969), folder 28, box 4, Nkombo Records.

226 Mary Holmes College, Delta Ministry, and BLCKARTSOUTH, “Proposal for the Development of Black Poetry and Drama in Mississippi” (1970): 1-2, folder 20, box 4, Nkombo Records.



Dent thus incubated black southern playwrights and disseminated cooperative political and economic principles across the region.<sup>227</sup>

In turn, the New Orleans black liberation movement's philosophy and principles influenced rural Louisiana cooperative efforts. By the late 1960s, Father McKnight was particularly impressed by New Orleanian black liberationists' tenets of "community control, self-reliance, self-determination, and self-defense."<sup>228</sup> After immersing himself in black nationalism and Pan-Africanism philosophy, McKnight crafted a sustained critique of "White capitalism" and a more nuanced analysis of racism. Significantly, he regarded Ahidiana Co-operative member Mtumishi St. Julien as his "mentor in Blackness."<sup>229</sup> Started by former FST members, Ahidiana was a New Orleans black liberationist school and collective practicing the principles of the Nguzo Saba. McKnight applied the concept "ujamaa," or African-inspired economic cooperation, to his traditional and faith-based cooperative model, as did other politicized black cooperatives.

Until the collective's demise in 1982, the rural South continued to be an important space for community organizing for the FST. Maintaining its headquarters in New Orleans while touring rural Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, the FST had always balanced the needs of its New Orleans constituents with the desire to address rural poverty and political disempowerment in the Deep South. However, by the late 1970s, FST was at a crossroads; given its shrinking budget, which community should the

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227 Tom Dent, letter to Reverend Milton Upton, 10 Jan. 1975, 1-2, folder 6, box 188, Tom Dent Papers; Congo Square Artists Association, report, "Congo Square Theater" (Summer 1979): 2, folder 3, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

228 McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 75.

229 *Ibid.*, 110-112.

collective serve: rural or urban African Americans? By 1979, FST was inactive, searching for funding and a new direction. Could the FST exist without substantial external funding, and if so, O'Neal queried, "would it be more economical to work from a rural rather than an urban base?"<sup>230</sup> Advocating different sides of this debate, members created offshoot programs targeting city or agricultural communities. For example, Tom Dent's BLKARTSOUTH became an autonomous organization that fostered collective theater throughout the rural Deep South. O'Neal similarly contemplated shifting away from the FST's New Orleans constituency in order to raise the cultural consciousness of black rural southerners.<sup>231</sup> In contrast, until it closed in 1982, Kalamu ya Salaam's Ahidiana Work Study Center sought to build lasting black-owned cooperative institutions to liberate urban New Orleanians from racialized poverty. Salaam continues to model community activism and collective pedagogy at Students at the Center, a Freedom School-inspired writers workshop for high school students.

### **Congo Square Writers Workshop**

Finally, examining one last iteration of the FST, the Congo Square Writers Association (CSWA), brings the Dent family story full circle. Its history connects Tom Dent to traditional fundraising sources and educational institutions long sustaining middle-class civil rights organizations while also celebrating New Orleans' working-class musical forms, rural cooperative economic development, and national cultural liberation projects. Carrying on the cooperative legacy of Albert and Tom Dent, the collective

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230 John O'Neal, letter to Robert H. Leonard, 11 Jun. 1979, folder 6, box 2, O'Neal Papers.

231 John O'Neal, letter to Stanze Peterson, 11 Jun. 1979, folder 6, box 2, O'Neal Papers.

continued to incorporate democratic process into its organizational structure as well as its creative work. It pronounced itself a “cooperative of Black artists in all disciplines.”<sup>232</sup>

Tom Dent, Lloyd Medley, Felipe Smith, and Chakula Cha Jua formed the CSWA in 1974 as a writer’s collective and workshop connecting black New Orleanians to the larger civil rights movement and literary world.<sup>233</sup> While the collective migrated to the Uptown neighborhood of Broadmoor, an ethnically heterogeneous community badly scarred by postwar white flight, Dent’s programming paid homage to the politically oppositional black musical traditions of the Seventh Ward and Central City.<sup>234</sup> The CSWA’s name honored “the famous meeting place of slaves and free blacks adjacent to the French Quarter in New Orleans, an important location in the history of jazz and black cultural survival,” and events were often held in Tremé, a locus of historical and contemporary black music.<sup>235</sup> Meeting in homes or the Broadmoor library, members documented their collective “mental and physical experiences, as southern black folk,” believing that “by doing so the awareness of blacks everywhere will be heightened.”<sup>236</sup>

Like the FST, the CSWA viewed New Orleans and the South as a lynchpin of black creative development and sought to support young writers. Accordingly, the

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232 Congo Square Arts Collective, program flyer, “Act 1 and Congo Square Arts Collective Invite You to Attend the 1st Annual Black Theater Festival,” folder 7, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

233 Asante Salaam, “Griot House: Draft 2” (November 1997): 1, folder 2, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

234 “Broadmoor Neighborhood Snapshot,” Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, last modified October 5, 2002, <http://www.datacenterresearch.org/pre-katrina/orleans/3/63/snapshot.html>; Walter Isaacson, foreword to Scott Cowen with Betsy Seifer, *The Inevitable City: The Resurgence of New Orleans and the Future of Urban America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), viii.

235 Congo Square Arts Collective, “Act 1 and Congo Square Arts Collective Invite You to Attend the 1st Annual Black Theater Festival”; Congo Square Writers Association, report, “Congo Square Theater” (Summer 1979), 1, folder 3, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

236 Congo Square Writers Union, “The Congo Square Writer’s Workshop” [nd], folder 3, box 188, Tom Dent Papers; Department of Program Development, *Profile of Poverty in New Orleans*, 7.

collective used the workshop to refine poetry, essays, fiction, and drama for publication in the FST's literary journal *Nkombo* or the CSWA's non-commercial anthology, *Baboula*. Further, the CSWA subsidized members' book publication and distribution to journals, community organizations, and schools supporting black literary arts.<sup>237</sup> Finally, just as Albert Dent hosted black national and international figures to speak at Dillard University, Tom Dent also sponsored prominent African diasporic writers and historians such as Andrew Salkey, a Caribbean poet, essayist, and journalist, in order to forge aesthetic and political ties between New Orleans and the Global South.<sup>238</sup>

Simultaneously, like both Albert Dent and the FST, the CSWA continued to build collective and cooperative networks in the rural South. In 1979, the CSWA formed the Congo Square Theater to tour the South, often jointly producing plays with rural or small town community organizations.<sup>239</sup> While it initially performed preexisting FST-authored plays like Tom Dent's *Ritual Murder* and *A Black Experience*, the black, volunteer-run community theater also produced new CSWA-authored plays that explicitly addressed New Orleans and southern black audiences and their perceived concerns.<sup>240</sup>

The CSWA's funding sources also replicated Albert Dent's middle-class philanthropic and government donors. While Tom Dent had previously criticized Total Community Action and mainstream institutions for their reformist aims and fundamental

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237 Tom Dent, letter to Rev. Milton Upton, 10 January 1975, 2; Congo Square Writers Association, *Bamboula* (1976), folder 5, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

238 Tom Dent, letter to Rev. Milton Upton, 10 January 1975, 2; Tom Dent and Quo Vadis Rex, letter to Congo Square Writers Union, 12 March 1981, box 3, folder 1, John O'Neal Papers.

239 Chakula Cha Juais was a paid employee. Congo Square Writers Association, "Congo Square Theater," 2-3, folder 3, box 188.

240 Congo Square Writer's Association, press release, "Congo Square Writer's Workshop of New Orleans Presents A Poetry Reading" [nd], folder 3, box 188, Tom Dent Papers.

inability to address the root causes of racialized poverty, now CSWA financially depended on moderate social welfare, governmental, and educational institutions similar to those Albert Dent relied upon to support his medical cooperative. For example, in order to combat the “cultural isolation” and “provinciality of black New Orleans,” CSWA received financial and programmatic assistance from TCA, the University of New Orleans, and the Louisiana Committee for the Humanities, which co-sponsored the collective’s lectures, film screenings, literature events, and discussions.<sup>241</sup>

Additionally, like Albert Dent, who deployed experts to disseminate cooperative principles among the general public, the CSWA’s cooperative structure increasingly deviated from the FST’s proletarian roots and sharply demarcated members from non-performers. For example, when it opened in 1997, the CSWA’s Griot House, a Mid-City community center and performance venue, was hailed an authentic expression of African diasporic cultural identity but cultivated middle-class, well-educated patronage.<sup>242</sup> Griot House’s hierarchical structure and costly membership fees may have discouraged working-class engagement. For a five-year membership fee of \$1,000, core members governed the organization and programmed its events, while patrons paid between \$100 and \$500 per year to attend events and paid staff lacked decision-making power. By the time of Tom Dent’s death in 1998, his arts collective had in some ways circled back to his father’s civil rights philosophy, in which professional cooperative activists and racial justice leaders developed programs to aid the poor. Similarly, CSWA performances,

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241 Tom Dent, letter to Rev. Milton Upton, 10 January 1975, 2; Tom Dent and Quo Vadis Gex, letter.

242 Asante Salaam, “Griot House: Draft 2,” 1.

while resolutely political and Afro-centric, became increasingly uncoupled from community-centered civil rights activism and working-class participation.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the FST's philosophical and geographical divide permanently split up the group. Not only did the dissipation of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements weaken the FST's creative and revolutionary fervor, but the collective's perennial struggle to secure funding also led to its collapse.<sup>243</sup> As Camara notes, frustrated with the FST's meager finances, many talented artists moved to New York City or, no longer afford to live on the organization's stipend, searched for work within a capitalist system "they wrote, sang, and performed against."<sup>244</sup>

Yet from its inception, the FST believed it could be a model for other theatrical collectives. FST members viewed themselves as history-makers, both as part of the civil rights movement and as a "cultural force in the Black Liberation Movement."<sup>245</sup> As such, members carefully documented the collective's history, organized conferences about its civil rights origins, and preserved FST materials in institutional archives for future study and imitation. At the same time, however, it is rooted in the cooperative past. The FST's legacy cannot be evaluated only on its influence on black community theater, but also on its members' lifelong dedication to building a new moral economy rooted in black community organizing and cooperative economics.

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243 Camara, "There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters," 51.

244 Ibid., 76.

245 Free Southern Theater, "Basic Program Guidelines," 4.

## **Chapter 5: “I Have Hope that People Can Live that Life”: Rupture and Continuity in the Post-Hurricane Katrina Cooperative Movement**

In June 2008, three years after Hurricane Katrina decimated large swaths of the city, the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC) met in a slowly recovering New Orleans for its fourth annual conference.<sup>1</sup> Two hundred worker cooperatives from around the country discussed how the cooperative movement might achieve economic justice and equitable redevelopment in a city whose cash-strapped government embraced neoliberal proposals to privatize essential city services. Setting the tenor of the conversation, New Orleans Citizen Participation Project director Khalil Shahyd affirmed that worker cooperatives modeled on the USFWC could establish a “solidarity economy” grounded in democratic, community-based economic development to swiftly, and justly, rebuild New Orleans.<sup>2</sup>

The 2008 USFWC meeting revealed a national network coalescing between New Orleans cooperatives and cooperatives around the country. In fact, after a week volunteering around the city, USFWC attendees pledged their commitment to lasting collaboration between Louisianan, southern, and national cooperative organizations.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, the USFWC and other contemporary cooperative activists often overlooked New Orleans’ long history of cooperative development, instead viewing

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1 Steve Dubb, “Worker Co-op Gathering Highlights Sector Innovations,” Community-Wealth.org (July 2008), [http://community-wealth.org/\\_pdfs/news/recent-articles/07-08/article-dubb-usfwc.pdf](http://community-wealth.org/_pdfs/news/recent-articles/07-08/article-dubb-usfwc.pdf).

2 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, “Uplifting and Strengthening Our Community: A Showcase of Cooperatives in New Orleans,” Grassroots Economic Organizing, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.geo.coop/node/356>.

3 Ajowa Nzinga Ifayeto, “USFWC: Ten Years of Achievement,” Popular Resistance, last modified July 17, 2014, <http://www.popularresistance.org/usfwc-ten-years-of-achievement/>.

Hurricane Katrina as the flashpoint for cooperative organizing, largely at the behest of outside activists. Representing post-Katrina New Orleans as a “blank slate” for cooperative formation, conference members often asked New Orleanian presenters how the contemporary “co-op message” was being received in Louisiana, implying that residents were ignorant of cooperative principles.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, while USFWS cooperatives proffered their organizational success stories, Louisiana Association of Cooperatives (LAC) director Harvey Reed maintained that the rich legacy of African American cooperatives provided a strong indigenous model for New Orleans and Louisiana’s economic recovery. From religious benevolent associations to the Federation of Southern Cooperative’s (FSC) 1960s agricultural cooperative campaigns, Reed celebrated black cooperative traditions as essential tools for combatting poverty and racial injustice.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the massive physical and economic devastation from levee failures and flooding during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita galvanized the LAC and the FSC to revive and expand the state’s dormant network of agricultural cooperatives for small, economically disadvantaged producers.

Reed encouraged contemporary cooperatives to use marginalized communities’ preexisting network of social aid to foster sustained economic development and community revitalization. He therefore envisioned the LAC and the national cooperative movement as another layer of institutional support for farmers and urban residents already relying on cooperative methods for economic survival. Ideally, worker and

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<sup>4</sup> Reed, “Welcome, Cooperatives in New Orleans and Louisiana.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



agricultural cooperatives should operate in conjunction with government officials, national cooperative organizations, and community religious institutions to build a more equitable Louisiana and New Orleans. Additionally, Reed placed the reemerging Louisiana cooperative movement within a global context, acknowledging that while the state's cooperatives were currently "just tiny," Louisiana organizers should emulate countries like Costa Rica to create a comprehensive, cooperative-based economy.

Like Reed, I argue that the story of post-Katrina cooperatives is actually one of rupture and continuity. As the preceding four chapters have demonstrated, New Orleanians of all backgrounds have repeatedly formed cooperatives to achieve community economic security and social justice. However, the city's post-Katrina devastation spurred veteran activists to redouble their efforts to implement a system of cooperative governance and economics to abolish the racial and class inequities imbedded in New Orleans's geographic, economic, political, and cultural landscape. In fact, New Orleans cooperative organizers at USFWC conference highlighted the continuity of the city's cooperative history as often as they acknowledged the rupture that community experienced during and after Hurricane Katrina.

Similarly, my chapter contends that Katrina provided an impetus for veteran and neophyte cooperatives alike to unite around a shared understanding that cooperatives should influence rebuilding efforts to ultimately transform the city. Specifically, I examine cooperatives' efforts to influence city decision-making processes and implement alternative economic, political, and land-use planning models that critique large-scale government and market forces shaping local conditions. I argue that the cooperative's

physical and conceptual presence in its community alters the city's geography in ways that can both benefit and harm local constituents. In essence, New Orleans cooperatives are a lens through which to study how reform-minded organizations struggle to redress social and economic disparity without reproducing the same social, political, and economic disparity they seek to ameliorate.

In particular, this chapter analyzes how three contemporary cooperatives address persistent food and land insecurity among low-income New Orleanians in order to construct a broad-based, interracial social justice movement. For several years, the city's sustainable food movement has sparked debate over its contradictory role in expanding nutritious food access for poor residents of color while simultaneously hastening gentrification in vulnerable neighborhoods. To that end, I examine how veteran cooperative activists Macon Fry, John Clark, and Harvey Reed understand cooperatives' impact on their communities of concern. Their respective cooperatives, Gathering Tree Growers Collective, Solidarity Economy, and the LAC, represent cooperative initiatives at the neighborhood, city, and state level. All are committed to racial justice and food security, yet each cooperative differently configures its responsibility to its members and neighbors, its relationship to the state, and the role of cooperatives in social transformation. Consequently, each cooperative's conception of the ideal relationship between citizen and state has unique implications for the city's cooperative movement and its cultural and physical geography.

First, I examine a neighborhood cooperative garden, the Gathering Tree Growers Collective, and its head, Virginia native Macon Fry. The 1980s oil bust and Hurricane

Katrina and their attendant land use debates frame Fry's vision of cooperative gardens as tools to transform neglected city lots into productive urban farms. Second, the democratic cooperative coalition, Solidarity Economy, organizes collectives and cooperatives at the city level. New Orleanian John Clark, an anarchist philosopher, channels his experience with 1970s cooperative organizing to Solidarity Economy's efforts to establish a cohesive, citywide cooperative community. Finally, the LAC organizes and supports agricultural cooperatives across the state. New Orleans native Harvey Reed, the Executive Director of the LAC, links the intersection of Louisiana's civil rights and cooperative movements to marginalized farmers' ongoing attempts to secure economic stability. I argue that Fry, Clark, and Reed's unique socioeconomic backgrounds and cooperative philosophy have indelibly marked their appraisal of cooperatives' role within post-Katrina New Orleans's economic and political systems, their solutions to pervasive racial and class disparity, and their concrete impact on their communities.

### **New Orleans Cooperatives and Urban Land Use Debates**

Macon Fry, John Clark, and Harvey Reed became active in cooperative politics during the 1970s and 1980s, in the midst of significant economic turmoil and population flux. It is crucial to analyze how mass tourism between the 1980s and early 2000s restructured the city's economy and remolded its geography because it directly informed cooperatives' later desire to create community-driven development initiatives fundamentally at odds with post-Katrina neoliberal economic policies.

Financially dependent on the oil industry, a 1980s oil bust stagnated New Orleans' economy. At the same time, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974's

Section 8 Program provided low-income families vouchers to rent privately-managed residences and expanded the city's supply of low-income units in multifamily housing complexes.<sup>6</sup> The two phenomena spurred thousands of white and middle-class African American families to move to neighboring Jefferson Parish and the city's outer suburbs. As a result, while in 1980, African Americans constituted 45 percent of the city's 557,515 residents, in 2000, they comprised over 60 percent of only 484,674 residents and were concentrated primarily in its increasingly impoverished urban core.<sup>7</sup>

To counter this trend, in the 1980s and 1990s, developers and city planners touted New Orleans as a mecca for cultural tourism and banked on drawing tourists to the French Quarter and Canal Street to ensure the city's recovery.<sup>8</sup> To attract potential homebuyers and investors, city administrators and developers began to revitalize large areas of downtown real estate close to employment centers and cultural districts.<sup>9</sup> In response, increasing numbers of young white professionals and retirees seeking closer access to geriatric services began settling in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods with attractive pre-World War II historic housing stock close to affluent or gentrifying communities.<sup>10</sup> Against this backdrop, Fry, Clark, and Reed independently began to seek

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6 Richard Campanella, "A Glorious Mess: A Perceptual History of New Orleans Neighborhoods," *New Orleans Magazine*, last modified June 2014, <http://www.myneworleans.com/new-orleans-magazine/june-2014/a-glorious-mess/>; "HUD History," U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed July 8, 2014, [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/about/hud\\_history](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/about/hud_history).

7 Campanella, interview; "Louisiana: Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed August 13, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.html>.

8 Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 186.

9 Campanella, interview with author.

10 *Ibid.*; Gottdiener and Budd, *Key Concepts in Urban Studies*, 33-34.

alternative economic and political solutions to confront the city's stagnating economy, while staving off neoliberal incursions on essential municipal welfare services.

### **Macon Fry: Community Gardening During the Louisiana Oil Bust**

Long drawn to Louisiana's food and culture, in 1981, Fry moved from southern Virginia to New Orleans. There, he wrote about the region's music and food for various publications and worked with Orleans Parish Public Schools as an educator for autistic young adults. Growing up in a "homogenous" suburban community, Fry was enamored by the city's independent restaurants, affordable housing, and "incredible old-school musicians."<sup>11</sup> He soon discovered first-hand the region's precarious economic conditions, however. While Louisiana had been the second largest producer of refined oil in the nation and the center of the petrochemical industry since 1945, its economic growth was dependent on the benevolence of the oil industry, which heavily influenced state economic policies and legislation.<sup>12</sup> Fry recalls that with the influx of oil money, developers during the 1980s had begun "investing in buying vacant lots and buying run-down properties to renovate them."<sup>13</sup> But then the oil industry "busted big time."

Only a few years after Fry settled in the city, the 1984 oil bust decimated Louisiana's economy. When oil companies fled the city to invest in oil production abroad, the state's unemployment rate hit 13.2 percent, the highest in the country.<sup>14</sup> Fry

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11 Macon Fry, interview with author, June 10, 2012. Cooperative Oral History Project.

12 Beverly Wright, "Race, Politics, and Pollution: Environmental Justice in the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor," in *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*, ed. Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard, and Bob Evans (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), 125-145.

13 Fry, interview with author.

14 Kimberly Quillen, "The Oil Bust," Times Picayune (January 29, 2012).

[http://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/01/the\\_oil\\_bust\\_the\\_times-picayun.html](http://www.nola.com/175years/index.ssf/2012/01/the_oil_bust_the_times-picayun.html).

notes that while he was attracted to the city’s “benign neglect,” which warded off the homogenizing effects of chain stores and large corporations, by 1985, “businesses closed, everything was for sale...There were blighted cars—every block had three or four cars on it that were sitting there, dead...And [blight is] progressive.”<sup>15</sup> The effect of the oil bust was so profound, Fry recalls, that “on a small scale, and with much less repercussions, it was like a mini Katrina, because there were so many blighted properties in the city.”

Reflecting on his gardening career during the 1980s oil bust and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Fry maintains that during both periods, he explicitly addressed the ways in which local food production could counter crushing economic loss. As the city’s economy spiraled downwards, Fry began training as a master gardener with the Parkway Partners community garden program, established in 1982.<sup>16</sup> Founded by Flo Schornstein, a former director of Parks and Parkways, the organization was a public-private partnership created to “maintain green spaces in the City, at a time when budgets were stretched really thin, and there was a huge amount of blight because of people leaving town from the oil bust.”<sup>17</sup> The community garden program, run by Kris Pottharst, attempted to convert abandoned lots into gardens. At its height, Parkway Partners had formed over 100 community gardens scattered across the city.

Yet the community garden program contained several “fatal flaws” that would have serious implications after Hurricane Katrina, and Fry has assiduously avoided replicating these “time bombs” in his current work with the Gathering Tree Growers

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15 Fry, interview with author.

16 Ibid.; “About Us,” Parkway Partners, accessed July 10, 2014, <http://parkwaypartnersnola.org/index.php/about-us/>.

17 Fry, interview with author.

Collective. Specifically, Fry contends, the program lacked land security. At the height of the oil bust, Parkway Partners received permission from the City to build community gardens on steadily accumulating “adjudicated properties,” private lots held for judgment on back taxes when owners defaulted on their loans and abandoned their property. Fry claims that the city’s agreement placed Parkway Partners in a vulnerable and ambiguous legal position because the city had no “process to either collect the money or to get rid of the lots.” Further, because the City did not technically own the adjudicated properties, the owner could return to claim his or her land at any time. Consequently, “there was never a clear sense [that] those gardens would not be sold” by their original owners, making Parkway Partners and nearby residents uniquely vulnerable to the vagaries of private property owners and developers.

Fry compares Parkway Partner’s tenuous hold on its gardens to the post-Katrina phenomenon of “guerrilla gardening,” in which activists like those belonging to the Common Ground Collective transformed abandoned lots between buildings and houses into productive, environmentally sustainable gardens to provide food security for flood ravaged communities. As Common Ground co-founder Scott Crow argues, the collective’s bioremediation program revitalized old gardens and created new ones that were “gathering places for conversation, beautifying unoccupied and derelict spaces that gathered garbage even before the storm.”<sup>18</sup> Matt Robinson, a former Common Ground volunteer, recalls that immediately after the storm, his fellow activists believed the “chessboard was empty...So it seemed like anything was possible. You just take a piece

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<sup>18</sup> Scott Crow, *Black Flags and Windmills* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 156.

of land, start growing stuff on it, and boom! You have a community garden. Irrespective of who owns the property, where they are, what are they going to do with it, what the condition of the property is, and all that.”<sup>19</sup> While he admires the impulse to help residents grow nutritious and inexpensive produce, Fry argues, “if you’re trying to do community building around the garden, it’s a non-starter to not have land security.”<sup>20</sup>

The primary weakness in the community garden program, however, was that while Parkway Partners could claim to be one of the largest privately supported community gardens system in the nation, it failed to maintain most of the gardens it had initiated. Fry observes, “it’s sexy to start a garden, you know? Everybody wants to start a garden. And [local business owners and politicians] get [their] picture in the paper with the little kids from the neighborhoods with the shovels...And funding comes in, and you build more gardens.” Yet when Fry was promoted to Parkway Partners’ community garden cooperator in 2001, he discovered that of the organization’s stable of 120 community gardens, only about 20 were adequately maintained. He recalled that the vast majority were entirely derelict: he either could not locate the gardens or “I’d find that the sign had fallen down and was laying in the back...under a bunch of beer cans...And even harder than finding the gardens, though, was finding gardeners.”

The problem was rooted in the fact that Parkway Partners was a greening organization rather than a community-building organization. The program was not intended to “build a cooperative or a collective. They were there to put in gardens on lots

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<sup>19</sup> Robinson, interview with author.

<sup>20</sup> Fry, interview with author.



that were blighted.” In essence, the organization’s role was to “[save] the city maintenance work” rather than to create sustainable food security programs. Indeed, after twenty years in operation, Parkway Partners’ gardens were scattered “with some abandon around the city. And ‘abandon’ being the operative word later, you know, because they hadn’t done the footwork in getting proper support” from community members to commit to cultivating the gardens.

Fry contends that the city’s changing demographics and a corresponding profound cultural shift over the past thirty years dramatically impacted the longevity and health of the Parkway Partners community garden program. Fry acknowledges, “If you’re talking about the people in gardens, and what has happened with those gardens, you have to talk about race.” When Fry moved to New Orleans, the African American population hovered around 60 percent.<sup>21</sup> While younger generations of New Orleanians were uninterested in gardening, the Parkway sites were staffed primarily by elderly African Americans between 70 and 85, sometimes over 90 years old.<sup>22</sup> The African American population of New Orleans tripled in the two decades after World War II as thousands of rural migrants seeking work in the burgeoning oil industry and shipyards.<sup>23</sup> Fry argues that this population “brought their interest in gardening and their skills. And there were some very, very good gardeners that needed a lot of help because of their age.”

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21 Richard Campanella, “Mapping and Interpreting the Human Geography of New Orleans, Louisiana, USA,” CFC, no. 204 (June 2010): 41, <http://www.lecfc.fr/new/articles/204-article-5.pdf>.

22 Julia Africa, “Community Gardens as Healing Spaces: Addressing the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans,” Harvard University Graduate School of Design, last updated 2011, <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k94076&pageid=icb.page577179>.

23 Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2010), 10-11.

However, by the early 2000s, this generation was rapidly shrinking, and most of the staff's elderly gardeners had either died or relocated after Hurricane Katrina. Consequently, the older African American population crucial in Parkway Partners' early days was no longer present to sustain the community garden program after 2005. As a result, Fry argues, "if community gardening is your model for a so-called cooperative effort, they just very often end up not being truly cooperative. It ends up being individuals brought in, that may or may not have mutual interest...into a space where they're rubbing elbows. And it just doesn't surprise me that that type of social experiment might not work." Therefore, on the eve of Hurricane Katrina, Fry was looking for a new model for urban agriculture to draw community members together. The Gathering Tree Growers Collective would allow Fry to retain ownership over the cooperative garden and guide its cultivation, while providing training and resources for budding gardeners.

### **John Clark and New Orleans' Countercultural Cooperatives**

In order to understand Solidarity Economy's vision for a utopian New Orleans, we must examine the background of one of its founders, long-time anarchist John Clark. For Clark, Solidarity Economy is the manifestation of his philosophical and political theory and practice over the past forty years.<sup>24</sup> Growing up in a devoutly religious ethnic white-working class community of St. Roch in the 1950s and 1960s, Clark was steeped in a culture of Protestant church-based voluntarism that would train him in the principles of cooperation and activism long before he encountered the formal cooperative movement. As a philosophy graduate student at Loyola University in the late 1960s, Clark

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<sup>24</sup> John Clark, interview with author, June 28, 2012. Cooperative Oral History Project.

encountered radical libertarianism, decentralism, and anarchism, which compelled him to “break with individualism” and embrace social cooperation and mutual aid as a model for complete social and political transformation.

Clark did not have far to look for practical applications of cooperation. His first experiment with cooperation was in the early 1970s when he and his fellow neighbors, mostly graduate students living near Tulane University and Loyola, started the University Free School Co-op for infants and toddlers. Parents hired teachers and volunteered at the day care one day a week per enrolled child. Soon after, in 1971 or 1972, a parent from the day care cooperative organized the Broadway Food Co-op, a cooperative buying club, which Clark would run the following year.

As organizer of the Broadway Food Co-op, Clark immersed himself in New Orleans’s burgeoning food cooperative movement, which, since the late 1960s, had advocated ecologically-responsible food production and consumption and consumer empowerment.<sup>25</sup> In line with Clark’s newfound admiration of radical ecological and anarchist philosophy, historian Doug Rossinow argues that many New Left-era cooperatives embodied “a vague social vision of innumerable and decentralized small units” while offering an alternative to capitalist worker-employer relations.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Clark advertised the cooperative as an expression of Murray Bookchin’s theory of social ecology, which posited that cities should operate on a human scale that embraced civic

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<sup>25</sup> Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 280-282.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 280, 281.

participation and individual autonomy.<sup>27</sup> Ideally, society should reject both capitalism and socialism, instead embracing a cooperative, egalitarian, and ecologically sound community-centered system of governance.<sup>28</sup>

Clark advocated food cooperatives, and Broadway Co-op in particular, as an accessible way for New Orleanians of moderate incomes to improve food quality, eliminate third party price inflation, and advance ecological principles by avoiding waste and buying food in bulk.<sup>29</sup> Most importantly, however, Clark argued that cooperative membership and contact with similarly-minded cooperators clearly demonstrates to residents that “constructive, practical activity can be accomplished through mutual aid and voluntary association, and that profit-making is not necessary to achieve our ends.”

While for its first few years Broadway Food Co-op had as many as 75 members, low participation rates encouraged the club to restrict membership to about 15 individuals or families who agreed to a “system of equally rotated work and an extremely simple [organizational] structure.”<sup>30</sup> For over ten years, the Chapel of the Holy Spirit, a student chapel across from Newcomb College, let the cooperative use its space as a staging ground. After deciding collectively what produce to purchase, everyone contributed between \$5 and \$6.50 and appointed a member based on a rotating schedule to make weekly trips to the French Market to buy groceries.<sup>31</sup> Every Saturday morning, Clark and a few volunteers would purchase vegetables in bulk directly from farmers before stopping

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27 Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007): 19.

28 “Bookchin Speaks in New Orleans,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (January 1983): 4.

29 “The Benefits of Cooperation,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (March 1983): 2.

30 “Broadway Co-op Seeks New Members,” *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (March 1983): 2.

31 *Ibid.*; Clark, interview with author; John Clark, Solidarity Economy meeting, June 27, 2012.

at a local bakery and cheese shop. Each member family would congregate at the Chapel to receive packages of eight different fruits and vegetables, a pound of cheese, and two loaves of whole grain bread, which would comprise the bulk of their food for the week.

Further, as Clark made his weekly rounds through the farmers market, he realized he was part of a larger cooperative buying impulse. In fact, throughout the 1970s, recognizing the popularity of food cooperatives, the Mayor's Office of Consumer Affairs created the Central Food Co-op Office, which supported the establishment of new cooperatives.<sup>32</sup> In April 1976, for example, the office hosted "Food Week" and "Food Co-op Day," which featured a potluck banquet and speakers ranging from the president of the local sugar workers union, New Orleans Socialist Union member Jim Stodder, local food cooperative activists Phyllis Parrun, and national cooperative representatives.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, "there were lots of little food coops," Clark recalls. "I'd run into them when I'd do the shopping. I'd see five or six other groups at the French Market." Offering members organic, high quality fresh produce as well as the experience of "a social gathering where working together breaks down the impersonality" of supermarket chains, Uptown Food Co-op and the French Quarter Co-op were among at least a dozen other food cooperative buying clubs operated in tandem with Broadway, ranging from tiny to very large.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, by 1975, the Community Co-op Food Store opened along Esplanade Avenue at the edge of the French Quarter, complementing neighborhood

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32 Nancy Weldon, "Uptown Food Co-op Mixes Work with Pleasure" *Times Picayune* (January 12, 1975): 32.

33 Nancy Weldon, "Consuming Interest: Facts on Food," *Times Picayune* (March 28, 1976): 51; New Orleans Socialist Union, "Jim Stodder Public Service: Public Enemy Number 1," 1.

34 Charles Carson, quoted in Nancy Weldon, "Uptown Food Co-op," 32; "Broadway Co-op Seeks New Members," 4.

buying clubs by selling dry goods rather than produce.<sup>35</sup> It targeted “persons interested in the ‘back to nature movement,’ college students, and older persons who used to eat whole grains but got out of the habit,” by offering its several hundred members discounted natural foods in bulk, like brown rice, cracked wheat, nuts, oils, natural tea, dried fruit, and honey.<sup>36</sup> Observing the rise of food cooperatives across the city, it seemed inevitable to Clark that cooperative activists like his Social Ecology Group and interested residents alike could cultivate a citywide network of diverse cooperatives.

For a brief moment in the 1970s and early 1980s, Clark hoped that cooperative activists, inspired by the counterculture, student protests, antiwar demonstrations, and theories of the beloved community and personal liberation, would reshape society.<sup>37</sup> He declared breathlessly in 1983 that the “possibilities are almost endless” if using cooperatives as tools for total societal transformation.<sup>38</sup> However, historian Warren Belasco argues that over the course of the 1980s the mainstream food industry steadily contained and marketed progressive cooperative’s “natural” foods, while “hip entrepreneurs” increasingly compromised their own countercultural ideologies and eliminated their cooperative structure to survive competition.<sup>39</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, many cooperatives declared bankruptcy as federal fiscal policies favored corporate growth while undercutting small businesses: federal tax cuts to

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35 “New Businesses in New Orleans,” *Times Picayune* (February 2, 1975): 90; “Broadway Co-op Seeks New Members,” 4; “Co-op Store is Being Formed,” *Times Picayune* (November 14, 1974): 62.

36 Susan Steelman, quoted in “Co-op Store is Being Formed,” 62.

37 Clark, interview with author.

38 “Broadway Co-op Seeks New Members,” 4.

39 Curl, *For All the People*, 282; Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966-1988* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

corporations, cut-throat competition, and slashed government spending for social programs resulted in a rapid decline of cooperative ventures.<sup>40</sup> Community Co-op member Patrick Battle bemoaned in 1977, for example, that after federal grants for community-centered cooperative development dried up, many of the city's neighborhood food co-ops vanished.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, despite organizing educational presentations on food cooperatives and relentlessly promoting cooperation to Clark's Social Ecology group, Broadway Food Co-op ended in 1983 when many of its original members moved away.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the demise of the Broadway cooperative, Clark has been committed to the pursuit of creating an agrarian, ecological cooperative community since the early 1970s, when he encountered philosopher Martin Buber's *Paths in Utopia*.<sup>43</sup> Written three years before Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, Buber celebrated the Israeli kibbutz as a utopian socialist model for complete cooperative living. He described the kibbutz as an opportunity for social healing, in which Palestinian and Israeli members could live, work, produce, and consume together in a cohesive cooperative community.<sup>44</sup>

Inspired by Buber's account of an egalitarian, racially harmonious collective, Clark became convinced that contemporary cooperative land trusts were the ultimate manifestation of utopian cooperative ideals. He investigated the Miccosukee Land

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40 Curl, *For All the People*, 242.

41 Joyce Davis Robinson, "Consuming Interests: Food Cooperatives" *Times Picayune* (July 3, 1977): 70.

42 "Broadway Food Co-op Suspends Operations," *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1, no. 3 (June 1983): 4;  
"November Meeting: Slide Presentation on Food Co-ops," *Social Ecology Newsletter* 1, no. 5  
(November 1983): 1.

43 Clark, interview with the author.

44 Ibid.; Uri Davis, "Martin Buber's Paths in Utopia. The Kibbutz: An Experiment That Didn't Fail?"  
*Peace News For Nonviolent Revolution*, no. 2446 (March-June 2002),  
<http://peacenews.info/node/3979/martin-bubers-paths-utopia-kibbutz-experiment-didnt-fail>.

Cooperative, an intentional community in Tallahassee, Florida, as a potential model for a land trust serving Mississippi and Louisiana. Miccosukee consisted of 100 families each owning one to three acres of private property, while over 90 acres were designated as a nature preserved owned collectively by the Cooperative.<sup>45</sup> The Cooperative also included a town council, community center, swimming pool, and other recreational and community institutions. Inspired, between the early 1990s and 2005, Clark and his ex-wife bought over 70 acres of clear-cut land to start a similar community in Hancock County, Mississippi, hoping to divide acreage between collective and individual projects. Before Hurricane Katrina flattened most of the land, he had been reforesting the area, constructing trails, and holding retreats to promote and develop large scale “true communities.” After the storm, Clark renewed his efforts to both create an urban cooperative network and a rural cooperative land trust in order to radically transform Louisiana’s repressive political and exploitative economic conditions.

### **Harvey Reed and New Orleans’ Black Cooperative Traditions**

Finally, examining Louisiana Association of Cooperatives (LAC) director Harvey J. Reed, III’s cooperative career vividly links the history of civil rights and antipoverty movements in New Orleans to contemporary social justice organizing. While Reed was unaware of the Louisiana cooperative movement until the 1990s, he was nonetheless familiar with the principles of cooperation from a young age. Born in 1950 in Tremé, Reed grew up in the Lafitte Public Housing Projects and attended public schools within

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<sup>45</sup> “Miccosukee Land Co-op,” Fellowship for Intentional Community, accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.ic.org/directory/miccosukee-land-co-op/>.



walking distance of his home. Reed recalls, “people functioned like cooperatives...the situation...[allowed] you to come together and take your goods and services and trades and market to those who are going to use it. So I saw folks do that.”<sup>46</sup> Religious, social, and informal cooperative enterprises would expose Reed to the necessity of mutualism long before he encountered agricultural cooperatives as an adult.

As an adolescent, Reed relied on a close-knit community that embraced mutual cooperation, while he was simultaneously thrust into Tremé’s burgeoning civil rights movement. He recalls that in the 1950s and 1960s, “we understood how to get around [racial strife]” through small acts of resistance as well as coordinated protest. For example, “We would remove the barriers [white officials] would put up without anybody knowing about it...Signs on the bus saying ‘colored to the rear of the bus,’ we would just throw away...and occupy the bus.” Reed also directly encountered black activists fighting Louisiana’s civil rights battles. For instance, he recalls that NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund attorney Thurgood Marshall and his staff established temporary offices in the Knights of Peter Claver Building during the parish school desegregation crisis in 1960 and 1961. Galvanized by civil rights activity, Reed’s strong sense of racial justice would influence his cooperative organizing many decades later.

Similarly, the 1965 Hurricane Betsy disaster demonstrated to Reed the extent to which racial and class discrimination was ingrained into the city’s infrastructural development and the dire need for community action to redress systemic inequity. That year, Reed won a football scholarship to attend Southern University in Baton Rouge, a

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46 Reed, interview with author.

historically black college. Two weeks after Reed began classes, Betsy slammed into New Orleans, flooding the Lower Ninth Ward, a low-lying, poorly drained neighborhood of poor blacks and whites.<sup>47</sup> Eighty people died, and the neighborhood suffered \$1 billion in damages.<sup>48</sup> While historian Kent Germany argues that initial government apathy spurred a rise in black political participation at the neighborhood, city, and state level, Beverly Wright and Robert Bullard contend that the Ninth Ward never received adequate state or federal assistance to fully recover, causing the neighborhood to rapidly decline as residents left seeking better opportunities.<sup>49</sup>

To Reed, Betsy demonstrated the necessity of sustained resident cooperation and neighborhood self-reliance in the absence of adequate government response.<sup>50</sup> In Tremé's Lafitte Projects, residents relocated to the highest floor of the building, gathering friends and stranded non-residents alike to shelter with them during the storm. Afterwards, Tremé residents reached out to affected Ninth Ward neighborhoods so that "no one starved." Black cooperatives ranging from church groups, social aid and pleasure clubs, mutual aid societies, and medical and life insurance groups helped flooded neighborhoods slowly recover.<sup>51</sup> As they organized their own recovery efforts, black New Orleanians demonstrated characteristic resiliency stemming from decades of oppression: "We knew how to survive," Reed says.

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47 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 4-5.

48 Woods, "Katrina's World," 442.

49 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 4-5; Beverly Wright and Robert D. Bullard, "Washed Away by Hurricane Katrina: Rebuilding a 'New' New Orleans" in *Growing Smarter: Achieving Livable Communities, Environmental Justice, and Regional Equity*, ed. by Robert D. Bullard (Boston: The MIT Press, 2007), 196.

50 Reed, interview.

51 Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises*, 65.

Reed's college career was another politicizing moment. Although his schooling was interrupted when he served in the air force during the Vietnam War, after his tour, Reed enrolled at Southern University's New Orleans (SUNO) extension campus located in Pontchartrain Park, a new suburban neighborhood built for African Americans.<sup>52</sup> Reed pursued a bachelors degree in transportation management and a minor in accounting, noting that racial discrimination restricted black students' employment options. Often, black students were forced to "choose what was given to us."<sup>53</sup> However, Reed attended SUNO as the civil rights and black liberation movements were sweeping SUNO's campus, spurring many students to critique their educational training as they fought for self-determination in all aspects of their lives.<sup>54</sup>

For example, in 1969, the Afro-American Society, a group of civilian and veteran students, demanded that SUNO President Emmett Bashful respond to the changing political climate by engaging in meaningful dialogue with students, faculty, and staff. Specifically, the organization urged SUNO to create an autonomous Black Studies program, improve campus facilities and resources, freeze tuition increases, expand the library's collection of black-authored texts, and form a Black Draft Counseling Center.<sup>55</sup> When neither the school administration nor the state governor acceded to the protestors' demands, students occupied a campus building until the National Guard marched on the school. Months of protest did result in some concrete change, but for the remainder of the decade SUNO largely maintained its educational status quo. Nonetheless, Reed

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52 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 51-52; Reed, interview with author.

53 Reed, interview with author.

54 Woods, "Katrina's World," 443.

55 Camara, "There are Some Bad Brothers and Sisters in New Orleans," 95-110.

describes his experience at SUNO as a “gift”; as he completed his business degree, he gained a broader understanding of world and national affairs, which he lent to his future cooperative organizing career.

By 1986, in spite of the oil bust, Reed was running a successful horticulture business serving as Outreach Coordinator for Delgado Community College’s Horticulture Department.<sup>56</sup> A long-time civil rights and community organizer, Reed taught Orleans Parish prisoners horticulture skills and implemented a high school summer program.<sup>57</sup> In the mid-1990s, he befriended Ben Burkett, a small farmer and the Mississippi coordinator for the FSC. At the time, Burkett was working with the African American-owned Indian Springs Farmers Association in Mississippi, shipping cooperative members’ produce to New Orleans, Chicago, and the greater South.<sup>58</sup> A food sovereignty advocate, Burkett contended that indigenous producer cooperatives could ensure access to wholesome, locally produced food that also sustained indigenous agricultural practices and communities.<sup>59</sup> Inspired by his discussions with Burkett, Reed independently researched cooperatives and was amazed to discover Louisiana’s vibrant black cooperative history.<sup>60</sup>

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56 Reed, interview with author.

57 Ibid.; “Panel and Bio,” African Scientific Research Institute: Inaugural international African Diaspora Heritage Trail Promiseland Symposium (October 12, 2013), <http://asrip.org/index.php/inaugural-cultural-heritage-symposium/panelists>.

58 Donna F. Abernathy, “Cooperative Update: A Legacy Lives On,” Rural Cooperatives: USDA/Rural Development, last modified May 1998, <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/pub/may98/legacy.html>.

59 Federation of Southern Cooperatives, *The Ben Burkett Story: The Unlikely Journey of a Small Farmer*, video, April 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JM7zHWey3DQ#t=168>; Tony Field and Beverly Bell, “The Consumer’s Got to Change the System,” Other Worlds, last modified March 15, 2013, <http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/consumers-got-change-system-farmer-ben-burkett-racism-and-corporate-control-agriculture>.

60 Reed, interview with author.

Reed was struck by the similarities between civil rights and anti-poverty initiatives and the cooperative movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He was most impressed with black farmers' recognition that "the one thing you have is all this land, but no one is buying your goods because you're black or another color...[So] the best thing is to come together as group." Once they organized into cooperatives, "no one wanted to tackle with these farmers; they were resilient, active, strong. [White officials and large farmers] did not want to handle them wrong—If they handled one person wrong, the entire group was against them." Racial and economic justice organizers staunchly believed that this system of black-owned cooperatives would ameliorate rural African American poverty and political powerlessness.<sup>61</sup>

Reed was so impressed with the record of Louisianan cooperatives' economic development that he applied for a position with the FSC.<sup>62</sup> The FSC sent Reed to Jamaica to work with the State Department and the large cooperative business Land O'Lakes, which were assisting local agricultural cooperative prepare and ship watermelons to the United States. Over the course of two weeks, he learned about Jamaican cooperatives' environmentally sensitive and high-yield agricultural techniques, as well as their democratic organizational structure. Inspired by the practical applications of agricultural cooperatives, Reed would eventually dedicate his career to incubating cooperatives for socially disadvantaged small farmers.

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61 De Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 163; Greta de Jong, "From Votes to Vegetables," 145-161.

62 Reed, interview with author.

At the same time Reed became increasingly interested in farm cooperatives, two agricultural agents who had helped him establish the Delgado Horticulture Program urged him to enroll in the Louisiana State University Agricultural Leadership Development Program as its first black student. Over the course of two years, agricultural leaders attended lectures and travel seminars designed to strengthen rural economies by exposing local practitioners to national and global agricultural theories, methods, and resources.<sup>63</sup> At first Reed was reluctant, insisting that his “civil rights days are over. I’m tired of being the first [African American].”<sup>64</sup> Further, he was the only horticultural expert in a program catering to wealthy white owners of large farming, ranching, and agricultural sales industries.

Nonetheless, the two-year training course was a formative one; Reed gained comprehensive knowledge about the agriculture business, and the class also traveled throughout Argentina and Brazil for three weeks to observe South American farming practices. The program culminated in a weeklong World Health Organization conference, in which Reed chaperoned agricultural ministers, economic development agents, and financiers from around the world. Reed credits the experience with connecting him to important large-scale agricultural industries, as well as broadening his understanding of diverse agricultural practices and policies across the globe. Most importantly, Reed would use these domestic and global networks after Hurricane Katrina to seek institutional support for Louisiana’s marginalized farmers.

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63 “Agricultural Leadership Development Program,” LSU AgCenter, accessed July 17, 2014, [http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/community/leadership/ag\\_leadership/Agricultural+Leadership+Development+Program/](http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/community/leadership/ag_leadership/Agricultural+Leadership+Development+Program/).

64 Reed, interview with author.

## **Hurricane Katrina, Rebuilding, and Gentrification**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Fry, Clark, and Reed began to experiment with cooperatives to remediate and rebuild the city. They acted in direct opposition to accelerating city efforts to gentrify transitional communities and demolish public housing to redevelop inner city neighborhoods. Examining New Orleans' post-Katrina urban land use debates illustrates how Fry, Clark, and Reed positioned cooperatives as an ameliorative to persistent racial and economic inequality. Urban planner Kristina Ford argues that after Katrina, developers and architectural firms viewed the city as “a place where they could win contracts to write plans for recovery from the disaster based more on their pet planning theories than on what they knew about the city.”<sup>65</sup> As Ford observes, the Urban Institute and Bring New Orleans Back Commission's first rebuilding plan, unveiled to the public in January 2006, called for a smaller city footprint more resilient to flooding. To do so, it concentrated rebuilding efforts along natural levees, historically the wealthiest part of the city.<sup>66</sup> Proposing that the devastated Lower Ninth Ward be transformed into parkland, it offered no plan for rehousing displaced residents.<sup>67</sup>

When citizens rejected the Bring Back New Orleans plan, Mayor Ray Nagin announced a new rebuilding policy based on free market principles: if a critical mass of residents returned to a neighborhood, the City would extend services to the area.<sup>68</sup> As anthropologist Vincanne Adams argues, rather than reducing the city's dependence on

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65 Kristina Ford, *The Trouble with City Planning: What New Orleans Can Teach Us* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 30.

66 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 244.

67 Ford, *The Trouble with City Planning*, 31.

68 *Ibid.*, 33.

federal government aid, Nagin's "market-driven governance" allowed the City to benefit from "the market and its rationalities of profit" by transferring government-supervised social and economic programs to individuals and the private sector.<sup>69</sup> Nagin's laissez-faire rebuilding initiative dovetailed with inefficient and insufficient state and federal Road Home recovery funds that forced residents living outside of tourist destinations like the French Quarter and the Garden District to largely coordinate rebuilding efforts themselves. The policy pressured non-profit charities, churches, and volunteers to help recovery efforts and bridge the gap in government social and economic services. In response, over 70 neighborhood organizations formed to advocate for their community, create a neighborhood plan, and independently begin rebuilding.<sup>70</sup>

At the same time, despite the flooding of 60 percent of the city's housing stock, higher rents, and housing shortages, Hurricane Katrina provided city officials and developers a compelling reason to raze public housing and gentrify New Orleans' most vulnerable communities.<sup>71</sup> Hoping to redevelop valuable central city property and draw tourism dollars, city council members aligned with corporations, HANO, and HUD to attack public housing. Between 2005 and 2008, the city demolished four intact public housing complexes, attempted to deny residents' "right of return," and erected mixed-use residential apartments with thousands fewer affordable units than before.<sup>72</sup>

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69 Vincanne Adams, *Labors of Faith, Markets of Sorrow: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5-6.

70 Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 347.

71 Campanella, interview with author.

72 John Arena, "Black, White, Unite and Fight?" in *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans*, ed. by Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 152-173.



In contrast, public housing advocates like John Arena, a member of the direct action organization Community Concern Compassion/Hands off Iberville (C3), declared that only the state could properly ensure safe, sanitary, and affordable housing for low-income people of color, 70 percent of whom faced housing discrimination years after the storm.<sup>73</sup> However, during a closed December 19, 2007 City Council meeting, anti-demolition protesters were pepper sprayed while council members delivered a unanimous decision to demolish public housing and stalled on financing new affordable housing units.<sup>74</sup> Further highlighting the need for vastly expanded public housing rather than private affordable housing alternatives, after the 2008 economic crisis, disproportionate numbers of unemployed, low-income, and marginalized homeowners lost their homes during the 2008 subprime mortgage loan crisis.<sup>75</sup> By the end of 2007, the damage was done: both Florida and Desire were razed, generations of public housing residents were dispersed, and the city began constructing mixed-use, mixed-income housing that critics claim will spur further gentrification.<sup>76</sup>

Cooperatives have long emerged out of and served New Orleans' now demolished public housing complexes. For example, using Desire as its base of operations, the Free Southern Theater incorporated public housing residents into its cultural programming. Magnolia's rich community of musicians nurtured cooperative record company executive

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73 Ibid., 159; Cedric Johnson, "Charming Accommodations," in *Neoliberal Deluge*, 191; Wright and Bullard, "Washed Away by Hurricane Katrina," 199.

74 Campanella, interview with author.

75 Arena, "Black, White, Unite and Fight?" 159.

76 Maureen O'Hagan, "Post-Katrina: Will New Orleans Still Be New Orleans?" The Institute for Southern Studies (April 10, 2014). <http://www.equalvoiceforfamilies.org/post-katrina-will-new-orleans-still-be-new-orleans/>. Accessed on July 9, 2014.

Harold Battiste, while Rhythm Conspiracy is recruiting former residents to join its music cooperative. Also, St. Bernard resident Harvey Reed would later form the Louisiana Association of Cooperatives. The destruction of public housing and subsequent urban renewal threatens the legacy of community-based cooperative organizing.

Additionally, urban redevelopment has broader implications for the city's low-income residents by exacerbating pre-existing racialized settlement patterns. Historically, Richard Campanella argues, the city's racial demographics has been spatially represented by the "white teapot," a high concentration of affluent whites living along the strip of higher land bordering the Mississippi River between Carrollton and Bywater and encompassing the French Quarter. In contrast, as a result of historic segregationist practices such as deed restrictions, impoverished blacks largely live in low-lying drained marshland disproportionately vulnerable to flooding.<sup>77</sup> Today, Campanella observes that the "white teapot" has fattened in response to rising rates of white migration into the city, subsequent gentrification, and black out-migration into surrounding suburbs.<sup>78</sup> The result is dramatic: In some gentrifying neighborhoods such as Campanella's own Bywater, residents of color have declined by as much as 64 percent over the course of the decade.<sup>79</sup>

Most troubling, although the City unveiled its Master Plan in 2011, which mandated meaningful neighborhood participation to implement a cohesive system

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<sup>77</sup> Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma*, 185.

<sup>78</sup> Campanella, interview with author.

<sup>79</sup> Richard Campanella, "Gentrification and its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans," *New Geography*, last modified March 1, 2013, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/003526-gentrification-and-its-discontents-notes-new-orleans>.

governing land-use decisions, critics argue that planning documents were vague, obscure, and ineffective.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, environmental justice activist and historian Robert Bullard argues that Regional Planning Commission, the entity responsible for creating and implementing comprehensive land use policy for the New Orleans region, is weak, applies to few parishes near New Orleans, and is disproportionately influenced by wealthier, whiter, and less populated parishes like Plaquemines Parish.<sup>81</sup> These characteristics favor “suburbanization, decentralization, and low-density development” in exurban areas and consequently drain state and federal resources away from rebuilding a more environmentally just and sustainable New Orleans.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, many activists and residents fear, city leaders, mainstream conservationists, and well-connected white businesses ignore the needs of impoverished residents of color and instead desire to rebuild a “smaller and more upscale” New Orleans.<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to the “disaster capitalism” governing much of the city’s rebuilding efforts, cooperative activists hoped that New Orleans could be a “proving ground” for a more humane, grassroots-led, participatory economy.<sup>84</sup> Yet cooperatives occupy an ambiguous place within New Orleans’s changing physical, economic, and political landscape. While most cooperatives strive to mitigate the abuses of a capitalistic marketplace, their record of community engagement is mixed. Observers have criticized, for example, the spread of cooperatives that feature a significant racial, class, and

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80 Ford, *The Trouble with City Planning*, 40-41; Bullard, introduction, in *Growing Smarter*.

81 Bullard, introduction, in *Growing Smarter*, 1-5, 14.

82 Ibid; Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 148.

83 Thomas and Campo Flores, quoted in Wright and Bullard, “Washed Away by Hurricane Katrina,” 193; Stevens, interview with author.

84 Stevens, interview with author.

political disjunction between the low-income, transitional neighborhoods in which cooperatives are often located and their actual membership.<sup>85</sup> Idealistic, culturally middle-class, educated young people who are committed to improving the city's economic and political disparities confront conundrum of facilitating gentrification and perpetuating the very inequality they sought to ameliorate.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, evidence suggests that food cooperatives can both benefit from and drive gentrification. New York Times' Vivian Yee reports, for example, that the Bushwick Food Co-op's financial success is largely the consequence of gentrification in the formerly majority-Hispanic neighborhood.<sup>87</sup> Part of a new complex of lofts, espresso bar, and a craft store, the cooperative is directly linked to escalating property rates that drive resident displacement. Likewise, when Portland's Alberta Co-op Grocery opened in 2001 in a predominantly black neighborhood, the area was rapidly gentrifying.<sup>88</sup> Over the past decade, the cooperative's membership and profits have grown significantly, mostly due to its new clientele of affluent whites. Organizations like the New Orleans Food and Farm Network recognize that the white-dominated local food movement is often unaware of the racial and class disparities shaping the city's geography and food

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85 Vivian Yee, "Food Co-ops in Gentrifying Areas Find They Aren't to Every Taste," *New York Times* (February 11, 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/12/nyregion/as-neighborhoods-gentrify-co-ops-find-they-are-not-to-everyones-taste.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/12/nyregion/as-neighborhoods-gentrify-co-ops-find-they-are-not-to-everyones-taste.html?_r=0); Scott Kellogg and Stacy Pettigrew, *Toolbox for Sustainable City Living* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2008), 211; Carlos Perez de Alejo, interview by author, Cooperative Oral History Project. February 12, 2012.

86 Campanella, interview; Robinson, interview.

87 Yee, "Food Co-ops in Gentrifying Areas."

88 Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 199.

politics, and cooperatives' presence in a vulnerable neighborhood can exacerbate social and economic disparity by accelerating gentrification already in effect.<sup>89</sup>

A primary example of the inadvertent ways in which cooperative economics can speed urban renewal is the New Orleans Food Co-op, which in 2011 opened along St. Claude Avenue in the New Orleans Healing Center. Located at the edge of the Marigny, a neighborhood that has been gentrified since the 1970s, and St. Roch, a low-income African American community, the New Orleans Food Co-op seeks to serve both communities despite their different demographics and needs. Even before opening its doors, the Co-op was embroiled in debates over the rapid gentrification of poorer areas of the St. Roch, Marigny, and Bywater neighborhoods, which Richard Campanella argues has created a bifurcated area characterized by “distinct race and class lines,” producing “sub-cities, separate communities that happen to abut each other, but otherwise do not interact.”<sup>90</sup> Recently, accelerating urban renewal and rising rental prices in the Marigny have pushed artists into the St. Roch community across St. Claude Avenue. The presence of Richard Florida’s young “creatives” has attracted college-educated whites and mid-career professionals to this largely disinvested black neighborhood.<sup>91</sup>

Admirably, the Food Co-op hopes to bridge the city’s pervasive food deserts, in which low-income residents procure expensive yet poor quality foods from convenience stores and fast food chains, by allying with the city’s network of farmers’ markets, local

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89 “NOLA Food and Farm Network News,” NOLA Food and Farm Network, April 3, 2012,

<http://noffn.tumblr.com/post/20426706499/finding-common-ground-in-nola-through-food-justice>.

90 Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 187; “Healing Center Attacked for Role in Gentrification,” NOLA Anarcha (blog), September 11, 2011, <http://nolaanarcha.blogspot.com/2011/09/healing-center-attacked-for-role-in.html>.

91 Campanella, interview; Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

farms, and community-supported agriculture organizations.<sup>92</sup> Before opening the store, for example, the cooperative partnered with Market Umbrella and the Second Harvest Food Bank to operate a mobile food market to provide fresh produce to underserved populations.<sup>93</sup> Now, to ensure that less affluent residents can join, the cooperative offers limited-income membership for \$25, a quarter of its “individual share investment.”<sup>94</sup>

However, the food co-op’s leftist credibility was damaged when it announced its storefront location in the New Orleans Healing Center. The center’s developer, Pres Kabacoff, has been the key architect in rebuilding post-Katrina New Orleans along free market neoliberal principles.<sup>95</sup> In addition to renting space to non-profit progressive organizations, the Healing Center envisions itself as a community center and small business hub that promotes the “physical, nutritional, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, economic, environmental, cultural, and civic well-being” crucial to creating a democratic and cooperative society.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, the organization houses a variety of upscale,

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92 Lawrence Knopp, “Some Theoretical Implications of Gay Involvement in an Urban Land Market,” *Political Geography Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (October 1990): 337-352; Knopler, *Food Co-ops in America*, 191-192; “Our Mission, Ends, and Goals,” New Orleans Food Co-op, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.nolafood.coop/about-nofc/mission/>; “Our Farmers and Producers,” New Orleans Food Co-op, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.nolafood.coop/shopping-at-nofc/meet-our-farmers/>.

93 “NOFC History,” New Orleans Food Co-op, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.nolafood.coop/about-nofc/beginnings/>.

94 “Invest—Co-OWN It!” New Orleans Food Co-op, accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.nolafood.coop/cooperative-ownership/invest-you-own-it/>.

95 Campanella, “Gentrification and its Discontents.”

96 “Credo,” New Orleans Healing Center, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://www.neworleanshealingcenter.org/#!credo/c1fok>.

for-profit cafes, yoga studios, galleries, and juice bars that clearly attract a more affluent demographic rather than the low-income St. Roch community located across the street.<sup>97</sup>

Kabacoff's strategies mirror those of developers across the country who tout expensive residential and commercial building plans that incorporate only minimal environmental design elements as "green" and "sustainable" to attract affluent families to a gentrifying neighborhood, while ignoring that development's potentially harmful effect on marginalized residents.<sup>98</sup> For example, in 2008, when Kabacoff first began building the Center, St. Claude residents charged that the developer made little effort to outline the details of the complex and even mischaracterized the kinds of stores the Center might attract in order to acquire neighborhood approval.<sup>99</sup>

The New Orleans' Food Co-op therefore faces a troubling conundrum: how can it address persistent racial inequality shaping food access and neighborhood viability when it resides in a complex Kabacoff explicitly designed to drive gentrification in Bywater and the Marigny? Kabacoff has positioned the Healing Center, and by extension, the New Orleans Food Co-op, as an anchor for new development along St. Claude, which itself is predicated on demolishing public housing and dispersing thousands of low-income residents across the city. Arguing that "density is good as long as you don't concentrate the poor," in 2013, Kabacoff razed 59 out of Iberville Public Housing Projects' 75

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97 Doug MacCash, "Gentrification of Bywater and St. Claude Avenue Was Sped Up by Flood and 2008 Economic Slump," *Times Picayune* (January 25, 2013),

[http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/01/the\\_long\\_term\\_gentrification\\_o.html](http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/01/the_long_term_gentrification_o.html).

98 Kellogg and Pettigrew, *Toolbox for Sustainable City Living*, 211.

99 Richard Webster, "St. Claude Neighbors Wary of Healing Center Plans," *New Orleans City Business* (June 17, 2011), <http://neworleanscitybusiness.com/blog/author/richardwebster>.

buildings.<sup>100</sup> While he promises to eventually construct 820 mixed-income new units on the site and throughout New Orleans, only 227 have been funded, with no concrete plans to rehouse former low-income residents.<sup>101</sup> Instead, Kabacoff's development company, Historic Restoration Incorporated, recently completed a 75-unit affordable housing apartment complex for artists in Bywater, anticipating the movement of thousands of newcomers into the city seeking housing near downtown while embracing "authentic" culture and entertainment.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the explosion of redevelopment in low-income neighborhoods that has threatened this community by inflating property values in by 30 to 60 percent over the past four years.<sup>103</sup>

Unsurprisingly, while the New Orleans Food Co-op advances a model for racially inclusive food systems and community economic stimulation, observers contend that the cooperative has yet to sufficiently attract low-income residents. For example, Restaurant Opportunity Center cooperative organizer Reese Chenault argues that few working-class people of color patronize the Healing Center or the food co-op, preferring to eat at nearby fast food restaurants along St. Claude Avenue.<sup>104</sup> He notes that St. Roch residents trust packaged junk food over fresh produce because conventional grocery store vegetables are sometimes rotten, and the New Orleans Food Co-op often offers expensive and

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100 Richard A. Webster, "Demolition of Iberville Housing Development Beings," *Times Picayune* (September 10, 2013).

101 Tyler Bridges, "Pres Kabacoff Outlines \$1 Billion Vision to Redevelop New Orleans' Urban Core," *The Lens* (September 24, 2013), <http://thelensnola.org/2013/09/24/pres-kabacoff-outlines-1-billion-vision-to-redevelop-new-orleans-urban-core/>.

102 Doug MacCash, "St. Claude Avenue May Roll Into the 21st Century Aboard a Streetcar," *Times Picayune* (January 13, 2013), [http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/01/st\\_claude\\_avenue\\_neighborhoods\\_1.html](http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2013/01/st_claude_avenue_neighborhoods_1.html)

103 Bridges, "Pres Kabacoff Outlines \$1 Billion Vision."

104 "Credo," New Orleans Healing Center; Reese Chenault, Solidarity Economy meeting, June 27, 2012.



unfamiliar products.<sup>105</sup> Although the Co-op sells natural and organic foods to improve resident nutrition, provides educational services about environmental and health issues, and seeks to connect with Louisiana farmers to expand the New Orleans food economy, Chenault maintains that the cooperative's goods must be affordable for the low-income community it purports to serve.<sup>106</sup>

If cooperatives alone cannot halt gentrification or neighborhood disinvestment, what can? Cooperatives run by marginalized residents may better address their neighborhood's economic and political needs than those located in vulnerable communities but serving affluent members outside the neighborhood. Community-led cooperatives, such as Macon Fry's Gathering Tree Growers Collective, John Clark's Solidarity Economy, and Harvey Reed's Louisiana Association of Cooperatives, attempt to solve racialized food and property disparities by transforming the city's political and spatial geography. Significantly, these grassroots cooperatives are partnering with cooperative allies at the city, state, and national level.

### **Gathering Tree Growers Collective**

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Macon Fry organized a sustainable farming experiment station, the Gathering Tree Growers Collective, near Xavier University in Mid-City's Gert Town. He and his assistant gardener, Jocine Velasco, argue that sustainable urban gardening disrupts the conventional food distribution system, is environmentally sensitive, and can promote community bonding among neighborhood

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105 Chenault, Solidarity Economy meeting.

106 Ibid.; Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 191.

residents.<sup>107</sup> In Gathering Tree, Fry has striven to create an egalitarian cooperative gardening project that models both environmental sustainability and community sociability to strengthen communities and expand food access to needy residents.

The Gathering Tree Growers Collective is both a manifestation of Fry's political philosophy as well as a product of the tremendous resurgence of interest in community gardens and urban farms after Hurricane Katrina. Activists hoped a grassroots network of urban agriculture projects would help underserved communities of color access fresh produce, spur community redevelopment, improve resident health, and ensure neighborhood food security.<sup>108</sup> A gardener of two decades, Fry was well placed to exploit the city's coalescing urban farm movement. To staff the collective, he deployed the contacts he made as the mentor farmer at the Mid-City Hollygrove Market and Farm and as farm advisor and mentor farmer at Grow Dat Youth Farm, a non-profit City Park organization that trains socioeconomically diverse teens to grow food and sell or donate produce within neighborhoods with limited access to fresh foods.<sup>109</sup>

Fry charts the dramatic transformation of the community garden movement after the storm: The absence of an important body of African American gardeners, the depopulation of the city, and the flooding of most of the garden plots, save for a handful residing on a narrow strip of high ground, a starkly racialized space, all had significant

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107 Fry, interview with author; Jocine Velasco, interview with author, June 24, 2012. Cooperative Oral History Project.

108 Lower Ninth Ward 18, accessed August 11, 2014, [http://www.sustainthenine.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/L9W%20CSED%20Food%20Action%20Plan%20FINAL\\_sm\\_0.pdf](http://www.sustainthenine.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/L9W%20CSED%20Food%20Action%20Plan%20FINAL_sm_0.pdf).

109 "Our Farm," Grow Dat Youth Farm, accessed July 10, 2014, <http://growdatyouthfarm.org/what-we-do/our-farm/>; Fry, interview with author.

political implications for community gardening in post-Katrina New Orleans. Fry observes that in the wake of the storm, “suddenly...there were lots more vacant lots” to garden on, but the lots’ ownership, as well as their disposal and distribution, “became highly politicized,” particularly in un-flooded areas of Uptown. The community garden movement confronted the racial dynamics of the city’s historical demographic settlement patterns, with unsettling consequences.

Pressure to develop vacant land was further heightened as increasing numbers of wealthy, well-educated white migrants resettled the white teapot.<sup>110</sup> Consequently, Uptown community gardens “that had survived the development of the early 2000s, the [economic] growth...and hadn’t been developed, were suddenly really valuable” to investors. The contested property “simply became...too valuable” to use for community gardening.<sup>111</sup> In contrast, while there had been many community gardens in African American neighborhoods in Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly, those areas were flooded and depopulated. Further, the dearth of long-time black gardeners, who had either died or been evacuated during the storm, “really put the whammy on the gardens” that “already had been decimated by poor planning, overdevelopment, lack of follow-up, [and] lack of community-building.” Consequently, “after Katrina the number of gardens, the number of gardeners, there was nobody here...[it was a] tabula rasa.”

The frustrations Fry encountered within the community garden movement before and after Katrina pushed him to experiment with other kinds of food sustainability

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110 Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 272.

111 Fry, interview with author.

strategies. He argues, “if community gardening is your model for a so-called cooperative effort...they just very often end up not being truly cooperative.” Participants may not work together toward the garden’s mutual benefit because they are only invested in their own “little spot in their backyard.” Ultimately, “it just doesn’t surprise me that that type of social experiment might not work.” Observing that the most successful Parkways Partners community gardens were those that had institutional support, gardened on institution-owned land, and had a strong leader with continued resident participation, Fry strove to create a collective garden reflecting these qualities.

Specifically, Gathering Tree Growers Collective emerged out of Fry’s belief that small market gardens could revitalize vacant city lots and help needy families. After establishing demonstration market gardens at Mid-City’s Hollygrove Market and Farm, Fry replicated the experiment in a flood-damaged Parkways Partners community plot near Xavier University, a Catholic institution primarily serving students of color. At the time, the largely black working-class Gert Town neighborhood was almost completely depopulated. Collective member Jocine Velasco notes that the “scrappy” Mid-City neighborhood’s housing stock was severely damaged in the storm, and seven years later, several houses near the garden still stood empty.<sup>112</sup> However, Velasco observes, “people come and go, but there are also a bunch of really old families that have stayed here for a really long time that came back or never left after the storm.” Returning residents clamored to revitalize their old community garden, so Fry recruited over 100 housing

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112 Velasco, interview with author.

rehabilitation volunteers to transform the “total junkyard” back into a working garden.<sup>113</sup> He recalls, “we cleaned this garden down to the bones. I mean, by hand got out every bit of grass.” After the garden was remediated, Fry gave Iola and Leola, two elderly Gert Town residents and ardent community gardeners, their old plots. Fry used the remaining parcel of land as his own market garden, recruiting especially dedicated Hollygrove volunteers to harvest the Gert Town garden. Eventually, Fry turned the garden into a collective farm, while he served as “benevolent dictator,” or mentor gardener.

### **Organizational Structure**

Fry envisioned the resulting Gathering Tree Growers Collective as a project that would both reflect an egalitarian, cooperative organizational structure and demonstrate methods for sustainable urban agriculture. To ensure that the garden remains productive, Fry acts as head gardener, supervising the collective’s work and outlining the week’s tasks. In addition, the collective elected Jocine Velasco to manage the garden in the summertime when Fry flees New Orleans to escape the oppressive heat. However, in practice, the collective runs on a consensus model; all responsibilities are shared among members and they often decide the garden’s course as a group.

Velasco relishes the democratic nature of the collective. Because everyone “has a complete stake” in maintaining the lot, she believes “it’s really important that we ask every single person...what we want to grow, and when we’re going to help out.” To that end, each week the collective’s 13 members divvy up labor tasks among themselves, although Fry trains everyone on all aspects of the garden’s cultivating duties. As Velasco

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<sup>113</sup> Fry, interview with author.

describes, “We make a calendar, and see what everybody’s availability are. And we just decide from there.” Each individual is responsible for completing a small task at least one day during the week, such as watering or harvesting. For example, members coordinate several daily irrigation shifts during the summertime. If the members fail to maintain the garden by neglecting to coordinate vacations or forgetting to consistently water and weed, Velasco says, “we have to take ownership of the problems...and try to alleviate [them] together.”

Similarly, Fry and Velasco contend that the collective’s democratic structure nurtures close relationships among members in ways absent in other urban agricultural projects.<sup>114</sup> Velasco says of her fellow members, “everybody is a myriad of really funny people coming together really for the sake of being curious and wanting to learn how to urban farm...It’s really fun getting to meet people I wouldn’t otherwise get to meet before.” Most of the collective’s young members are predominantly white, idealistic transplants who joined the group to establish a sense of community in their new home as well as participate the urban agricultural movement. For example, twenty-something Velasco was born in the Philippines and raised in Florida.<sup>115</sup> A few years after graduating college, she moved to New Orleans to pursue a career in urban and sustainable agriculture. Velasco first volunteered at the New Orleans Food Co-op on St. Claude Avenue, drawn to its mission to make nutritious food accessible to the African American

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114 Fry, interview with author; Velasco, interview with author.

115 Velasco, interview with author.

St. Roch community. Velasco's desire to eventually run an urban farm of her own led her to volunteer with Hollygrove and then Gathering Tree Growers Collective.

Collective members bond through weekly communal workdays, which blend labor with socializing. Sundays "feel more like a collective, I guess," explains Velasco, because all members convene to "tackle a lot of really big garden issues," like mending and weeding.<sup>116</sup> The collective usually spends the early morning volunteering first at Hollygrove before driving or biking to Gathering Tree. Members usually eat lunch together after their Sunday gardening shifts and often invite each other to parties.<sup>117</sup> As Fry notes, "it's really neat that there's been a sense of community generated around this garden that I...seldom was able to generate in a community garden space, where people...tended to their own little plot."<sup>118</sup> Rather than perpetuating New Orleans's reputation as being "sort of a lone wolf, no club type place," Gathering Tree is an important site for cementing social ties among members.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly, while the collective has fostered a tight-knit community amongst members, it also attempts to serve the nutritional needs of Gert Town's African American community. Prior to Katrina, the Parkways Partners community garden had been a vibrant site for local food production, and Velasco notes, "people in this neighborhood have always known that this was a garden." Not only do residents raise vegetables on the site, but other neighbors know that Gathering Tree is "a place where they can get food if they needed it." For example, one neighbor, Mike, "has picked cumquats off this tree for

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116 Ibid.

117 Fry, interview with author.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.; Velasco, interview with author.

as long as it's been around here.” On Sunday harvest days, collective members fill wheelbarrows with greens and root vegetables, and passersby can take as much as they wish. Frequently, the collective has a substantial surplus of produce, so “if we have too much, we kind of just knock on [residents’] doors.” To that end, collective members join with the firm understanding that they will only plant crops to eat themselves or donate the surplus to the surrounding neighborhood. Because Gathering Tree is primarily a demonstration garden, the collective can sell produce at local farmers markets only if it still has remaining vegetables after donating the food to the community.

### **Permaculture**

Secondly, Gathering Tree Growers Collective’s mission is to promote community-driven sustainable agriculture to transform the city’s abandoned lots, many of which are still contaminated by residue in Katrina’s floodwaters, into productive spaces.<sup>120</sup> Velasco argues that after bioremediation of the soil, the lots are “perfect places to grow food, as community gardens, for personal use, or...to sell to markets.” Gathering Tree specifically practices permaculture, or the practice of “closed loop” living that rejects large-scale farming and food production that exploits human and non-human animals and fosters environmentally destructive habits.<sup>121</sup> The collective contends that sustainable agriculture conserves dwindling fossil fuels and other non-renewal resources. Ultimately, permaculture adherents seek to create a cooperative, affordable, and sustainable lifestyle for all citizens. To do so, practitioners educate residents about

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120 Velasco, interview with author.

121 “Take the Virtual Tour,” Rhizome Collective, accessed October 17, 2011, <http://www.rhizomecollective.org/node/7>.



ecological technologies and strategies to satisfy shelter, food, waste management, water, and energy needs in an urban environment.<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, Gathering Tree argues that permaculture principles offer a new model for individual and neighborhood self-sufficiency and food security. Gathering Tree aligns with sustainable agriculture advocates around the country who argue, “working-class neighborhoods deserve community gardens, green spaces, and easy access to healthy food, transportation, and services.”<sup>123</sup> As Velasco contends, by no longer relying on expensive or poor quality supermarket produce, “you’re feeding yourself, and you’re feeding a lot of people with [the garden] in a very small space.” To that end, Velasco seeks to educate Gert Town residents, collective members, and New Orleanians in general about sustainable and cooperative farming principles. For example, Gathering Tree’s small, intensively cultivated plots depend on “reusing materials...making your own potting mix, say, and reusing that potting mix. A lot of seed saving. Using as little of our precious resources as possible.” Further, the collective grows seasonal and local produce appropriate to coastal Southern Louisiana. Such practices, the collective believes, can empower neighborhood residents to question over-consumption and dependence on large companies and agencies for their basic needs.

The success of Macon Fry’s Gathering Tree Growers Collective is inseparable from New Orleans’s burgeoning local food movement. For example, vegetarian and vegan restaurants have spread across the city, and as Velasco states, there have “been pop-ups

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122 Kellogg and Pettigrew, *Toolbox for Sustainable City Living*.

123 *Ibid.*, 211.

and speakeasies and restaurants opening all the time that have those alternatives.”<sup>124</sup> Restaurants like Maurepas Foods in Bywater advertise a “farm-to-table mentality about their food” by procuring locally-sourced ingredients. Also, since 2010, the NOLA Locavores have organized an annual “Eat Local Challenge,” sponsored by over 40 restaurants and food purveyors, in which New Orleanians are encouraged to produce or eat foods grown within 100 miles of the city for one month.<sup>125</sup> Locavores range from vegan activists and farmers market directors to inner city community organizers, and they strive to preserve Louisiana’s indigenous foods while fostering a local food economy accessible to all New Orleanians. As social geographers Patricia Allen and Clare Hinrichs argue, the local food movement has rapidly gained momentum across large segments of the public as community gardens and other grassroots urban agricultural projects are increasingly “seen as fostering direct democratic participation in the local food economy and cultivating caring relationships among people in a community.”<sup>126</sup>

### **Gentrification and the Local Food Movement**

As Gathering Tree seeks to improve resident access to environmentally sustainable and healthful food while also modeling an egalitarian non-profit organization, they, like other permaculture activists around the country, have become increasingly attuned to the complex racial and class dynamics of food advocacy. Velasco notes that the garden provokes some measure of curiosity among black residents because “the

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124 Velasco, interview with author.

125 Ibid.; “About Us,” The New Orleans 4th Annual Eat Local Challenge, accessed July 13, 2014, <http://www.nolalocavore.org/nola-locavores/>.

126 Patricia Allen and Clare Hinrichs, “Buying into ‘Buy Local’: Engagements of United States Local Food Initiatives,” in *Alternative Food Geographies: Representation and Practice*, ed. by Damian Maye, Lewis Holloway, and Moya Kneafsey (New York: Elsevier, 2007), 255-260.

members of our collective are a.) not from here [New Orleans], and b.) don't [live]...in the same neighborhood...So there's kind of a gentrification like that here...But, you know, no matter what, you're kind of a part of this thing that's happening."<sup>127</sup> While Velasco commends the rapid acceptance of the local food movement and cooperative economics, she remains ambivalent about the unintended impact food cooperatives may have on the communities they desire to help. As community activists Scott Kellogg and Stacey Pettigrew similarly contend, permaculture must "also include consciousness about gentrification and class to be truly effective."<sup>128</sup>

On the other hand, Fry maintains that despite the recent influx of white urban gardeners into New Orleans, "my point of view on urban agriculture and these types of community projects in general...is [that] showing people success is a good thing," regardless of the activists' race or class. If a community garden or cooperative can inspire neighborhood participation, particularly among African American youth, then the project is meaningful. Fry concludes, "as much as I would like to engage all the segments of the city," his priority is to strengthen the city's urban agriculture network disrupted by Hurricane Katrina in order to build a sustainable, permanent food justice movement. The New Orleans Food and Farm Network supervises Fry's work for the Hollygrove and Grow Dat Youth Farm, for example. Network Executive Director Sanjay Kharod argues that food justice requires a complex and nuanced understanding of the city's racial and class dynamics and advocates for collaboration among people of color

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127 Velasco, interview with author.

128 Daniel Mottola, "Bringing Urban Living in Harmony with Nature," *The Austin Chronicle* (January 20, 2006), <http://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2006-01-20/325865/>.

and white activists.<sup>129</sup> Specifically, it liaisons between the urban farm movement and “neighborhood food clusters” of residents, non-profits, institutions, and businesses to ensure that local citizens and activists influence urban food policy.<sup>130</sup>

Regardless of members’ position on urban renewal, institutional forces unrelated to Gathering Tree’s presence are transforming Gert Town, with serious ramifications for the organization’s constituency. Since Katrina, Gert Town’s rehabilitation has lagged behind other neighborhoods; industrial pollution continues to contaminate the area, neglected roads wash out, a flooded anchor school has been demolished, and finally, Xavier University has rezoned a dozen properties in order to build dormitories.<sup>131</sup> Community activists accuse Xavier University of hurting the neighborhood by unduly raising property values and pushing out long-time residents.<sup>132</sup>

Ultimately, while Gathering Tree Growers Collective promotes environmentally conscious agricultural practices, it lacks a systematic framework of economic cooperation that can facilitate halt deleterious gentrification or build a community-driven alternative to current urban planning models. The collective functions more successfully as an experimental station for permaculture methods rather than as a part of the city’s movement for cooperative-led racial and economic justice. Despite working with the

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129 “NOLA Food and Farm Network News,” NOLA Food and Farm Network News, last modified April 3, 2012, <http://noffn.tumblr.com/post/20426706499/finding-common-ground-in-nola-through-food-justice>.

130 Ibid.; “NOLA Food and Farm Network News,” *Food Policy Advocacy*, accessed August 11, 2014 <http://www.noffn.org/category/food-policy-advocacy/>.

131 Susan Buchanan, “Gert Town Overlooked as New Orleans Redevelops,” *Huffington Post* (October 17, 2012), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-buchanan/gert-town-overlooked-as-n\\_b\\_1973777.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-buchanan/gert-town-overlooked-as-n_b_1973777.html); Bruce Egger, “Xavier University Rezoning Request OK’d By New Orleans City Council,” *Times Picayune* (April 20, 2013), [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/04/xavier\\_university\\_rezoning\\_req\\_1.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2013/04/xavier_university_rezoning_req_1.html).

132 Egger, “Xavier University Rezoning Request.”

Louisiana Association of Cooperatives, Fry was hard pressed to name a single co-op in New Orleans, claiming that the movement has not yet reached the city.<sup>133</sup>

Further, despite its democratic organizational structure, Gathering Tree operates largely at the behest of Fry, who owns the garden property. The collective is primarily an outgrowth of his interest in the urban agriculture rather than a manifestation of any cooperative ideals; without his continued interest, the garden would cease to exist. Consequently, Gathering Tree operates independently from the broader cooperative movement in New Orleans, and any environmental, economic, and political impact it may exert is therefore isolated to Gert Town and its specific collective members. In contrast, one citywide New Orleans cooperative coalition, Solidarity Economy, is explicitly aligned with the broader cooperative movement, while also placing land security and racial justice at the center of its program for social transformation.

### **Solidarity Economy**

In 2012, Loyola philosophy professor and long-time cooperative and environmental activist John Clark helped found Solidarity Economy as a cooperative think tank and study group. The group aimed to pinpoint the failings of previous cooperative efforts and brainstorm concrete action plans to sustain meaningful economic, political, and social change in the city.<sup>134</sup> In weekly meetings, often held at Loyola University's library, members study historical and contemporary cooperative models and discuss their current and proposed projects to physically transform their communities.

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133 Fry, interview with author.

134 Clark, interview with author.

While the organization encompasses cooperatives addressing a broad range of political and economic issues, I will limit my analysis to the coalition's campaign to revolutionize the city's exploitative food production, distribution, and consumption systems.<sup>135</sup> Solidarity Economy is a counterpoint to the neighborhood-specific Gathering Tree Growers Collective: it identifies atomistic cooperatives as the primary barrier to building a cross-class and interracial city-wide cooperative movement, and it labors to connect radical, anarchist, and progressive cooperatives into a loose coalition to better achieve community-based governance and economic cooperation.

Solidarity Economy is the outgrowth of several recent cooperative and radical movements centered on social justice, community empowerment, and alternative economics. First, Hurricane Katrina spurred a resurgence of anarchist and cooperative activism to challenge neoliberal government and development initiatives. For example, after returning to New Orleans shortly after the storm to assist with relief work, Clark was inspired by anarchist activists who streamed into the city to help stabilize devastated communities. Clark was particularly impressed with New Orleans community organizer and former Black Panther Malik Rahim's collaboration with Austin anarchist Scott Crow to establish the Common Ground Collective in Algiers and the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>136</sup>

A radical, democratic, and anti-oppressive organization, Common Ground offered free medical treatment, food, and clothing to survivors. The collective's organizers drew explicitly on survival tactics from the Black Panthers, Zapatistas, and American

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135 Solidarity Economy meeting, June 27, 2012.

136 Clark, interview with author.

anarchists to craft an alternative to failed city, state, and federal relief efforts, and it hoped to quickly turn its operations over to returning local residents.<sup>137</sup> However, local activists and Common Ground founders worried that high turnover rates of volunteers, the slow return of hurricane refugees, and white, affluent, and outside volunteers' prejudice would blunt Common Ground's potential to overturn institutionalized racial and class inequality.<sup>138</sup> After Solidarity Economy formed out of the ashes of Common Ground and other collective organizations, Clark and his fellow activists invited former Common Ground members to participate in a renewed effort to build a radical, egalitarian, and cooperative economy.<sup>139</sup>

Second, the economic recession of 2008 constituted a new impetus for cooperative organizing as New Orleanians who had lost their jobs, savings, and homes through corporate malfeasance looked for community-driven solutions to economic instability.<sup>140</sup> As Anne Knupfer argues, after 2008, the cooperative movement rapidly expanded as under-employed and unemployed citizens formed small businesses, collectives, and cooperatives.<sup>141</sup> Third, several Solidarity Economy members had belonged to the anarchist New Orleans Free School Network, which John Clark created in 2010 as a free, anti-authoritarian volunteer organization devoted to "the development

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137 Sue Hilderbrand, Scott Crow, and Lisa Fithian, "Common Ground Relief," in *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*, ed. by South End Press Collective (Cambridge: South End Press Collective, 2007), 81-88; Arend, *Showdown in Desire*, 192-194.

138 Roger Benham, "The Birth of the Clinic: Action Medics in New Orleans," in *What Lies Beneath*, 79.

139 Clark, interview with author.

140 Solidarity Economy meeting.

141 Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America*, 191.

of accessible, relevant, community-based education.”<sup>142</sup> Fourth, young activists in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement also comprised the core of the coalition. Acting in solidarity with New York City protestors, Occupy New Orleans coordinated mass marches protesting a wide gamut of local and national social, economic, and political issues ranging from police brutality, the prison-industrial system, political corruption, economic inequality, and neoliberal policies governing Hurricane Katrina rebuilding efforts and post-2008 home foreclosure measures.<sup>143</sup>

Finally, Solidarity Economy formed directly out of the international solidarity economy movement, which critiques capitalism by uniting worker cooperatives, intentional communities, farmers markets, time banks, and other alternative economic models to transform capitalistic economic and political systems.<sup>144</sup> Solidary economy activists believe that by sponsoring reinvestment programs, researching community needs, and monitoring public programs, cooperatives can help residents control revitalization in their neighborhood. Similarly, Solidarity Economy’s 20 members represent diverse cooperative projects throughout the city and state, including time bank, free schools, land trust organizations, farmers markets, community gardens, and a variety of worker cooperatives.

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142 Esther Martin and Kate Smash, “New Orleans Free School Network,” *Fifth Estate*, no. 388 (Winter 2013), <http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/388-winter-2013/new-orleans-free-school-network/>.

143 Brendan McCarthy, “About 400 Marches Join ‘Occupy New Orleans’ Protest,” *Times Picayune* (October 6, 2011), [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/10/about\\_400\\_marchers\\_join\\_occupy.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/10/about_400_marchers_join_occupy.html); Mike Howells, “On the Plunder of Post-Isaac Rebuilding,” Occupy New Orleans, last modified September 6, 2012, <http://onola.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/on-the-plunder-of-post-isaac-rebuilding-onola/>; Gordon Russell, “New Orleans City Council Meets This Morning; Occupy NOLA Protest Expected at 11,” *Times Picayune* (November 17, 2011), [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/11/city\\_council\\_meeting\\_this\\_morn.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/11/city_council_meeting_this_morn.html).

144 Erin Rice, e-mail message to the author, June 26, 2012.



Although many of coalition members are recent additions to the New Orleans activist community, the group draws on the experiences of long-time cooperative activists John Clark, a native New Orleanian, Sally Stevens, a resident since the 1990s, and Don Paul, a denizen since 2006. All three channel their previous cooperative work, analyzing their failings and offering suggestions for current cooperative organizers.

In a June 2012 Solidarity Economy meeting, veteran and new cooperative members bluntly assessed the hurdles facing the city's cooperative movement.<sup>145</sup> Central City activist Sally Stevens observed that while many cooperative activists are doing important work within their neighborhoods, their larger impact is dampened because they are dispersed across the city. In order to unite scattered cooperatives and educate the public about their presence, the coalition must reframe the cooperative economy as beneficial to New Orleans as a whole. Concurring with Stevens's assessment, Restaurant Opportunities Center of New Orleans (ROC) organizer Reese Chenault contended that black and white cooperatives must bridge geographic isolation by improving interracial communication and building a broad, citywide cooperative movement.

To that end, John Clark urged members to look to large churches as models for community outreach. For example, St. Roch's Franklin Avenue Baptist Church had 7,000 members, largely because it was "in touch with people's real needs." Clark criticized left wing activist groups for spouting revolutionary rhetoric but "not helping when members are sick, or die," unlike many faith-based organizations. He pointed to the civil rights movement's "beloved community" as touchstone for Solidarity Economy. Similarly,

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<sup>145</sup> Solidarity Economy meeting.

Don Paul, the former Operations Director for Common Ground, instructed members to go out to impoverished neighborhoods to ask residents directly what they needed. Activists must “get over our egotism,” he said. “What does everyone want us to do?” Pointing to his experience with Common Ground’s offshoot cooperative projects, Paul observed that cooperatives fail when they do not provide services that the community needs. Chenault agreed: “Communities must want you, or you can’t survive.”

Given Clark’s experience with food cooperatives, it is no surprise that Solidarity Economy addresses racial and class disparity in the city’s food distribution, production, and consumption systems. In June 2012, for example, Chenault outlined ROC’s efforts to mobilize restaurant workers for workplace justice, campaigning for living wages, safe working conditions, job training, and professionalization programs.<sup>146</sup> ROC was building community partnerships between neighborhood churches and Solidarity Economy to encourage black St. Roch and the Seventh Ward residents to join the nearby New Orleans Food Co-op and organize their own worker cooperatives.<sup>147</sup> By circulating money within the community, reducing crime, and providing healthful food to residents, a critical mass of community-based cooperative restaurants and grocery stores might reverse racialized disinvestment and achieve neighborhood stability.

To that end, Chenault announced that in 2013, ROC planned to open a cooperative restaurant called Colors, modeled after ROC efforts in Detroit and New York City. The restaurant would serve the St. Roch community, which suffers from poor

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146 “New Orleans” Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, accessed July 8, 2014, <http://rocunited.org/nola/>.

147 Solidarity Economy meeting.

nutrition and an over-abundance of fast food chain restaurants. Worker-owners would be paid a living wage, create their own menus, and grow food on site. To fully embrace a “solidarity economy,” Don Paul members suggested that ROC work with the Louisiana Association of Cooperatives to purchase produce from agricultural cooperatives.

To complement Chenault’s worker cooperative campaign, Clark urged his Solidarity Economy colleagues to revive cooperative buying clubs to eliminate food deserts in the city’s poorest neighborhoods. If modeled after Clark’s Broadway Food Co-op, buying clubs’ minimal membership fees would fund weekly French Market excursions to buy bulk produce, while target neighborhoods would benefit from reliably sourced, affordable, and nutritious food. Paul suggested asking the New Orleans Food Co-op to stock cooperative fruit and vegetable vendors, which would circulate throughout the city, much like beloved Arthur “Mr. Okra” Robinson’s traveling fruit truck.

### **Community Land Trusts and Neoliberalism**

While Clark and Solidarity Economy promote food cooperatives to empower consumers, they also believe cooperative land trusts can democratize food production and housing.<sup>148</sup> Likewise, Scott Kellogg and Stacey Pettigrew argue that only community-driven initiatives such as rent controls, tax limitations, and land trust programs can slow or stop gentrification and ensure working class communities’ continued autonomy.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Don Paul announced, “New Orleans development doesn’t have to roll over people. People feel disempowered, and not included” in the planning process. Therefore,

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148 Clark, interview with author.

149 Kellogg and Pettigrew, *Toolbox for Sustainable Living*, 212.

community land trusts constituted a “huge opportunity” to transform the city’s neglected, empty land into productive agricultural plots.<sup>150</sup> Accordingly, Paul met with the LAC to plan a cooperative urban farming campaign. With between 75 and 85 percent of Lower Ninth Ward lots still vacant, Paul and LAC head Harvey Reed theorized that the area was an ideal place to form small urban agricultural cooperatives. The group could form a land trust to buy an empty lot or an entire city block and farm it. In this way, Solidarity Economy hoped to achieve a basis for sustainable cooperative living.

In a free market economy that disincentivizes equitable housing, cooperative activists also advance community land trusts as practical means of helping low-income residents locate affordable housing. Community land trusts are private, non-profit organizations that purchase and permanently control property for the benefit of their community.<sup>151</sup> Ideally, because its occupants collectively own the property, housing costs remain affordable for all stockholders. Organized as a cooperative, voting members consist of both land trust residents and outside community members, ensuring, theoretically, that the organization remains answerable to its neighborhood constituents. Concurring that public housing “concentrates poverty,” attracts crime, and perpetuates dependence on government social programs, in 2006, the Urban Institute enthusiastically promoted community land trusts to increase private homeownership and affordable rental rates among low-income citizens.<sup>152</sup>

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150 Don Paul, Solidarity Economy meeting.

151 Diane K. Levy, Jennifer Comey, and Sandra Padilla, *Keeping the Neighborhood Affordable: A Handbook of Housing Strategies for Gentrifying Areas* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2006): 38-39.

152 Ibid.; Arena, “Black, White, Unite and Fight?” 162-163.

Respected cooperative activists like Gar Alperovitz advance community land trusts as a tool to prevent displacement and gentrification in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>153</sup> Accordingly, several non-profits have started community land trusts to help vulnerable communities equitably rebuild. In the midst of the City's decision between 2006 and 2008 to demolish much of New Orleans's public housing, the non-profit Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund received funding from the Venezuelan government to establish an affordable housing community land trust and credit union in the Lower Ninth Ward.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, in 2008 Common Ground co-founder Malik Rahim dismissed state-delivered social services in favor of anarchist non-profit organizations. Consequently, the collective briefly, albeit unsuccessfully, converted former public housing into cooperative housing.

More recently, fearing that a proposed Whole Foods and upscale residential development would raise property values and displace low-income Mid-City African American renters, in 2013 the Crescent City Community Land Trust partnered with Jane Place Neighborhood Sustainability Initiative to build an affordable housing apartment complex in the area.<sup>155</sup> The Trust claims that public housing is no longer sustainable because federal funding only ensures that housing is affordable for five or ten years before the property reverts to market-rate value. In contrast, as urban studies professor Maria Nelson argues, community land trusts located in gentrifying neighborhoods will

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153 "The Cooperative Economy: A Conversation with Gar Alperovitz," *Orion* (May/June and July/August 2014), <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/8163>.

154 Arena, "Black, White, Unite and Fight?" 182-173.

155 Eve Abrams, "Crescent City Community Land Trust Helps Mid-City Create Affordable Rental Units," WWNO, last modified November 5, 2013, <http://wwno.org/post/crescent-city-community-land-trust-helps-mid-city-create-affordable-rental-units>.

“take real estate off the speculative market and ensure long-term affordability for renters and low-income homeowners” by acquiring property under long-term, renewable leasing contracts.<sup>156</sup> The Trust and Jane Place hope that land trusts will facilitate community-led neighborhood improvement absent within the city’s public housing projects.<sup>157</sup>

However, Solidarity Economy’s enthusiasm for community land trusts is complicated by an aversion to state assistance. Because many of its members are anarchists who reject the state’s authority to intervene in individual and community affairs, the organization as a whole has preferred to work with other cooperatives and non-profits to build a grassroots cooperative movement, rather than demanding municipal, state, or federal assistance for cooperative development and support. For example, Matt Robinson, a collective member of R.U.B.A.R.B., a Ninth Ward community bicycle workshop and Common Ground offshoot, observes that there is a “really strong undercurrent among folks who are anarchist-minded to not engage with the government in any way.”<sup>158</sup> He recalls that deciding whether to apply for federal non-profit status in order to have legal standing “was just pulling teeth, because folks would be like, ‘we don’t need to do that. We’re not here to be part of the government; we’re just here to work with kids and fix bikes.’”

Yet by promoting decentralized networks of cooperatives as an alternative to government institutions, anarchists can be implicated in the state’s efforts to privatize

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156 Maria Nelson, “Guest Opinion: Can Equitable Development Ease the Pains of Gentrification?” WWLTV, last updated December 23, 2013, <http://www.wwltv.com/news/opinion/Equitable-Development-in-the-Face-of-Gentrification-237009571.html>.

157 Abrams, “Crescent City Community Land Trust.”

158 Robinson, interview with author.

economic and social programs. Political scientist Cedric Johnson argues that lacking a cohesive citywide rebuilding plan that accommodates public housing residents, city leaders instead legitimize non-profits' "various agendas of community empowerment and grassroots rebuilding."<sup>159</sup> By giving non-profits the authority to direct rebuilding efforts, the government has shifted the onus of reconstructing New Orleans to the private sector.

Indeed, critics contend that community land trusts legitimize government efforts to abandon public housing, health care programs, public schools, and other social services in favor of their management by corporations and private, nonprofit organizations.<sup>160</sup> While a robust democratic grassroots movement among public housing residents and activists demanded that officials halt demolition and retain all remaining public housing, social scientist John Arena argues that anarchists and radical leftists undercut this campaign by creating private nonprofits to replace public housing units.<sup>161</sup> As a result, Common Ground, Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund, and other community land trusts effectively supported a neoliberal policy of privately managed social programs.

Further, the Urban Institute concedes that, unlike public housing, community land trusts are vulnerable to shifting property values.<sup>162</sup> Once the neighborhood has been targeted for urban renewal, land values can skyrocket, out-pricing community trusts dependent on private donations to acquire property. Consequently, opponents maintain, cooperative housing should complement, not replace, a comprehensive system of federally regulated affordable housing. By potentially shoring up neoliberal policies they

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159 Johnson, "Charming Accommodations," 199.

160 Arena, "Black, White, Unite and Fight?" 172-173; Adams, *Labors of Faith, Markets of Sorrow*, 6.

161 Arena, "Black, White, Unite and Fight?" 172.

162 Levy, Comey, and Padilla, *Keeping the Neighborhood Affordable*, 38-39.

oppose, Solidarity Economy may adversely affect their communities of concern by potentially exacerbating racial inequality. Instead, cooperatives run by marginalized citizens that build governmental alliances and demand municipal accountability may achieve more permanent political and economic change.

### **Louisiana Association of Cooperatives**

The Louisiana Association of Cooperatives (LAC) provides a final model for cooperative organizing. LAC believes cooperatives are just one tool among many to make the state accountable to its citizens; alongside cooperative development, activists must work directly with government officials to redress the economic and political plight of underserved agricultural communities in Louisiana. Key to the LAC's success, therefore, is its role as intermediary between its dispersed network of small-scale local cooperatives and government agencies. Tracing LAC director Harvey Reed's involvement in cooperative development reveals the continuity and rupture the Louisiana cooperative community experienced in the years after Hurricane Katrina.

Since 2007, the Gretna-based LAC has constituted the vanguard of interracial cooperative formation across the state and has been integral to reconstructing rural communities and reinvigorating the Louisiana cooperative movement after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 and the Gulf Coast Oil Spill in 2010.<sup>163</sup> While it primarily organizes agricultural cooperatives, the LAC also participates in the New Orleans food justice movement, networking with city farmers markets, cooperative projects, and community gardens to equitably connect Louisiana's small growers to disadvantaged

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<sup>163</sup> Reed, interview with author.



consumers. It therefore works with local communities and state and federal agencies to concentrate economic and political power among Louisiana's poor residents of color.

Reed was slowly recovering from cancer when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast states on August 29, 2005. He felt "the need to do something [positive] without having pity party," so he aided the FSC's recovery and relief efforts. Immediately after Katrina, the FSC trained citizens to apply to federal relief programs and provided cooperative and credit union workshops to rebuild marginalized Gulf Coast communities.<sup>164</sup> Reed traveled across Louisiana, meeting with small fishermen and farmers to identify their most pressing needs. For example, Cameron Parish fishermen were "wiped out" after Hurricane Rita inundated coastal areas on September 24, 2005.<sup>165</sup> At the opposite end of the state, Plaquemines Parish lost 80 percent of its commercial fleet and virtually all of its docks, equipment, and coastal businesses.

After speaking with these small fishing communities, Reed discovered two immediate points of concern: first, Hurricane Katrina and Rita had exposed the systemic economic inequality long plaguing independent, marginalized fishermen. In both parishes, low-income fishermen were forced to use large commercial docks for processing their seafood hauls, which significantly reduced their already meager profits.<sup>166</sup> Historical racial and cultural antagonism between African Americans, Native Americans, Southeast Asian immigrants, and whites militated against marginalized

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164 De Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 164.

165 Reed, interview with author; Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 210.

166 *Ibid.*, 210; Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, "Initiating Change for a Sustainable Louisiana," *Initiate Change: 2009 Annual Report* (2009): 12,

[http://www.foundationforlouisiana.org/docs/news\\_reports/ldr\\_09ar\\_final.pdf](http://www.foundationforlouisiana.org/docs/news_reports/ldr_09ar_final.pdf).

fishermen's interracial collaboration. However, the widespread devastation provided an impetus for multicultural cooperation to ensure speedy economic recovery.<sup>167</sup> The FSC promoted interracial cooperatives to equalize marketing and distribution systems that had depressed all independent fishermen's wages.<sup>168</sup>

Second, small fishermen worried that Governor Kathleen Blanco's Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) was overlooking independent commercial outfits by channeling limited recovery funds to the wealthy, well-organized Louisiana Fishing Community Recovery Coalition, an advocacy group for large fishing corporations and recreational boaters.<sup>169</sup> Until small fishermen received adequate government support, they would not be able to resume their livelihood.<sup>170</sup> Addressing their concerns, Reed suggested marginalized fishermen form cooperatives to pool their resources to recover their losses and represent their interests to the LRA. He cautioned, however, "if you agree, you must promise me that you will stand right next to me, not behind me. And not in front of me because you don't know what you're doing." In return, Reed would train the fishermen in cooperative principles and represent them at LRA hearings to receive equitable recovery funds. Further, Reed connected new cooperatives to private and federal funding sources and worked to expedite the funding process. This way, "if it takes too long for a federal program to get the cooperative's loans approved, we can do it

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167 Jane Livingston, "Miracle on the Bayou," *Rural Cooperatives* 74, no. 2 (March and April 2007), <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/rbs/pub/mar07/miracle.htm>.

168 Federation of Southern Cooperatives, press release, "Cooperative Support for New Post-Katrina Fishing Co-op in Louisiana" (February 27, 2007), <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/press/feb2707.htm>.

169 Jeremy Alford, "Board Develops Plan to Help Fishermen with Storm Recovery," *Houma Today* (January 13, 2007). <http://www.houmatoday.com/article/20070113/NEWS/701130305>.

170 Reed, interview with author.

quicker, with less collateral, so that a cooperative member does not have to put up their house or farm. So many times, banks have auctions. People lose their land and homes because they didn't have adequate [expert] advice.”

In 2007, Reed helped incorporate the first post-Katrina Louisiana cooperative: the South Plaquemines United Fisheries Cooperative, a racially diverse 50-member marketing cooperative that sold shrimp, crab, and oysters.<sup>171</sup> Yet the nascent cooperative's crucial rebuilding work was slowed because the Louisiana Secretary of State did not understand the nature of the cooperative. Although the federal government had recognized the legal status of fishing cooperatives in its Fishermen's Collective Marketing Act of 1934, it still took three weeks for the agency to approve the South Plaquemines charter.<sup>172</sup> Similarly, many cooperatives across the state and country divert much time and energy from their daily operations to educate public officials about their status as legal entities and their protections under the law.<sup>173</sup> Nonetheless, Reed's persistence was rewarded, and he used the Plaquemines charter as a template to rapidly incorporate many other Louisiana cooperatives.

Like many observers, Reed is sharply critical of the LRA's distribution policies. Directly controlling over \$10 billion in federal recovery funding, LRA often ineffectively administered aid to New Orleans and Louisiana's devastated population and legitimized

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171 Federation of Southern Cooperatives, “Cooperative Support”; Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 210.

172 Reed, interview with author; Andrew W. Kitts and Steven F. Edwards, “Cooperatives in US Fisheries: Realizing the Potential of the Fishermen's Collective Marketing Act,” *Marine Policy* (April 4, 2003): 1, <http://www.uwcc.wisc.edu/info/fishery/kitts.pdf>.

173 Stevens, interview; “What We're Working On,” Austin Cooperative Think Tank, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://www.thinktank.coop/what-we-do>.

the privatization of housing, workforce development, and health care services.<sup>174</sup> Its fishery recovery program was no better. In the years following Katrina, Reed served as Plaquemines and Cameron parish fishing cooperatives' advocate, speaking before LRA Infrastructure Task Force meetings in Baton Rouge. Reed recalls, "LRA would [also] hold meetings in all these outlying places so people couldn't get to them. [But] we would go to the meetings—we didn't care where. We were speaking for the fishing co-ops."<sup>175</sup>

Armed with personal accounts from independent fishermen, confidential data Wildlife and Fisheries officials had provided him, and his own research, Reed often scolded the LRA for "taking care of the big boys" like recreational boats and large commercial fishing outfits and "forgetting about the small fishermen." At one meeting, he pointedly asked the council, "'Between recreational boating and the fishing industry, which generates the most tax dollars?' They couldn't answer. Recreational boating generates zero tax dollars, while fishing boats generate \$54 billion in taxes. They were rescuing recreational boats without putting their tax dollars to work...[At the conclusion of his presentation,] there was silence from the council." The experienced dramatized to Reed the crucial need for government officials to engage in direct dialogue with low-income communities, as well as cooperatives' duty to demand accountability for government distribution of economic and political resources.

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174 Reed, interview with author; Mtangulizi Sankiya, "Katrina and the Condition of Black New Orleans: The Struggle to Justice, Equality, and Democracy," in *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina*, ed. by Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright (Philadelphia: Perseus Books Group, 2009), 106; Sheila J. Webb, "Investing in Human Capital and Healthy Rebuilding in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina," in *Ibid.*, 147-148; Robert K. Whelan and Denise Strong, "Rebuilding Lives Post-Katrina: Choices and Challenges in New Orleans's Economic Development," in *Ibid.*, 195-196.

175 Reed, interview with author.

The LAC continued to demand LRA equitably distribute funds to independent fishermen. For example, in February 2007, Reed argued that the LRA should allocate its \$20 million Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) should provide impoverished Louisiana fishermen, processors, suppliers, and dock owners “start-up capital, replacement or repair of boats, inventory, docks and ‘gap collateral’ for borrowing money from other financial institutions.”<sup>176</sup> Further, individual outreach centers should collaborate with underrepresented groups “that have never been approached [for policy input] in the past” to democratically dispense recovery funds to rebuild houses and businesses. Also, outreach centers should hold frequent, bilingual public meetings in fishing communities to explain how residents could receive recovery funds and assist with application processing.

Finally persuaded, the LRA allocated \$20 million to small businesses through the Small Firm Loan and Grant Program.<sup>177</sup> Consequently, the LAC’s Gulf Coast Fisheries Cooperative in Cameron Parish received \$1.1 million in direct aid.<sup>178</sup> By 2009, Gulf Coast members jointly owned seafood-processing equipment and planned to construct their own dock.<sup>179</sup> Similarly, the South Plaquemines Cooperative received a LRA

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176 Press Release, “Crowe Supports Funding Assistance for Our Louisiana Fishing Industry,” A.G. Crowe: Louisiana Senate, last modified February 25, 2007, <http://www.agcrowe.com/pg-51-15-pressviewer.aspx?pressid=6>.

177 Alford, “Board Develops Plan to Help Fishermen with Storm Recovery.”

178 Louisiana Recovery Authority Board of Directors Meeting Minutes (March 14, 2006): 11, accessed July 19, 2014, [http://lra.louisiana.gov/assets/other/by\\_month/march07/LRAMinutes031407.pdf](http://lra.louisiana.gov/assets/other/by_month/march07/LRAMinutes031407.pdf); Louisiana Recovery Authority Board of Directors Meeting Minutes (January 12, 2007): 15, accessed July 19, 2014, [http://www.lra.louisiana.gov/assets/other/by\\_month/jan07/LRAMinutes011207.pdf](http://www.lra.louisiana.gov/assets/other/by_month/jan07/LRAMinutes011207.pdf).

179 Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, “Initiating Change for a Sustainable Louisiana”; Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 210.

Community Development Block Grant to build a docking facility, while FSC and USDA' technical assistance enabled members to locate better markets and increase profits.<sup>180</sup>

To better coordinate cooperative development across the state, Reed founded the Louisiana Association of Cooperatives in December 2007. Run out of a small office in Gretna, Louisiana with a staff of nine, it educates the public about cooperatives, collaborates with other cooperative organizations and government agencies, and advocates for cooperatives at the local, state, and federal level.<sup>181</sup> Further, it avoids the often apolitical and Eurocentric Rochdale consumer cooperative model. Believing that consumer cooperation by itself cannot satisfy the complex economic, political, and cultural needs of Louisiana's producers, Reed promotes the International Cooperative Alliance's (ICA) expansive definition of cooperation as the "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise."<sup>182</sup> By aligning with the ICA, an independent organization that promotes and supports autonomous cooperatives, particularly in developing countries, Reed connects the struggles of Louisiana's agricultural producers of color to the global struggle for land security and sovereignty.<sup>183</sup> As the ICA's network of cooperative affiliates seeks to

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180 Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 210-211; Anne Todd, "Disaster Spur Co-op Formations: Louisiana Co-op Association Helps Farmers, Fishermen Recover Following Hurricanes and Oil Spill," USDA, Rural Business, Cooperative Service (July 1, 2012).

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Disasters+spur+co-op+formations%3A+Louisiana+co-op+association+helps...-a0300885666>. Accessed on August 14, 2014.

181 Reed, interview with author; Todd, "Disaster Spur Co-op Formations."

182 "Cooperative Identity, Values, and Principles," International Co-operative Alliance, accessed July 15, 2014, <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>; Curl, *For All the People*, 254.

183 Curl, *For All the People*, 254.

achieve “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity,” the organization dovetails with Reed’s commitment to economic and political equity for all.

### **Scarcity of Funding and the Future of the Southern Cooperative Movement**

The LAC’s shoestring operations require it to heavily rely on the continued support of non-profit organizations and government agencies such as USDA Rural Development, Oxfam, and the Cooperative Development Foundation.<sup>184</sup> For example, committed to maintaining sustainable economic development in marginalized communities, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation helped the LAC establish the Gulf Coast United Fisheries Cooperative to assist Cameron Parish fishermen rebuilding their homes and livelihoods.<sup>185</sup> Despite this funding, the LAC’s precarious financial position was exposed in 2009, when small farmers interested in starting cooperatives clamored for the organization to provide them technical support and representation. As the only paid staff member, Reed recalls that the LAC had to temporarily halt its support services because “there were too many calls, and not enough manpower to work with everyone.”<sup>186</sup>

Indeed, the scarcity of consistent funding places considerable strain on the cooperative movement as organizations are forced to compete among themselves to win vital foundation and government grants. In particular, the once amiable relationship between the FSC and the LAC rapidly deteriorated amidst conflicting organizational purposes and contested jurisdiction. While historians Jessica Gordon Nembhard and

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184 Federation of Southern Cooperatives, “Cooperative Support for New Post-Katrina Fishing Co-op in Louisiana.”

185 Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 210; Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, “Initiating Change for a Sustainable Louisiana”.

186 Todd, “Disaster Spur Co-op Formations.”

Greta De Jong praise the FSC for its commitment to rural economic development for African American and other marginalized farmers, Reed describes the partnership as frustrating and competitive rather than collaborative.<sup>187</sup>

Reed's experience in some ways mirrors the tense relationship between the FSC and the LAC's predecessor, the Louisiana-based Southern Cooperative Development Fund (SCDF), run by Catholic priest and ardent cooperator Father Albert McKnight. While both organizations worked together to disperse Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funds to foster cooperative development across the South, the partnership splintered in 1972 as government and non-profit funding evaporated.<sup>188</sup> As the Nixon administration scrutinized War on Poverty initiatives, the OEO suddenly demanded that the FSC and SCDF merge in order to receive funding renewals. When the FSC refused and the SCDF conceded, the organizations descended into bitter infighting. Former SCDF and FSC member John Zippert argues that the feud ultimately "caused a division on the state association and co-op level."<sup>189</sup> The rancor between state and regional cooperatives would again resurface with the LAC's statewide cooperative initiatives.

According to Reed, after the LAC began incorporating more cooperatives in 2009, the FSC requested that the LAC become an affiliate so that it could oversee Louisiana's operations. Reed refused to relinquish the LAC's autonomy, and further, he argued, "Co-ops aren't run like that [hierarchically]. They are independently run...That's the only way we're going to get along." The two organizations severed their relationship shortly

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187 Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 212; de Jong, "From Votes to Vegetables," 157; de Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 164.

188 McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 36-38.

189 John Zippert, quoted in *Ibid.*, 38.



thereafter. Yet rather than agreeing to cover different regions, Reed claims that the FSC has resurrected a long dormant affiliate, the Louisiana State Association of Cooperatives, Inc., to compete with the LAC.<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the FSC publicly claims that its “recent recovery work in Louisiana has rejuvenated the Louisiana State Association of Cooperatives, which includes the beginning stages of the creation of 6 new cooperatives, including the South Plaquemines Parish United Fishing Cooperative.”<sup>191</sup> Nowhere does it state that the LAC was actually responsible for such organizing work, or that the two cooperative organizations are separate entities. Unfortunately, their fractious relationship hinders cooperatives’ ability to share resources and information necessary for a productive regional cooperative movement and substantive change across state lines.

Consequently, alluding to “adversaries” who “slander” the LAC, as well as New Orleans’ legacy of police abuse and government corruption, Reed has enforced a strict policy of protective secrecy and above board dealings. Within the context of police repression of civil rights organizations, widespread “disaster capitalism,” and rancorous cooperative competition, Reed argues, “the only way the LAC has survived so long is because we went under the radar.” For example, the organization has no website or public relations staffer. Its weekly e-newsletter never discusses LAC-specific actions, only government policies and agricultural issues. Reed carefully guards the LAC’s initiatives until he is ready to implement them, and he does not publish “what area we

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190 Prejean, *Louisiana State Association of Cooperatives*; de Jong, *Invisible Enemy*, 163.

191 “Four Decades (1967-2007),” 15, Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/fschistory/fsc40hist.pdf>; “History of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives,” CoopEcon 2012, accessed July 18, 2014, <http://ce2012.sgeproject.org/about-coopecon-2012/history-of-the-federation-of-southern-cooperatives/>.

cover, who we're working with; that's secret unless we hold a conference." At the same time, the LAC flatly refuses to be embroiled in "impropriety or cutting deals or propositions. What we can do is to assist you with technical assistance. No deals. You can watch TV everyday, and someone's going to jail for some deal or padding the books." However, Reed's distrust may enforce a chilling effect on the cooperative movement by disincentivizing the free exchange of ideas, a hallmark of the movement.

### **Race, Class, and the National Cooperative Movement**

While its history with the FSC has been contentious, the LAC has cultivated a lasting working relationship with other agricultural cooperatives across the state and nation, which provides the LAC's cooperative members crucial job opportunities and contracts within the movement itself. At the same time, however, the broader movement's stark racial and class orientation illustrates the immediate need for activists of color to participate in the state and national cooperative movement to truly achieve equity for all producers. In 2007, recognizing the Louisiana Council of Farmers Cooperatives (LCFC) political clout and potential for collaboration, Reed joined the Council, a powerful agricultural cooperative association of white farmers cultivating vast tracts of land. Significantly, the LCFC also represents the LAC's independent affiliates.

Shortly thereafter, Reed was the first African American elected to the Council Board.<sup>192</sup> He now represented small independent cooperatives, as well as large cooperatives at the state level. Soon, the LCFC appointed Reed as state representative to

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192 Reed, interview with author; "LCFC Board," LA Council of Farmer Co-ops, accessed July 19, 2014, [http://www.lafarmercoops.org/lcfc\\_board\\_5.html](http://www.lafarmercoops.org/lcfc_board_5.html).

the National Council of Farmers Cooperatives, which lobbies federal officials for agricultural legislation shielding cooperatives from corporate competition.<sup>193</sup> As one of a handful of black members, Reed was elected to the organization's National Conference of State Councils, where, alongside leading cooperatives such as Land o' Lakes and Ocean Spray, he drafts national agricultural cooperative policies.<sup>194</sup>

Although Reed works with small farmers, he maintains that large regional and national cooperative organizations listen when he discusses the need for racial justice for marginalized producers. He observes, "I've watched the way the civil rights movement works around the country and in Louisiana. There's a subtle point about civil rights in Louisiana. It's not that you're going in [to predominantly white cooperative associations] as a sell-out; it's that you're...saying, this need has to be met [or] it will affect everybody...the whole industry." For example, in 2012, Reed advised Louisiana's large rice cooperatives "to start dealing with the small, minority farmers and buyers." Preferring to sell large lots of rice by the tons, "old liners" refused to sell to small ethnic businesses catering to the Asian, Greek, and Spanish community in Louisiana. However, by marketing to specialty consumers, rice cooperatives would eventually move the same amount of product. If they did not sell to ethnic consumers, Reed warned that another corporation might corner that market, destabilizing the entire cooperative rice industry.

The limits of cooperative solidarity within the context of lingering racial discrimination, finite government resources, and pervasive poverty can be stark. For

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193 Curl, *For All the People*, 252.

194 Reed, interview with author.

example, Reed foresaw problems convincing the rice cooperatives of his soundness of his business plan. He declares, “If [the rice farmers] don’t want to [listen to me] because I’m black, fine. Sell [the rice] on out.” That so few low-income and black members hold influential positions within the mainstream agricultural cooperative movement is troubling. Mainstream cooperative organizations must embrace the large-scale integration of cooperative members from all classes, ethnicities, and backgrounds.

On the other hand, Reed also serves as liaison between marginalized cooperative members wary of their peers and large, predominantly white cooperative businesses. Their distrust can sabotage the LAC’s vision of economic security for small producers of color. For example, when Reed deployed his National Council of Farmers’ Cooperatives contacts to connect ConAgra with sweet potato cooperatives in northeastern Louisiana. However, the producers “talked themselves out of cooperation,” and the project stalled. Reed says in frustration, “You don’t invest millions in something that won’t work. [National cooperative] members are looking for patronage returns” and will work with small cooperatives, but low-income farmers still “complain” about their situation.

Reed attributes these persistent disagreements to members’ misunderstandings about the nature of cooperation and poor internal leadership. For example, some people formed cooperatives to pursue quick profit without understanding cooperative ethics. Reed cites several cooperatives that disbanded after being disabused of the notion that they could act as middlemen brokers for producers and thereby inflate profits--an action antithetical to the cooperative movement. Others grew frustrated with the logistics of running a cooperative and refused to acknowledge that a cooperative might take two or

more years to be profitable. As a result, Reed concedes that some of his older cooperatives, including the South Plaquemines United Fisheries Cooperative, are withdrawing from the LAC to revert to private associations or clubs.<sup>195</sup>

The LAC's travails are similar to those of their predecessor, Father McKnight, who discovered that many 1960s and 1970s Louisiana cooperatives failed because board members wished to solely benefit either the consumer or producer, rather than helping both. He notes that the Southern Cooperative Development Fund "eventually identified... 'capitalistic personalities'—those individuals who join cooperatives solely for their personal gain and are willing to allow the cooperative to be destroyed as long as they gain financially."<sup>196</sup> Likewise, the LAC now screens potential cooperatives before it admits them into its cooperative training program or provides technical assistance. While Reed maintains that sustained technical advice and training is crucial to perpetuating healthy cooperatives, "some co-ops are going to survive and others won't."<sup>197</sup> Although the LAC staff periodically meets with members to discuss leadership and cooperative principles, the organization cannot "admonish" independent affiliates, "so if they say they don't need our services, we just back off and let them go."

In order to explicate the LAC's core values and avoid attrition rates, the cooperative league has implemented an extensive training program to both educate potential cooperatives about alternative economic enterprises and assist them in establishing their business. To that end, when a cooperative matriculates into the LAC's cooperative

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195 Todd, "Disaster Spur Co-op Formations."

196 McKnight, *Whistling in the Wind*, 32.

197 Reed, interview with author.

training program, the LAC prepares a training manual for the new organization and expects the new cooperative to adhere to International Cooperative Alliance's principles.<sup>198</sup> These values consist of: 1) voluntary and open membership; 2) democratic member control defined by regular voting and egalitarian organizational structure; 3) member economic participation, in which members contribute equally to the cooperative's financial resources; 4) cooperative autonomy; 5) training for members and educational outreach to the general public and political officials; 6) collaboration among cooperatives at the local, national, regional, and international level; and finally 7) community development. By agreeing to the tenets of the ICA, Reed inculcates in its member organizations a sense of solidarity. He explains, "wherever they go, they know they're part of the international cooperative movement."<sup>199</sup>

## **USDA**

While linking independent Louisiana farmers to powerful national cooperatives is critical for building a state cooperative movement, so is establishing productive relations with state and federal agencies. Reed is by no means conciliatory, however; he pressures his government contacts to pass legislation protecting disadvantaged small producers. To do so, Reed struggles to relieve black farmers' persistent distrust of state and federal agricultural agencies, a legacy of decades of discriminatory agricultural policies. Because the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other federal institutions often

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198 Ann Hoyt, "Cooperative Principles Updated," *Cooperative Grocer*, no. 62 (January-February 1996), Cooperative Grocer Network, <http://www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/2004-01-09/cooperative-principles-updated>.

199 Reed, interview with author.

refused to approve loans to small black farmers, black-owned farmland has shrunk from 15 million acres in the 1920s to only 3 or 4 million acres today.<sup>200</sup>

However, in 1999, the FSC filed the Pigford vs. Glickman lawsuit in which 15,000 farmers of color argued that between 1981 and 1996, the USDA unfairly denied them loans because of their race. The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia awarded the claimants \$1 billion in reparations and demanded that the USDA concretely address its racist and classist lending policies. A second settlement in October 2011 allowed thousands of farmers who missed the deadline to participate in the lawsuit to apply for a \$1.2 billion claim. The same year, the consulting firm Jackson Lewis Corporate Diversity Counseling Group published a comprehensive study recommending key changes to the USDA's technical and financial aid programs to ensure "fair access for all USDA customers."<sup>201</sup> Consequently, Reed consistently holds the USDA to the court rulings when advocating for small farmers: "when we go back to the USDA we let it be known that 'you need to change this, this, and this.'"<sup>202</sup>

Despite the USDA's self-proclaimed "New Civil Rights Era," the LAC remains vigilant that its cooperative members receive reasonable loans. While Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack promised to "ensure that [USDA] assistance programs are administered equitably and in full compliance with civil rights and equal opportunity

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200 Adrian Sainz, "Thousands of Black Farmers File Claims in USDA Discrimination Settlement," CNS News, last modified March 28, 2012, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/thousands-black-farmers-file-claims-usda-discrimination-settlement>.

201 Jackson Lewis, *United States Department of Agriculture: Independent Assessment of the Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance "Civil Rights Assessment" Final Report* (March 31, 2011), USDA, [http://www.usda.gov/documents/Civil\\_Rights\\_Assessment-Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/documents/Civil_Rights_Assessment-Final_Report.pdf).

202 Reed, interview with author.

laws,” Reed maintains that “nine times out of ten [USDA staff] in field ignore the [Jackson Lewis] report.”<sup>203</sup> For example, Reed references one cooperative member who applied for USDA loan but forgot to list his place of employment. The USDA denied the loan rather than informing the member of the error. To avoid local agency resistance, the LAC now works directly with state USDA directors. In this case, the LAC called the Louisiana director, who ordered the local field office to inform the farmer what paperwork he needed to complete. Reed exclaims, “the field officer didn’t like it, but I didn’t care. It’s our tax dollars that are keeping you employed.”

Reed argues that if the USDA expects farmer compliance, its staff must follow with its own policies. For example, after Reed organizes a cooperative, he immediately seeks financial assistance from the USDA to start the enterprise. These funding opportunities range from start-up loans like the Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program to grants for cooperative training like the Rural Cooperative Development Grant Program and the Small Socially-Disadvantaged Producer Grant Program.<sup>204</sup> If Reed meets any local resistance, he leverages his considerable network of cooperative and governmental contacts to enforce compliance. Referring to the widely read e-newsletter the LAC publishes weekly, Reed tells recalcitrant field officers, “we’ll put [the story] out; don’t threaten us. Don’t say you can’t [provide the loan].... We know that the Secretary of

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203 Ibid.; “New Civil Rights Era at USDA Continues with Service Contract to Assist Program Administration,” Jackson Lewis, last modified October 9, 2009, <http://www.jacksonlewis.com/legalupdates/article.cfm?aid=1874>.

204 “Funding for Cooperatives,” USDA, accessed July 19, 2014, [http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP\\_FundingForCoops.html](http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_FundingForCoops.html).



Agriculture pumps a lot of money into Louisiana and Mississippi for rural economic development. The money can't stop in Baton Rouge.”

Largely due to Reed's tenacity and the USDA's efforts to remediate discriminatory rural funding programs, the LAC has succeeded in obtaining consistent USDA support for its cooperative development projects. For example, it was one of the first Louisiana organizations to receive a \$200,000 grant from the USDA Rural Development's Small and Socially Disadvantaged Producer Grant Program.<sup>205</sup> Seeking to increase job opportunities by developing businesses and cooperatives in rural African American communities across the country, the grant enabled LAC to purchase furniture, equipment, and supplies for its affiliate cooperatives.<sup>206</sup> A subsequent grant provided essential training and salaries for employees. Government funding has provided LAC a measure of stability; it now trains over 200 cooperative members a month, hosts events and workshops for target communities, and strives to organize all 64 state parishes. Consequently, one federal official credits the LAC with revitalizing the state's small farmer cooperative movement. He quipped to Reed, “if you die today, it won't stop the cooperative movement; people are now moving in that direction.”

## **Conclusion**

The case studies represented here, Gathering Tree Growers Collective, Solidarity Economy, and Louisiana Association of Cooperatives, reveal the extent to which cooperative activists' confrontation with historical examples of food, land, and job

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205 “USDA Support for Historically Black Colleges and Small Agricultural Producers” NC Agribusiness Council (September 20, 2010), [https://www.ciclt.net/sn/new/n\\_detail.aspx?ClientCode=ncagbc&N\\_ID=23740..](https://www.ciclt.net/sn/new/n_detail.aspx?ClientCode=ncagbc&N_ID=23740..)

206 Reed, interview with author.

insecurity have defined post-Hurricane Katrina organizing efforts. While the storm and subsequent flooding exposed the painful legacy of the city's race- and class-based political and economic structures, it also reinvigorated an already active city cooperative movement. While recent cooperative transplants have certainly expanded the city's cooperative landscape, their collaboration with veteran organizers more familiar with the city's particularities, nuances, and needs can counter neoliberal policies and foster real community-driven economic development. Cooperatives' longevity and influence depends on vital local, regional, and national support networks that transcend class, gender, and racial divides.

Based on the diverse organizing experiences of Macon Fry, John Clark, and Harvey Reed, I argue that New Orleanian cooperatives' continued relevance to their neighborhood hinges on their ability to address constituent needs while mobilizing residents to pressure local and state institutions for social, economic, and political change. Most importantly, a cooperative movement that works in concert with, rather than opposed to, government social and economic programs may provide more effective leverage for systematic and broad-scale economic and political equity for all.

## Conclusion

Traversing today's cooperative landscape is similar to island hopping; clusters of cooperatives are scattered across the city or operate as lonely buoys amidst a vast ocean of citizens often unaware of their existence. New Orleans activists' difficulty in creating a broad-based cooperative movement is rooted in the state's confusion about cooperative goals, organizational structure, and ideology. In a right-to-work state that has decimated unions, government officials and business leaders are leery of working with cooperatives they suspect are socialistic or subversive.<sup>1</sup>

Further, conservative print media largely conflates cooperative organizing with nefarious unions set on labor agitation and absconding with federal funds.<sup>2</sup> Reminiscent of the 1949 and 1950 federal investigation into cooperatives' tax status in which critics shrilled that communistic cooperatives and unions would bankrupt honest, small businesses, in 2013 *Times Picayune* journalist James Varney lambasted the Restaurant Opportunity Center of New Orleans (ROC) for receiving a \$200,000 Centers for Disease Control grant to develop "healthful menu options" among Pacific Island and Asian-American restaurant workers in New Orleans. Attacking the 501c(3) tax-exempt non-profit ROC as a "hard-left union front that models itself as a warm-hearted community group," Varney scoffed at using public monies to help a small segment of the city's population and predicted that ROC would only use this "nice pot of money" to foment labor unrest and lobby for minimum wage increases.

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, interview with author.

<sup>2</sup> James Varney, "A Dubious Grant for a Dubious Outfit," *Times Picayune* (June 16, 2013), [http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2013/06/a\\_dubious\\_grant\\_for\\_a\\_dubious.html](http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2013/06/a_dubious_grant_for_a_dubious.html).

Similarly, the Pelican Institute for Public Policy, a Louisiana free-market think tank, dismissed ROC's mission for restaurant worker justice. In the wake of ROC's successful lawsuit against French Quarter restaurant owner Tony Moran, Pelican Institute director Kevin Kane declared, "They should not interfere with other businesses here in New Orleans...We already have an industry characterized by innovation, service, diversity, value and opportunity. Owners, employees and customers benefit from this flexibility and we should be wary of union advocates who seek to restrict it."<sup>3</sup>

In response, cooperative activists attempted to educate *Times Picayune* readers about ROC's purpose in the article's comment section. Organizer Sally Stevens explained that in the restaurant industry, "labor abuse and wage-theft is the daily reality...Restaurant workers are undervalued, underpaid, mistreated with regularity in a variety of ways and, except for ROC, unrepresented in any way...by either the public or private sector."<sup>4</sup> However, her comment was quickly buried under a flood of anti-union diatribes.

The *Times Picayune* editorial illustrates a through line in New Orleans's cooperative development: from the 1890s to the present, cooperatives—from the Brotherhood of Co-operative Commonwealth to Solidarity Economy—have been controversial because they disrupt the Big Easy's tourist friendly narrative: beyond the "bowls filled to the rim with gumbo, late nights in dark jazz clubs, strolls through historic neighborhoods, and tantalizing festivals throughout the year," politically and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sally Stevens, June 18, 2013, comment on Varney, "A Dubious Grant for a Dubious Outfit."

economically disempowered residents struggle to make ends meet.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite fierce opposition, successive generations of New Orleans cooperative activists have devoted their lives to the movement, and the strength of their convictions imbues their past, current, and future cooperative endeavors. Viewing the history of New Orleans through the lens of the city's cooperative movement sharpens our appreciation of both the persistence of community-led oppositional traditions, as well as their fragility.

### **Economic and Political Tension**

First, a fundamental anxiety with which each case study has grappled is how to offer humane alternatives to market capitalism while continuing to operate within this economic and ideological system. For the Laboringmen's Protective Association, for example, Socialists, trade unionists, and black equal rights activists failed to achieve their "cooperative commonwealth" because they could not agree whether to compromise with segregationist, anti-union politicians and industrialists relentlessly chipping away at the biracial labor movement, or to completely overhaul a morally bankrupt economic and political system. The Housewives' League also had to couch its radical program for economically and politically empowering women within accommodationist language; battling conservative husbands, anti-suffragist officials, and anti-Communist businesses, the League struggled to finance its cooperative store. Similarly, while the multiracial coalition of Freret residents and Popular Front activists initially supported the Consumers' Cooperative Union's vision for a socialized government and cooperative

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<sup>5</sup> New Orleans Official Guide, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/>.

economy, the grocery cooperative ultimately could not survive postwar anti-Communist hysteria, white flight, and the popularity of large supermarkets.

### **Government Attitudes Toward Cooperatives**

Second, contributing to cooperatives' difficulties transforming abusive social systems is contradictory government policy. While Albert Dent and Henry Hermes celebrated New Deal reforms like the Farm Security Administration and the National Recovery Act that encouraged cooperatives as a way for small farmers and consumers to achieve economic stability, other federal agricultural agencies like the Farm Bureau and the Agricultural Extension Service favored wealthy planters and rejected the fundamental societal restructuring that a cooperative economy would necessitate as fundamentally at odds with traditional individual land ownership.<sup>6</sup> Yet as high-tech machinery and large-scale farming replaced sharecroppers, tenants, and small owners, federally-subsidized cooperative farms might have helped poor people successfully acclimate to this agricultural revolution.

Similarly, during the 1960s, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives received Office of Economic Opportunity funding to create black-run farm cooperatives while the USDA concentrated markets. Louisiana Association of Cooperatives director Harvey Reed daily confronts the legacy of racist and classist agricultural policies as he organizes socially disadvantaged producers with otherwise limited access to operating and investment capital, credit, and state and federal services.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Curl, *For All the People*, 174; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> Todd, "Disaster Spur Co-op Formations," 4-5.

Many cooperatives have also fought to overcome hostile city administrations actively working to dismantle them. Rhythm Conspiracy co-founder Sally Stevens documents the tremendous barrier to post-Katrina cooperative development within a city that views cooperative economics as “too socialistic.”<sup>8</sup> Although the worker cooperative attempts to educate city economic and workforce development agencies about the economic benefits of worker and consumer cooperatives, Stevens reports that the “City is reluctant to support indigenous musical forms except in highly contained, commodified ways” that justify “wholesale demolition and gentrification” of black communities as part of the relentless push to redevelop New Orleans and attract tourists and wealthy corporations. Nonetheless, she asserts, “We look at cooperatives as way around the [state’s] decimation of collective bargaining; cooperatives mitigate abuses of the private market and expand the commons.” Thus, Louisiana’s cooperatives poignantly illustrate how a matrix of federal and state policies, often operating at cross-purposes, have historically shaped local conditions and marginalized residents’ livelihoods.

### **Interracial Organizing and Racial Tension**

Third, New Orleans cooperatives augment our understanding of the promises and perils of interracial collaboration in social movements. Each cooperative case study wrestled with racial fissures and racial separation, even as they labored to build collaborative relationships. For instance, in 1897, the multiracial Brotherhood of Cooperative Commonwealth offered a utopian vision of workplace relations in which a socialist welfare state would protect all laborers from the vagaries of the market.

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<sup>8</sup> Stevens, interview with author.

However, while Graf and Bacarisse supported the idea of economic equality for all races, in practice, the pressure of procuring work in the midst of a depression splintered the cooperative along racial lines. Although Bacarisse hailed from an ethnically heterogeneous family, as legal racial distinctions intensified and work refused to materialize, he allied with white segregationists and conservative trade unionists at the expense of a broad, interracial labor movement.

Similarly, although the Housewives' League proclaimed that cooperative economics would usher in a morally advanced civilization that would protect all women workers and consumers, they faltered at the possibility of concretely improving working conditions for their own African American domestic servants. As black women unionized to demand better wages and working hours, the League redeployed cooperative economics as an agent of Jim Crow segregation. Organizing cooperative buying clubs to finance newfangled labor-saving cleaning and cooking technologies would liberate white middle-class women from the burdens of negotiating shifting class and race dynamics.

Today, too, contemporary cooperatives struggle to overcome the city's legacy of institutionalized racism. For example, Gathering Tree Growers Cooperative has no black members, even though it is situated in the heart of Gert Town, a African American neighborhood adjacent to Xavier University, a Catholic institution with a large black student population. Director Macon Fry, a Virginia native and long-time gardener, was unaware of the city's rich African American cooperative history. Despite working with Grow Dat Youth Farm, an urban farm and youth development program for at-risk African Americans, he opined that New Orleans nurtures "an independent streak here," perhaps



“because of the demographics and the racial makeup of the city. Not that there aren’t African American owned [cooperatives]...I’m just guessing.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the Upper Ninth Ward community bike shop, Rusted Up Beyond All Recognition Bikes (R.U.B.A.R.B.), illustrates the power of small, neighborhood-based cooperatives to concretely improve low-income African Americans’ daily lives. The shop offers tools and training to children and adults who rely on bicycles as their primary mode of transportation and provides a safe community space for students after school.<sup>10</sup> Serving the working-class black community near the old Florida projects, R.U.B.A.R.B.’s radical and anarchist volunteers see the space as an opportunity to “practice what they preach” by directly working with community members to halt gentrification and ameliorate racial and class divisions in the neighborhood.<sup>11</sup>

### **Class Divides**

Finally, New Orleans cooperatives have historically wrestled with class divisions within their ranks and between organizers and their constituents. For example, the Brotherhood of Cooperative Commonwealth’s inability to agree on tactics and goals largely coincided with members’ diverse classes and political affiliations. Brotherhood co-founder Eugene Bacarisse portrayed compatriot August Graf as an autocrat cloaked in crass populism. While the classically educated Bacarisse vaunted cooperation’s intellectually and spiritually uplifting merits, he decried the working-class Graf’s parades and mass meetings as dangerous rabble-rousing. Similarly, while the middle-class

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9 Fry, interview with author.

10 “What We Do,” *R.U.B.A.R.B.*, accessed October 31, 2014, <http://rubarbike.com/index.php/what-we-do>; “News,” *R.U.B.A.R.B.*, accessed October 31, 2014, <http://rubarbike.com/index.php/news>.

11 Robinson, interview with author, June 5, 2012.

directors of the Housewives' League Co-operative Store believed that all classes would benefit from cooperative economics, they specifically appealed to fellow affluent female professionals and housewives for financial backing and moral support. In other words, their short-lived grocery store was designed to serve the people, but was not of the people. Overlooking working-class women as co-organizers drastically limited the cooperative's membership base and pool of reliable store volunteers.

Additionally, the contemporary activities of the Free Southern Theater Collective (FST) reflect the ongoing struggle to reconcile its program of black cultural liberation with deep class divides between its performers and the disadvantaged New Orleanians for whom they advocate. In October 2013, the FST celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in a symposium entitled "Talkin' Revolution." Like Tom Dent watching the black Mississippi River waters lap against the dock, meditating on his city's history and his future journey, conference participants shifted back and forth across time and space to consider the "historic and continued impact" of the FST.<sup>12</sup> Over the course of four days, audiences listened to founders and alumni like John O'Neal and Dr. Doris Derby discuss the FST's civil rights influences, watched Junebug and FST performances, and traveled along the conference's civil rights trail, marking the city's racial justice accomplishments.

Further, the conference functioned both as a space to reflect on the FST's political and aesthetic contributions and as a meeting grounds for veteran and new activists and performers to discuss how to merge art and politics as they confront persistent racial

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<sup>12</sup> "Ticket/Registration Information," Junebug Productions, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.eventzilla.net/web/event?eventid=2138982928>.

injustice. Audiences participated in a cross-generational conversation about the ongoing relevance of democratic organizational structure and politicized performance between FST members and young artists. Echoing the FST's participatory collective meetings, participants formed a "fishbowl conversation" at Ashé Cultural Arts Center. FST alumni sat in an inner circle and discussed the collective's "impact on their lives, careers, and communities."<sup>13</sup> Artists, cultural workers, students, and teachers sat in the fishbowl's outer circle and could ask alumni questions. Afterwards, panelists and audience members collectively sang movement songs. The event culminated with a networking lunch with social justice organizations to foster sustained collaborations between creative artists, academics, and activists across the city and region.

However, for all the event's attempts to illustrate the continuing importance of politically engaged art, the symposium revealed how far the memory of the FST has traveled from its working-class roots. For instance, rather than targeting the New Orleans community at large, or African American public housing residents that the FST was committed to serving and recruiting as members, the conference invited scholars, performers, and activists to attend.<sup>14</sup> This culturally middle-class orientation is also reflected in some of the conference's event locations. For example, organizers held a featured artist showcase at Café Istanbul in the New Orleans Healing Center, an institution that is directly implicated in the St. Claude Avenue Corridor's accelerating gentrification. Residents from St. Roch largely avoid patronizing the Center. Further,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Talkin' Revolution," Tulane University, last modified October 18, 2013, <http://tulane.edu/calendar/event-details.cfm?uid=70AA286F-E688-E73B-A4E70CF5FB0E2912>.

while some performance events were free, others, such as dinners and speaking engagements, cost between \$30 and \$40, potentially prohibitively expensive for low-income citizens. These choices inadvertently positioned the FST and its successors as culturally exclusionary, reproducing the class biases original members like Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam dedicated their careers to eradicating.

### **A Cooperative Model**

While the legacy of the FST continues to inspire politicized performers, other post-Katrina cooperatives attempt to address the daily inequities impoverished residents of color confront. The sustainability of the contemporary cooperative movement hinges on honoring the city's cooperative roots, while constructing coalitions reaching far beyond its borders. To that end, the Louisiana Association of Cooperatives provides the most promising vision for a permanent, statewide cooperative movement. Enriched by cross-class and interracial coalitions with local, state, and national cooperative organizations and government agencies, the LAC offers a strong model for rural and urban economic development for all citizens. Focusing on land security, racial justice, and political empowerment for marginalized communities, LAC can transform how economic and political power is distributed in Louisiana.

The LAC's associational network reflects racial justice and environmental activists' vision for "metropolitan regional equity" in which the general public, government officials, and developers democratically discuss how a community functions to benefit everyone. As architect and activist Carl Anthony argues, true "smart growth" should facilitate conscientious planning to mitigate the effects of natural disasters, curb

environmentally unsustainable suburban sprawl, and halt gentrification adversely affecting vulnerable communities.<sup>15</sup> Comprised of labor unions, civil rights activists, and social justice activists, the metropolitan regional equity movement dovetails with the LAC's demand that communities of color influence both public policy and the free market to ensure equity for all.<sup>16</sup>

Regional metro equity can be a guiding principle for cooperative development. Echoing Harvey Reed's argument that unequal conditions for small farmers adversely affect an entire region's agricultural economy, environmental justice activist and scholar Robert Bullard contends in his proposal for designing more equitable cities that "Central city poverty and inequality...across a region can stifle a whole region's development."<sup>17</sup> In contrast, he argues that "community based regionalism" can combat regional inequality and promote equitable, sustainable development.<sup>18</sup> To achieve community based regionalism, Bullard outlines an economic and political system remarkably like Louisiana's decentralized cooperative network, which concentrates decision-making authority in the hands of independent cooperatives while regional and national cooperatives provide vital training, education, technical, and financial support.

Drawing on historian John A. Powell's theory of a racially just "federated regionalism," Bullard contends that individual communities should help shape regional and national planning strategies such as tax credits, developer incentives, and fair housing laws that extend equal opportunities to both suburban and urban communities suffering

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15 Carl Anthony, forward, in *Growing Smarter*, vii-vi.

16 Ibid., xi.

17 Robert Bullard, introduction, in *Growing Smarter*, 7.

18 PolicyLink 2002, 7, cited in Ibid.

from concentrated poverty, racial segregation, and social isolation.<sup>19</sup> For example, the metropolitan regional equity movement encourages policy makers and developers to plan neighborhoods around good schools, affordable housing, parks, grocery stores, public services, and access to good jobs both in the neighborhood and in the region.<sup>20</sup> Because city development patterns and national social, economic, and political trends have for generations undercut neighborhood-driven efforts to counteract racial isolation, depopulation, and disinvestment, metropolitan regional equity activists are forging broad regional coalitions of marginalized communities to create meaningful institutional change and economic upward mobility.

The need for New Orleans and Louisiana to join the metropolitan regional equity movement is clear. Between the 1970s and 2000, New Orleans experienced a profound outmigration of white residents, and with them, thousands of jobs.<sup>21</sup> With largely undeveloped regional transit, low-income African American and Latin Americans living in the city's deteriorating urban core have been increasingly isolated from well-paying jobs. After 2000, low-income families began to move to the parish suburbs to find jobs, and without access to educational services or professional development, demographic change has begun to reproduce the unequal economic and social conditions of inner city New Orleans. To Metropolitan Policy Program directors Amy Liu and Bruce Katz, "reducing spatial disparities" between low-income residencies and jobs, while

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19 John A. Powell, *Racism and Metropolitan Dynamics: The Civil Rights Challenge of the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Institute of Race and Poverty, University of Minnesota, 2002), 5.

20 Anthony, forward, *Growing Smarter*, vii-vi.

21 Amy Liu and Bruce Katz, "Katrina is Everywhere: Lessons from the Gulf Coast," in *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis*, ed. by M. Paloma Pavel (Boston: The MIT Press, 2009), 81-94.

simultaneously developing dense metropolitan areas with higher concentration of jobs, will reduce economic disparity and raise local governments' tax bases.<sup>22</sup>

However, while Liu and Katz focus on regional planning's need for transportation justice and job development, the LAC envisions a "hub-and-spoke" regional food system. As food advocate James McWilliams theorizes, the hub-and-spoke model will equitably reorient food production by selecting central nodes most conducive to environmentally sensitive, high-yield agriculture and then distributing low-cost food from the nodes to more distant markets.<sup>23</sup> To stimulate regional economies, the LAC connects New Orleans food cooperatives to the state agricultural network, while providing healthful, inexpensive food to low-income city residents. For instance, it collaborates with Crescent City Farmers Market, Solidarity Economy, and the New Orleans Cooperative Development Project to develop training and job development programs for vulnerable New Orleanians.<sup>24</sup> LAC also trained and supported both the Latino Farmers Cooperative, a Mid-City urban farm and resource center for underserved Latin Americans, and the New Orleans East-based VEGGI Farmers Cooperative, established after the Gulf Coast Oil Spill threw many Vietnamese fishermen and farmers out of work.<sup>25</sup> It hopes the cooperatives will be integrated into a New Orleans-based food hub.<sup>26</sup>

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22 Ibid.

23 James E. McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get it Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* (New York: Little, Brown and Company: 2009), 49.

24 Solidarity Economy meeting; Fry, interview by author; Reed, interview with author; "ICIC Summit: Urban Innovation No. 4: New Orleans Cooperative Development Project," *Initiative for a Competitive Inner City* (October 27, 2013), <http://www.icic.org/connection/blog-entry/blog-icicsummit-urban-innovation-no.-4-new-orleans-cooperative-development>.

25 Reed, interview with author.

26 "Who We Are," VEGGI Farmers Cooperative, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://www.veggifarmcoop.com/>.

To promote food hubs, when Reed attends agricultural conferences, he immediately asks his hosts, ““Where did you buy this [catered] food? Did the [local] farmers bring the food or did you buy it from some of the other companies?...If your conference is on farmers, then farmers should bring their bounty to share. What you’re doing is taking a dollar out of their pocket and putting it in someone else’s who doesn’t even care about you.””<sup>27</sup> As the local food movement has become increasingly popular, however, “Now the first thing [my hosts] tell me is, ‘Harvey, this came from so and so.’” If the LAC’s progress is any indication, food hubs are promising examples of regional metro equity. By drawing strength from Louisiana’s history of black cooperative organizing and organizing far beyond New Orleans’ city limits, Reed constructs a model for cooperative development that can survive the transience of individual cooperatives and provoke substantive policy change benefitting small farmers and consumers alike.

Ultimately, the story of New Orleans cooperatives is one of simultaneous erasure and persistence, continuity and rupture. The most successful New Orleans cooperatives have been those emerging from the city’s residents themselves; while inspired by local and national political, economic, and social conditions, organizers have consistently adapted cooperative ideology and practice to their particular constituents’ concerns and needs. However, New Orleans cooperatives have resisted operating in geographical and intellectual isolation. On the contrary, activists have carefully constructed complex social networks of governmental, cooperative, labor, and business officials at the local, state, and national level in order to further their cause. Ironically, while these broad webs

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<sup>27</sup> Reed, interview with author.



of sympathetic allies have provided budding cooperatives logistical and financial support vital for sustaining a permanent cooperative economy, they have just as frequently contributed to local cooperatives' demise. Dependent on the vagaries of philanthropic foundations or politically precarious government funding agencies, many cooperatives wither with shifting national political or economic tides.

At the same time, when assessing the success of the New Orleans cooperative movement, it is essential to consider its larger historical trajectory. Despite individual cooperatives' failures, many members were sufficiently convinced of cooperative economics' benefits to continue organizing collective organizations throughout their lifetime. Further, persistent racial and class inequality reinforces community cooperatives' reputation as viable institutional alternatives, ensuring their reemergence across the city at key moments of economic and political flux. Addressing people's immediate needs for financial stability and civic influence, cooperatives' pragmatism appeals to members seeking a direct line to participatory democracy. As John Clark poignantly remarks, the successful cooperative movement must instill "Hope. The hope that people can live that life. Let's show what we could have."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Clark, interview with author.

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Juvenile Co-operators Fraternal Benevolent Mutual Aid Association Records

### **Oral Histories**

Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana State University  
John Zippert

Digital Repository, The University of Texas at Austin  
Cooperative Oral History Project

### **Published and Unpublished Materials**

#### Newspapers and Periodicals

*Amerika Esperantisto Magazine*  
*Atlanta Constitution*  
*The Austin Chronicle*  
*Boston Evening Transcript*  
*The Catholic Champion*  
*The Chicago Reader*  
*Cigar Makers' Official Journal*  
*The Crusader*  
*The Congregation Quarterly*  
*The Dawn*  
*Forest Republican*  
*The Gambit*  
*The Garment Worker*  
*Houma Today*  
*Housewives League Magazine*  
*The Huffington Post*  
*Jennings Daily Record*  
*L'Abeille*  
*Ladies' Home Journal*  
*Lincoln Daily Star*  
*Leslie's Weekly*  
*The Longshoreman*

*Louisiana Populist*  
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*New Orleans Tribune*  
*New York Times*  
*Ogden Standard*  
*Polks' New Orleans City Directory*  
*Seattle Times*  
*Soards' New Orleans City Directory*  
*Social Ecology Newsletter*  
*The Sun*  
*The Sunland Tribune*  
*Times Democrat*  
*Weekly Louisianan*  
*Weekly Pelican*

Government Records

1925 New York State Census  
1850 United States Census  
1860 United States Census  
1870 United States Census  
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