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Looking Through the Grille:
An Analysis of Ursuline Religious Agency in an Early French Colonial Context

By:

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation *summa cum laude*

University of Louisville

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the agency of the Ursulines in French New Orleans from 1727 to 1732. It analyzes the letters of Marie Hachard and several other documents from the Ursuline archives and places them within the context of French colonial New Orleans. The Ursulines' establishment in Louisiana and their missionary efforts were situated in a larger colonial context of violent conflict between the French and the native populations, the colonists' endless struggles to develop an economy and secure funds to survive, and the slow evolution of official systems of power. The Ursulines' decisions to leave their homes for the appeal of the New World missionary endeavor, redefine their New Orleans mission to adapt to the happenings of the community outside of their convent, and their commitment to various social services exposed their desire to achieve the same level of religious achievement of those famous missionaries before them. Despite the limitations of the patriarchal structure of the early modern Church, the Ursulines of New Orleans worked within the confines of their status in early modern European society to progress their desire to engage in the male-dominated field of missionary work. The combination of the Ursulines' unique status as women religious and the untamed colonial context of New Orleans made their exceptional act of feminine religious agency possible. The Ursulines seized an opportunity for improvement just like their fellow male colonists, and in doing so, they expanded the categories of acceptable work for women religious.

On April 24, 1728, an Ursuline novice from France and a founding member of the New Orleans order of Ursulines, Marie Hachard, wrote to her father while sitting in the convent on the outskirts of the nascent Louisiana provincial capital, New Orleans. As the Louisiana sun shone through the convent's covered windows and native insects flew wearisome about her head, Hachard described the moral character of the sisters' new religious charges to her father:

What pleases us is the docility of the children, whom one forms as one wants. The blacks are also easy to instruct once they learn to speak French. Is it not the same for the savages, whom one does not baptize without trembling because of the tendency they have to sin, especially the women, who, under a modest air, hide the passions of beasts.¹

Hachard's assessment of the receptibility of her new spiritual charges to the Ursulines' campaign of catechism reflected the decided racial trends that marked the evolution of the feminine Catholic mission in early French New Orleans.

Like the male clergy throughout the colonies, the New Orleans Ursulines engaged in a racially targeted mission driven by a Counter-Reformation urgency to contain the spread of Protestantism and help achieve the Church's ideal of universal Catholicism. In its search for universalism, the Church aimed to extend the propagation of the Catholic faith to the indigenous and enslaved populations of the Americas.² The Ursuline's decisions about the reach of their educational apostolate displayed one of their many acts of agency within the confines of a patriarchal church structure that limited the religious roles and activities available to women.

¹ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, April 24, 1727, in *Voices from an Early American Convent: Marie Hachard and the New Orleans Ursulines, 1727-1760*, edited by Emily Clark (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 78. [Hereafter: VEAC].

² Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 22, 49. For an exploration of early modern missionary Catholicism see, Alison Forrestal and Seán Alexander Smith, "Re-thinking Missionary Catholicism for the Early Modern Era," in *The Frontiers of Mission: Perspectives on Early Modern Missionary Catholicism*, eds. Alison Forrestal and Seán Alexander Smith (Lieden: Brill, 2016), 1-21; Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage: And the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984), 276.

Successful missionary activity, like the Ursulines' work with the enslaved African populations of New Orleans, and the resolve to bring new converts into a universal Catholic faith was a driving force for missionary endeavors to the "New World."³ As demonstrated by the Ursulines of New France, this growing movement toward a form of religious attainment that was considered more appropriate for the male ministry was not without the involvement of women religious as well.⁴ Although barred from the ability to baptize, hear confession, give communion, or transmit any other sacrament, the women religious of New Orleans exhibited their spiritual agency and participated in the missionary work of the city. As evident in Hachard's letters and other documents relating to the New Orleans Ursulines, women religious braved new terrains and reluctant patriarchal opinions to enact agency through fulfilling feminine religiosity and claim their place in the New World missionary movement.

This thesis demonstrates the agency employed by the pioneering Ursulines and the interactions these acts of agency helped foster with the New Orleans laity from 1727 to 1732. It does so by placing Hachard's letters and several other documents from the Ursuline archives within the context of colonial New Orleans. Violent conflict between the French and the native populations, endless struggles to develop an economy and secure funds to survive, and the slow evolution of official systems of power all occurred within the timeframe of the Ursulines' establishment in Louisiana. Similar to historian Kathryn Burns' idea of a "spiritual economy" in the Spanish-colonial convents of Peru, the New Orleans Ursulines participated in an exchange of

³ After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Pope Gregory XV made this missionary drive an official Church priority when he issued the Papal Bull *Inscrutabili* on June 22, 1622, creating the Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide*. The Congregation served as an administrative branch of the Vatican and it devoted its resources to the recall of European Catholics to the Church after the Protestant Reformation and the winning of new American and Asian souls to expand the Church's influence beyond its European borders. Peter Guilday, "The Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide (1622-1922)," *The Catholic Historical Review* 6, no. 4 (1921), 478-483. See also, Forrestal and Smith, "Re-Thinking Missionary Catholicism for the Early Modern Era," 5.

⁴ Forrestal and Smith, "Re-thinking Missionary Catholicism for the Early Modern Era," 18-19.

religious and social services for opportunities of spiritual advancement and fulfillment.⁵ In pursuing their aims for spiritual advancement and communal recognition, the Ursulines asserted their religious agency by selectively foregoing the submissive archetype of women religious. In presenting their desire for religious prestige as following the will of their spiritual spouse, diverting their missionary focus away from an unsuccessful attempt to convert native populations, and taking on social services of several different religious orders in addition to their educational vows, the Ursulines advanced their ambitions within the boundaries of Early-Modern European gender constraints.

The uniqueness of the Ursulines' educational apostolate, their modified monastic vows, and their conditional observance of *clausura* that Pope Paul V granted to the order on June 13, 1612 enabled the later Ursulines of New Orleans to embark on their journey to New Orleans. Furthermore, the unusual conditions of the Louisiana frontier—it's position as a trade post with little royal oversight—created a space where the Ursulines could define their involvement in the community and forge their own path to continue their educational and missionary ideals. The combination of the Ursulines' unique status as women religious and the untamed colonial context of New Orleans made their exceptional act of feminine religious agency possible.

Analysis of the Ursulines' New Orleans experience helps negate the narrative of complete submission and stagnation of vowed women religious. Presenting the religious mission of vowed women as a display of their aspirations and search for authority and recognition of their feminine piety expands the perception of the roles that women inhabited during the early modern era. My research moves to include the active positions that women religious held within society that previous historians have ignored. It also places the Ursulines of French New Orleans

⁵ Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 3-6.

within the greater trends of feminine mission in the North American colonial context by drawing connections between other women religious in the American frontiers.

Historiography

Historians writing before the 1990s did not contribute critical scholarship centered on the uniquely feminine Ursuline mission in New Orleans. Instead, prominent historians of French Louisiana, such as Charles Edwards O'Neill and William J. Eccles, focused on the male clergy in their scholarship about Louisiana. They concentrated on the Capuchins and Jesuits. O'Neill and Eccles argue that the scope of missionaries in Louisiana had never reached the level of those in Quebec and the Great Lakes region because of a lack of funds, resources, and men. A complicated feud between the superiors of the Capuchins and Jesuits, along with an overall absence of religious fervor in New Orleans, also stood in opposition to the ecclesiastic endeavor in New Orleans.⁶

However, O'Neill and Eccles made their conclusions with little consideration of the Ursulines' missionary efforts and success. During the 1960s and 1970s, historians of the Louisiana Territory discussed the Ursulines in only a few paragraphs in their works. They acknowledge the Ursulines in parenthetical references, mentioning the opening of the Ursulines' school for girls or their position at the colony's hospital without exploring the greater place they held in the community due to their efforts from within the walls of their convent.⁷ Recent scholars have also noted this disparity in attention paid to male and female ministry. Historians

⁶ Charles Edwards O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana: Policy and Politics to 1732* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 219-230 and William J. Eccles, *France in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 171; For the perceived lack of religiosity of the population see O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, 287 and Eccles, *France in America*, 158.

⁷ Although O'Neill does acknowledge the realization of the Company of the Indies officials and the "value of the Ursulines in laying the foundations of a sound colony," he does not elaborate on the work of these women that prompted this response. O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana*, 223.

Alison Forrestal and Seán Alexander Smith argue that previous scholars underestimated the contributions of women religious in missionary efforts because “women religious were unable to dispense sacraments and were largely excluded from initiating new believers, instead engaging in processes of conversion by caring.”⁸ Previous scholars have not considered a gendered view of missionary activity, and this limited their interpretation of the efforts of the Ursulines in early colonial New Orleans.

This trend was also present in the historiography of French Quebec. Scholars of Quebec have been dismissive of women religious. Like scholarship on Louisiana, the Jesuits and the few other male orders who ventured into the danger and uncertainty of the Canadian frontier in the pursuit to convert souls of the native populations dominated the historiography of the colonial Catholic mission. Scholars have given them most of the credit for the advancement of the “religious frontiers” ignoring the educational and domestic efforts of women religious.⁹ Even ethnographic historians, such as Karen Anderson, who has written about the impact of the Catholic mission and its patriarchal models of Christian gender roles on the female First Nation populations and traditional gender roles in indigenous societies, has done so within the scope of the Jesuit’s work. In *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France*, Anderson argues that the missionary efforts of the Jesuits among the Huron and the Montagnais nations redefined gender roles within First Nation communities and negatively impacted the way First Nation men interacted with women.¹⁰ At the same time,

⁸ Forrestal and Smith, “Re-thinking Missionary Catholicism for the Early Modern Era,” 18-19.

⁹ V. Alton Moody, “Early Religious Efforts in the Lower Mississippi Valley,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (Sept., 1935) 161-176.

¹⁰ Karen Anderson, *Chain her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 98.

Anderson did not consider how women religious, such as the Ursulines, might have sought to influence the beliefs and behavior of First Nation women from within their convent.

As a result of the growing field of gender history, the scope of historical research has expanded to explore the experiences of marginalized populations, such as women and people of color. As a result, several scholars have begun to study the missionary activity of nuns, such as the Ursulines in French Louisiana, and their contributions to colonial structure and society. Most notable of the recent historians who have written about the New Orleans Ursulines is Emily Clark. Clark argues that the Ursulines were more than the product of a French colonial need for social services.¹¹ They participated actively in the development of their society, and they were responsible for several long-lasting impacts on the New Orleans community. In her research, Clark analyzes the roles that the Ursulines played in the development of the first generations of Afro-Catholic Church, and how their unique feminine missionary endeavors provided the necessary conditions for its successful spread throughout New Orleans' enslaved female populations.¹² This thesis expands on Clark's analysis of the Ursulines' role in colonial society and the formation of racial trends in religious demographics by presenting a view of the Ursulines' colonial actions as expressions of religious agency.

Religious scholar Mary Dunn's research on Marie de l'Incarnation, the superior of the first group of Ursulines to Quebec, argues that the religious agency of women needs to be considered outside of simple categories of domination and resistance. Analysis of the intentions of women religious often only reveals the individual's agency and voice to be hidden behind an

¹¹ Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 40.

¹² For Clark's work on the rapid growth of the Afro-Catholic Church in New Orleans that would soon lead to an Afro-Catholic majority in the pews, see Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans, 1727-1852," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 no. 2 (April 2002): 416-418; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 175-187.

intense submission to the will of God.¹³ Literary scholar Diane Watt also argues that the religious agency of women must be viewed as existing within the constraints placed on women's religious expression within the patriarchal structure and theology of Christianity. Her research argues that female prophets used the masculine voice of God to gain authority and legitimization for their feminine spirituality and religious opinions.¹⁴

I analyze the Ursulines' agency and their resistance to gender-limited religious expression with consideration to the arguments posited by both Mary Dunn and Diane Watt. The gendered lens I employ to analyze the actions of the Ursulines during their formative years in the French colony contributes to new interpretations of female religious activity in New Orleans. I present the decisions made by the Ursulines under the façade of the divine will as their way to maneuver through the patriarchal Church and enact their religious agency without engaging in behaviors deemed inappropriate for women religious in the seventeenth century.

Methodology and Sources

My research on women religious focuses on collections of personal correspondence—similar to the work of Emily Clark and Mary Dunn. Clark's edited collection of letters between the Ursuline novice, Marie Hachard, and her father is my central primary source. Clark brought the contents of the New Orleans Ursuline Archives out of their dusty boxes and into the published world. The edited collection consists of Clark's translation of five letters from Marie Madeleine Hachard to her father, six obituary letters of some of the first Ursulines to land in New Orleans - including Hachard - and a detailed account of a procession taken by the Ursulines

¹³ Mary Dunn, *The Cruellest of All Mothers: Marie de l'Incarnation, Motherhood, and Christian Tradition* (New York: Fordham University Press), 11.

¹⁴ Diane Watt, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997) 3-5.

from their temporary convent to their new convent attached to the hospital. Hachard's letters reveal an intense religious devotion that led me to consider the role of the nuns' religious agency in their interactions with the broader community. The letters also display the agency that women religious took in embarking on their North American mission. The sisters expanded the meaning of what it meant to be a woman religious by breaking many of the restraints put upon them after the Council of Trent.¹⁵

This collection of sources describes the journey of a young nun along with eleven other Ursulines almost one hundred years after the first Ursulines in North America made their journey from France to Quebec. They also provide information on the deaths and the personal and professional lives of some women in the form of obituary letters. Additionally, they include an account of the 1734 procession of the Ursulines to their new convent next to the colony's hospital on Des Chartres Street. Hachard's letters are unique as they show the perspective of someone not yet fully entrenched in the inter-workings of cloister life, as she had not yet taken her vows when she wrote them. Although Hachard's letters only span a little over one year after her arrival in the colony, they reveal information about the day-to-day happenings during a formative period for the convent and the city. Most significant to my research, these letters provide a glimpse into the relationship the Ursulines had with the lay community and the ways that the Ursulines chose to and chose not to interact with their new environment.

My approach to Marie Hachard's letters focuses on the moments that reveal the ways in which the Ursulines engaged in acts of agency that spoke to the religious ambitions that brought

¹⁵ Just after the Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545-1563), where senior male clergy met at the Vatican to discuss religious reform to protect the Catholic religion in the face of the recent Protestant Reformation, Pope Pius V issued the Papal Constitution of 1566 that established the requirement of strict enclosure for all vowed and Vatican recognized female religious organizations. One of the groups of women religious most affected by this decision was the Company of Saint Ursula as the Vatican eventually forced them into cloister in 1612. Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 24.

them to the colonies. My analysis of the sources seeks to answer questions about the women's religious, symbolic, and practical place within their society: Why did the Ursulines agree to work in a hospital in Louisiana? How did the Ursulines generate such authority within their community? In what ways did the religious agency of the Ursuline factor into their actions in Louisiana?

Historian Kathryn Burns has done a similar comparative analysis of multiple convents in the Spanish colony in Cuzco, Peru, starting with the conquest of the Andes and the creation of the Santa Clara cloister. Dealing with the same limitations due to the lack of primary sources that other scholars who study women religious have encountered, Burns studies the colony's notarial documents and real estate records from Cuzco's convents to reveal the significant role that women religious played in the creation of the Spanish colony and ensuring Spanish hegemony.¹⁶ Burns' methodology, specifically the questions she asks of her sources (i.e., How did the cloisters engage in their everyday life? How did the nuns interact with their communities? What impacts did they have among different populations? How did the interests of the convent and the interests of the community intersect and impact one another?) and the broad definition of agency that Burns uses to interpret the actions of the Cuzco nuns, influenced the questions I asked. Furthermore, her findings provided context and a framework for how to present my analysis of the "everyday life" of the Ursulines of French New Orleans.

The work of gender historian Mary Beth Norton aided my analysis of the status of women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as it is through her work, *Separated by their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* that I based my analysis of gendered categories in early modern European societies. Similar to the emergence of gendered

¹⁶ Burns, *Colonial Habits*, 2.

spheres in England and its Atlantic colonies that Norton argues occurred during the early eighteenth-century; early modern France also saw the rise of patriarchal gender roles that influenced the experience and freedom of women religious.¹⁷ Furthermore, Norton's use of case studies of aristocratic women throughout her period of study provided a model for my study of this specific group of Ursulines.

Literary historian Diane Watt and her exploration of female prophecy and religious authority through their station as the voice of God in their mystical speech and writings influenced my reading of Marie Hachard and Marie Tranchepain's letters and voyage accounts. In her work, *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* Watt argues that a close reading of the circumstances surrounding women prophets is necessary to understand the agency they employed in their prophetic speech. Watt argues, "Women prophets could claim the transcendental authority of God's command, denying that they themselves spoke or wrote."¹⁸ I expand upon Watt's idea of masking women's religious agency behind the will of the masculine divinity to analyze the later writings of Hachard and Tranchepain. Through Watt's analysis, I too saw the veiled acts of agency of women religious who legitimized their ambitions and desires by attributing them to the will or works of God.

The Ursulines

In 1532, Angela Merici, a native of Desenzano, Italy, called together a group of twelve young women in Brescia, Italy to develop a spiritual group unlike what had since been ascribed to monastic women. Merici, who had lived in Brescia during the four years of political and social

¹⁷ Mary Beth Norton, *Separated by their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011), 8.

¹⁸ Watt, *Secretaries of God*, 14.

upheaval during the French campaign to take control of Northern Italy in the Great Italian Wars of 1521-1526, believed that the young women of the city were at high risk of moral depravity in the wake of such tumult. This concern, combined with the fear of the Protestant threat from Martin Luther's 1517 religious revolution, prompted Merici to embark on her mission of female education to bring Italy securely back into the Catholic faith. The group of girls that came under Merici's tutelage diverged from medieval notions of vowed women religious as they abandoned the idea of the monastic cloister, continued to live with their families, and set a course for the open and free education and transformation of young girls into good Catholic mothers.

Merici died in 1540, leaving behind a still maturing community governed solely by women that sought to preserve an alternative form of independent female religious expression and education in the face of encroaching Protestantism. But after their foundress's death, the order continued to progress. On the morning of November 25, 1544, Merici's followers took their vows, consecrated themselves to God, and officially began the Company of St. Ursula.¹⁹ The order named itself for their admiration of the hagiographical account of the fourth-century Romano-British princess, Saint Ursula, who preserved her virginity and purity, and led a religious mission across Europe with a troupe of 11,000 virgins that resulted in their gruesome martyrdom.²⁰

The Company of St. Ursula spread to southern France by 1597 where they again encountered religious anxiety and societal upheaval in the papal Comtat Venaissin.²¹ At the time of the Company's arrival, France was recovering from several decades of devastating religious

¹⁹ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 48.

²⁰ Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 19.

²¹ Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 50.

wars that lasted from 1562 to 1593. French church and state officials welcomed the Company of St. Ursula and encouraged its growth throughout the country as the Ursulines helped contain the spread of Protestantism through their educational programs for women. In her research on the development of religious orders of women in the late Medieval and Early Modern eras, historian Elizabeth Rapley writes that “In the front line of the Counter-Reformation there was, for a brief moment in time, an opening for good catechists, no matter what their sex.”²²

However, France soon shed its acceptance of the Company’s educational ministry. From the inception of the Company of St. Ursula, the order presented an alternative and unconventional form of female religiosity. The Company chose communal engagement through public education and mobility of mission rather than cloistered contemplation as European society and the Catholic Church prescribed to all vowed female monastic orders after the *Circa pastoralis* of 1566.²³ Several prominent male religious officials in France did not accept the Company’s rejection of the established roles of women religious. As one friar in Langres wrote in the sixteenth century “it was an abuse for women to teach in public.”²⁴ Comments such as this from male clergy indicate that the Ursulines threatened patriarchal ideas of a woman’s duty by daring to take their religious commitment to the public realm.

Individual convents’ needs for state and private funding eventually forced the Company of Saint Ursula to begin accepting claustration. Starting with the Paris order in 1611, all groups of the Company of Saint Ursula succumbed to the papal imposition of *clausura* by the mid-1630s.²⁵ After official Church recognition, what had now become the Order of St. Ursula

²² Rapley, 52.

²³ The *Circa pastoralis* was a papal constitution enacted soon after the Council of Trent that required all Vatican approved female religious orders to take solemn vows and submit to a life of *clausura*—vowed enclosure. Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 56.

²⁴ *Les chroniques de l’Order des Ursulines recueillies pour l’usage des Religieuses du Memes Ordre par Mère de Pommeru Ursuline*, part 1:81, quoted in Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 53.

²⁵ Rapley, 59.

proliferated throughout France as its teaching apostolate to girls and women served to reclaim the next generation of French for the Catholic Church. However, in the 1640s, French officials began to focus on the physical ills of society rather than the moral and religious anxieties created by the Reformation. A new type of female religious order took advantage of this need, and thus emerged the *Filles du Charité*.²⁶

The Ursulines first arrived in North America in 1639 when a group from Tours France, led by Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation, traveled to Quebec by request of the Jesuits. The Ursulines were to provide an education to the colony's French female residents and assist in the conversion of female First Nation populations. A collection of Guyart's letters to her son reveals that the Ursulines experienced several setbacks once in the colony. However, Guyart and her order's success and relative freedom in expressing and pursuing their missionary goals were also apparent in her letters that her son, Claude Martin, published after Guyart's death. The Ursulines of New Orleans made their attempt at missionary renown in New Orleans in 1726 in the shadow of the legend of Marie de l'Incarnation. The Jesuit father Nicholas Ignace de Beaubois, prompted by the Company of the Indies, contracted Marie Tranchepain and eleven other women religious to take control of the colony's royal hospital. Taking advantage of the Company's request for nurses, twelve Ursulines of Northern France traveled for five grueling months across the Atlantic to start a mission of their own in New Orleans.

New Orleans: From Native Territory to Colonial Capital

The backdrop of the Ursulines' mission to Louisiana was an environment of constant change and adaptation for not only the Ursulines, but all of its inhabitants. The New Orleans and

²⁶ Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 27.

greater Louisiana areas were much different from the Old World society of France. The area that later became Louisiana was forced to undergo much change during the first century after European colonization. During the first one hundred years, authority over Louisiana changed hands between three European powers four times, alliances with indigenous peoples were forged and destroyed, economies rose and fell, and slavery teetered back and forth between a driving force and a limited enterprise. As a result of the colony's unpredictable conditions, Louisiana's capital city quickly developed a reputation as a debauched and lawless failure of an endeavor.²⁷

In 1539, Hernando de Soto, a Spanish noble of Jerez de los Caballeros, embarked on a journey with six-hundred and twenty men and a royal charter from King Charles V of Spain to “discover” the areas of La Florida that became Spanish Florida and French Louisiana.²⁸

Accounts from members of de Soto's expedition indicate that the group wandered across modern-day Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana in search of mineral wealth before de Soto died of fever in 1542 along the western bank of the Mississippi River.²⁹

The remaining members of the entrada traveled west to New Spain through modern-day Texas by 1543.³⁰ De Soto's expedition affected the various indigenous populations living in the southeastern parts of North America by exposing them to European greed, violence, and disease. The ill-treatment by the Spaniards and mass deaths caused by European microbes affected the

²⁷ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3-4.

²⁸ There is some debate over the birthplace of Hernando de Soto as it had been widely accepted for hundreds of years that he was born in Villanueva de Barcarrota due to the assumption of an early chronicler. However, modern scholars have found evidence that point towards his actual birthplace being in Jerez de los Caballeros. See, El Conde de Canilleros, “Note about the Birthplace of Hernando de Soto,” ed., Ursula Lamb, *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1. (Jul.-Oct., 1965), 45-50.

²⁹ Luis Hernandez de Biedma, “A Narrative of the Expedition of Hernando de Soto,” in *Historical Collections of Louisiana: Embracing Translations of Many Rare and Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil, and Political History of that State*, vol. 2, trans., B.F. French, (New York: Lamport, Blakeman & Law, 1853), 107. [Hereafter, HCL].

³⁰ David H. Dye, “Death March of Hernando de Soto,” *Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (May/June 1989), 27.

natives' social memory of Europeans. Previous experience with the Spanish influenced later indigenous populations' reception of subsequent French explorations that made their way from Quebec down through the Lower Mississippi Valley at the end of the seventeenth century.

The first French exploration into the Louisiana region occurred in 1673 when a Jesuit missionary, Father Jacques Marquette, made his way from Quebec to the future Louisiana Territory, stopping various times in the Great Lakes regions and eventually floating down the Mississippi River, in his attempt to convert as many natives of the interior as possible and discover the mouth of the river.³¹ More strategic political explorations soon followed France's early religious missions by René Robert Cavalier Le Moyne Sieur de La Salle and his brother Pierre Le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville. In 1682, La Salle and his expedition of Canadian men claimed the area that would later be known as Louisiana for the French Crown. Solely men inhabited the first French settlement at Fort Maurepas in Biloxi Bay at present-day Mississippi for the first few years after its official settlement in 1699 by Iberville.

The French crown officially recognized New Orleans as the colonial capital of Louisiana in 1718 with the Company of the Indies, a joint-stock company headed by the Scottish financier, John Law, in control of the colony's administration. Much of the colony's economy came from the production of tobacco, indigo, and sugar, crown-endorsed smuggling of Spanish silver, and in later periods, slave labor.³² Inhabitants, especially the *coureurs de bois* who were a part of La Salle and d'Iberville first expeditions, also profited from trading furs and European manufactured goods with the Native American tribes. However, the colonial government

³¹ Marcel Guiard *A History of French Louisiana*, vol 1, trans., Joseph C. Lambert (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1953), xi. For a translated first-hand account of Father Marquette's travels from Quebec down the Mississippi, Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, "An Account of the Discovery of Some New Countries and Nations of North America in 1672," *HCL*, vol. II.

³² Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 115-134.

discouraged reliance on trade with the native populations as officials wished their male colonists to settle down with a good French (or in some earlier cases, indigenous) wife, and develop an agricultural life to sustain the economy and health of the colony. This proved impractical as a gender-imbalance in the colony's demographics existed until 1704. Furthermore, Spear argues that French officials still had issues preventing French men from taking indigenous wives for decades after the first women arrived in Louisiana.³³

The indigenous peoples of Louisiana were a diverse group that surrounded the French on all sides. They provided aid in times of French distress, trade opportunities, and sources of conflict when the French overstepped their boundaries into native ground. In the western areas of Louisiana, moving into what is now Missouri, lived the Osage and Missouri nations. Relations with these nations were deemed important to the French as the chiefs of were invited by French Company of the Indies to visit France.³⁴ The Natchez nation, governed by their Great Suns, lived in the northwestern frontiers. The Natchez generally lived in a state of cohabitation with the French as the two powers held a trade alliance. The Natchez also allowed French agricultural development in the Natchez land around Fort Rosalie before the souring of relations between the two from the Natchez Uprising of 1729. This event severed the Natchez's ties with the French and carved a collective scar in French memory in Louisiana.³⁵ In this same area resided the Tunica, and to the northeast of the colony lived the Yazoo and British-allied Chickasaw Nation. The closest native ally of the French, the Choctaw resided on New Orleans' eastern border.³⁶

³³ Jennifer Spear, "'They Need Wives': *Métissage* and the Regulation of Sexuality in French Louisiana, 1699-1730," in *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*, ed., Martha Hodes, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 36.

³⁴ Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonist in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 107.

³⁵ Sophie White "Massacre, Mardi Gras, and Torture in Early New Orleans," *William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (July 2013), 498.

³⁶ Michael James Foret, "French Colonial Indian Policy in Louisiana, 1699-1763," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 8, (1985), 85.

The Quapaw, another vital ally to the French, lived in the far northern reaches of the Louisiana territory. In later years the Quapaw assisted Bienville and the French in New Orleans in their ongoing wars with the Chickasaw.³⁷

This Native borderland was both beneficial and threatening for the French as native territories both buffered them from British interference to the east and Spanish competition to the west. However, when Native American tribes aligned with the British, like the powerful Chickasaw nation, they created a new front in the Seven Years War. As such, the native presence in the areas surrounding New Orleans was a constant focus of the French colonial government. For much of the colony's existence, French policy toward the natives varied throughout the period due to the close attention paid them by the French. In the first years of the colony's existence, especially those years surrounding the collapse of John Law's financial schemes in the early 1720s, the French relied on native assistance in times of scarcity. In other times, the French benefited from their trade relations and the alliances that protected the French's gateway to Mississippi River trade routes.³⁸ Experiences in Quebec and the Great Lakes region taught the French the value of symbolic diplomacy when dealing with indigenous populations, and their use of native material culture and customs allowed them success in the Midwest where the Spanish and the English had failed.³⁹ Despite the care taken by French diplomats to observe native political customs, conflict with the indigenous populations still arose as a result of evolving French ideas about race and cultural difference.

Historians have noted that the French view of indigenous peoples was more complicated than a simple "us" and "them" dichotomy. According to historian Sophie White, the culture of

³⁷ DuVal, *The Native Ground*, 97-98.

³⁸ DuVal, 65.

³⁹ DuVal, 18-19.

New Orleans was one precariously ensured by the markers of social, cultural, and racial difference. Material culture – especially worn artifacts – presented an outward sign of this difference.⁴⁰ The outward appearance and personal deportment played a significant part in the transplanting and preservation of “Frenchness” and the creation of a racialized worldview. Many French colonists believed that Native Americans were similar to the French in terms of their proximity to European theories of “whiteness.” This belief fueled the French efforts to “civilize” the indigenous populations through marriage to French and conversion to Catholicism.⁴¹ In the face of the rapidly growing threat of what colonial officials saw as uncontrollable *métissage*, this small French colony employed several regulatory measures to prevent the feared corruption of French blood and morality by the *sauvage* that surrounded them.⁴²

The French also held flexible racial ideas about the enslaved African population that outnumbered white settlers soon after the colony’s foundation.⁴³ Before the erosion of the rights of the enslaved that came with United States control after the Louisiana Purchase of 1802, the colony’s enslaved population was able to participate independently in the local economy.⁴⁴ The enslaved in urban areas had more opportunities to generate income as they required more freedom of movement to carry out their labor and thus were allotted time on Sundays in keeping with Catholic, doctrinally-driven slave codes and observe the Sabbath in the Catholic societies of

⁴⁰ Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial New Orleans* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1. For more in-depth analysis on specifically the use of material culture as a racial and socioeconomic marker in New Orleans, see chapters four, five, and six.

⁴¹ Olive Patricia Dickason, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1984), 146.

⁴² Jennifer Spear, ““They Need Wives,”” 36. Although Spear uses “*métissage*,” the mixing of French and Native races through sexual relations, throughout her analysis of the sexual and marital regulation used to form racial borders between the lighter and darker skin tones, the use of the word is anachronistic. However, it has been used by several scholars of the French colonies, like Jennifer Spear and Sophie White, to describe the circumstances of racial mixing and categorization. This essay will use the term with the same consideration and meaning.

⁴³ Spear, *Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 12.

⁴⁴ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 90.

French and Spanish rule.⁴⁵ This allowed for a more fluid class structure wherein enslaved individuals stood a better chance at buying their own freedom than those who lived in English controlled areas of the south.

By the time the Ursulines arrived in the colony in 1727, New Orleans, though still under constant construction, had undergone a considerable amount of stabilizing change since its founding in 1718. Hachard praises the town in one of her letters, writing, “There is here as much beauty and politeness as there is in France.”⁴⁶ The town itself was no more than a small urban quarter connected by muddy streets. Along the outskirts of the city, just off the banks of the Mississippi River resided a belt of plantations where the majority of the enslaved population lived and labored. Upriver lay various other agricultural posts, including the ill-fated Fort Rosalie in the heart of Natchez country that proved pivotal to the future Franco-Indian relations in the area.

Legitimizing a “New World” mission through The Father’s voice

According to Watt, religious women in the Medieval and Early Modern eras obtained authority through their conveyance of “God’s will” in prophecy.⁴⁷ In attributing their religious beliefs and declarations to the masculine voice of God, Christian women gained a legitimate voice. They used to their advantage both the feminine state of submission and the religious concept of the emptiness of the feminine self to make room for their agency through the projected “will of God.” The founding members of the New Orleans order of Ursulines also used

⁴⁵ Berlin, 91.

⁴⁶ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727, *VEAC*, 39.

⁴⁷ Watt, *Secretaries of God*, 14.

this form of feminine agency; claiming legitimacy for their voyage to North America as being a result of the will and voice of the divine.

Popular pre-conceived notions about the nature of the missionary work awaiting those who immigrated to New France provided a picture to French women religious in the seventeenth-century who formed their own ideas about the potential for advancing their religious works and missionary renown. The widespread circulation of the accounts of missions in Quebec would have surely been influential to the New Orleans Ursulines' decisions to join the colonial Catholic effort in New France. The extensive collection of Jesuit *Relations* and the newly published letters of Marie de l'Incarnation made ideas about the fame and fulfillment enjoyed by those missionaries in Quebec available to the French public in the seventeenth century.⁴⁸ Due to the repeated mentions of the missionary efforts of the Jesuit fathers in the travel accounts of Marie Hachard and Marie Tranchepain, it is clear that tales of Jesuit missionary work factored in the Ursulines' decisions to follow their desire to attain a new and exciting form of religious work.

The prospect of religious glory and in the face of physical danger, as seen in the missionary activities of the Jesuits in early New France, created a zeal for this romanticized version of foreign ministry among early-modern Catholics. The Jesuits' accounts of their danger-ridden and religiously rewarding experiences presented the possibility of a new level of religious attainment for a nation of Catholics who had just lost a decades-long war against the Huguenots

⁴⁸ Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1896). The examples of this kind of imagery and the reports of the success of the Jesuit missions to convert the First Nations of Canada, especially the Huron and the Algonquin, are numerous and can be found in both the original French and translated into English within any of the seventy-three volumes of this collection. Marie de l'Incarnation was also a prolific chronicler of her and her sisters' Ursuline mission in Quebec. A collection of her letters to various recipients in French has been translated into English from their original French. See, Joyce Marshall, ed., *Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de l'Incarnation* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967).

in post-reformation France.⁴⁹ Hagiographical tales of saintly Jesuit missionaries converting the chiefs of Canadian First Nations and brave missionaries who became martyrs while fulfilling their vocation were commonplace in the Jesuit Relations. The Ursulines who made up the first mission to New Orleans would have been exposed to both the widely circulated Jesuit *Relations*, and even more relevant to their feminine status in the religious hierarchy, the letters of Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation.

Guyart served as evidence of those Ursulines of early modern France drawn to the “New World” by spiritual opportunities to enact agency and fulfill their Counter-Reformation-driven feelings of obligation to preserve the Catholic faith. During her time as the first superior of the Ursulines of Quebec, Guyart wrote to several people in France about her order’s apparent success in their missionary endeavors. In a letter published in 1681, Guyart wrote about the intense devotion and love toward the faith that her female First Nation charges held:

We have seen a great number of men, women, and girls baptized here, who showed sentiments so Christian that our hearts melted with tenderness and devotion. A young woman was so carried away during her baptism that, as soon as the consecrated water was poured over her head, she turned towards those present, crying “Ah, it has been done. I am washed.” For more than eighteen months she had pressed to be admitted to the number of God’s children; it was this that made her cry out in such loud voice and tremble with utmost joy.⁵⁰

Likely exaggerated accounts of missionary activity and zeal of their fellow female religious, such as Guyart’s letters, would have been just as accessible to the Ursulines of Rouen as the Jesuit *Relations*. It is likely that these publications shaped the expectations of the New Orleans Ursulines and provided a model for which to base their feminine religiosity and provide precedent for their decision to search for the same type of religious attainment.

⁴⁹ Eccles, *France in America*, 12.

⁵⁰ Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation to Mother Ursule de Sainte-Catherine, September 29, 1642, in *Word From New France: the Selected Letters of Marie de l'Incarnation*, trans., Joyce Marshall (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 103.

Despite reluctance from their families and male clergy in France, the members of the first group of Ursulines who traveled to Louisiana actively ignored the concern of those around them. In some instances, such as that of Sister Madeleine Mahieu of St. Francis Xavier, they disobeyed their superiors to enact agency in determining their religious expression and in pursuing their individual goals of greater religious attainment. This type of insubordination is evident in Mahieu's obituary letter written by the New Orleans superior, Marie Tranchepain. Obituary letters are essential sources of biographical information on women religious. In many early modern orders they are the only sources that relay their individual lives and evaluations of their personality and aspirations.⁵¹

Sister Madeleine Mahieu's obituary letter exhibits how the Ursulines circumvented disapproval of their authorities in France and their use of statements of "God's will" or divine intervention to defend and legitimize their desires to join the New Orleans endeavor. Mahieu's letter details the difficulty she experienced in following her aspirations for New World missionary work and her use of her divine inspiration to legitimize her disobedience to her superior to join the voyage:

She attracted the loving regard of her divine spouse, who filled her with His spirit and gave her the desire to consecrate herself anew to Him for the mission to Louisiana. . . But it was not so easy to obtain the consent of her community [to go to New Orleans], and especially of the dignified mother superior who had authority over it. . . in the end, the power of grace enabled her to triumph with a pure heart, and with a metaphysical act she fulfilled God's plans for her.⁵²

Tranchepain presented the insubordination of this woman religious as her daring obedience to her spiritual spouse, giving legitimacy to the agency that Mahieu employed.

⁵¹ Clark, "Introduction to Obituary Letters," *VEAC*, 93.

⁵² Marie Tranchepain, Circular Letter for sister Madeleine Mahieu of St. Francis Xavier, July 1728, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 96-97.

The obituary letter of mother Marguerite Judde also presents the lack of submissive behavior on the part of the Ursulines whose families and communities requested they not go to Louisiana. Presenting Judde's decision to leave her community to pursue missionary work in New Orleans as an act of sacrifice highlights her extreme devotion to heavenly works and her commitment to her spiritual agency. Mother Marie Tranchepain, the superior who wrote Judde's letter writes,

She had such a strong vocation to work for the salvation of souls that as soon as she knew about the establishment of Ursulines here, she felt herself fortunate to discover an occasion to sacrifice herself one more time, afresh, for her heavenly spouse. But this sacrifice of herself was not the only thing that she did. Her family of brothers and sisters . . . and by whom she was tenderly loved, strongly opposed her plan. But our dear mother, thinking of herself only as a victim consecrated to the pure glory of God, remained true to the voice that called her.⁵³

Judde's disregard for the protests against her leaving for Louisiana exhibit the agency she employed in making the hard decision to leave her home and her loved ones to embark on an opportunity to advance her commitment to her religion and participation in the new spread of Catholicism.

Marie Hachard and Marie Tranchepain also legitimized their choice to follow this mission in their travel accounts. Repeatedly throughout her letters to her father, Marie Hachard denied that it was her desire to part from her family and go to Louisiana, but rather, the will of God and her calling to serve her religion and obey him. In her first letter to her father, Hachard expressed her regret at having left her family and her country:

If I seem to have left you, my dear Father, my dear Mother, and all my family without a tear and even with joy, my heart was not suffering any the less. I will confess that, at the last moment, I fought a hard battle within myself; but finally, the sacrifice was made, and I was pleased to have obeyed the sovereign Master of our destiny.⁵⁴

⁵³ Marie Tranchepain, "Obituary Letter of Mother Marguerite Judde," August 14, 1731, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 101-102.

⁵⁴ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, February 22, 1727, Lorient, France, *VEAC*, 22.

Despite Hachard's early doubts about her decision to embark on her journey to Louisiana, she soon lost her uncertainty in a later letter to her father as she defends her decision to leave with the authority of divine plan: "My dear Father, when one is certain of doing God's will, one values as nothing the opinions of men. Many people consider our enterprise as folly, but what is folly in the eyes of the world is wisdom in the eyes of the Lord."⁵⁵ Hachard's defense of her unusual decision to leave France and break her vows of cloister to travel to Louisiana is grounded in the imposition of God's will for her.

As stated above, the Ursulines drew their assumptions underlying their desires for their new chance to gain higher levels of religious attainment in Louisiana from various sources coming out of the colonies. However, they also came to their conclusions with the limited knowledge of foreign affairs that was available to the average person in the eighteenth century. The Ursulines did not form their preconceptions in an awareness of the recently growing tensions between the settlers and the native populations of the New Orleans area. The Ursulines soon discovered the difficulties of converting a native population not so accessible nor receptive to adopting a new religion. However, the difficulty the Ursulines experienced regarding the conversion of Native Americans did not deter them from their missionary focus. Instead, the Ursulines reacted to the tensions between the French community and the Native Americans on their own accord and shifted their focus away from the native population.

Reconfiguring Missionary Focus

In 1727, Marie Hachard admitted in a letter to her father that the focus of the Ursulines in New Orleans was not, at first, their commitment to the hospital as was stipulated in their contract

⁵⁵ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727, New Orleans, Louisiana, *VEAC*, 38.

with the Company of the Indies. Rather, it was the “glory of God” and the religious attainment of mass conversion. She wrote:

We hope that our establishment will be for the glory of God and that, in time, it will produce great good for the salvation of souls. That has been our principal aim. If one knew how sweet it is to suffer for Jesus Christ, with the hope of gaining for Him the souls that He redeemed at the price of His blood, I do not doubt that a great number of holy religious sisters would follow our example.⁵⁶

Not only does Hachard express her own attempt to receive praise and reward for the work she is doing, but she also espouses her hope that future women religious will strive for the same level of involvement in missionary work.

Like the missionaries of Quebec, the Ursulines strove to advance the conversion of native souls in mass quantities and awaited this possibility with zeal and excitement. However, as Clark mentions in her introduction to *Voices in an Early American Convent*, “within a few months they exchanged their vision of Indian conversion for a plan of African evangelization without a word of regret.”⁵⁷ Despite the initial ideas the nuns had about their new apostolic mission, it is evident that they soon developed negative impressions of Native Americans and their abilities to convert those potential catechumens “who one did not baptize without trembling.”

The Ursulines’ new ideas about the native populations grew throughout their time in Louisiana. They influenced their later redirection of missionary targets as an act of communal agency to promote their missionary success. The travel accounts of Marie Tranchepain and Marie Hachard indicate that these new perceptions were formed almost as soon as the women religious laid eyes on the continent. In both of their accounts, Tranchepain and Hachard write about the sailors of the *Gironde*’s warnings about the “*sauvage*” of the country. Hachard’s description indicates the apprehension the young nun felt at the sailors’ statements:

⁵⁶ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727, *VEAC*, 72.

⁵⁷ Emily Clark, “Introduction,” in *VEAC*, 17.

The officers assured us that there was no need to fear for our lives . . . But we should disembark only under extreme necessity because the island was inhabited by savages who, they said, were very cruel. Not only did they eat white people, but they made them suffer with torments a thousand times worse than death. Sometimes, they made them drink their own blood and made them suffer the most cruel martyrdoms.⁵⁸

The combination of assumptions of the missionary zeal in the colony, expectations about their extensive involvement with the native population, and the fear-inducing imagery of the “savage” instigated by the sailors created a complicated image of what awaited the Ursulines in New Orleans. Upon their arrival to in the town, the Ursulines quickly realized that their expectations of a docile native population and the glory resulting from the conversion of the “savage” were not consistent with the reality of a colony whose relations with indigenous populations teemed with tension.

Before the climax of the growing tension between the French and the Natchez nation, relations between Native peoples and the French wavered between negotiation and hostility throughout French occupation. The Natchez Massacre of 1729 represented a turning point in the relationship between the French settlers of the Lower Mississippi Valley and several indigenous nations that lived there.⁵⁹ In retaliation of continued French infringement on native land and the disrespect shown to the Natchez Sun by the new commandant of Fort Rosalie, Le Sieur de Chepart, Natchez warriors staged a surprise campaign against the French. The attack resulted in

⁵⁸ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727, *VEAC*, 64.

⁵⁹ The French colonial chroniclers, Antoine-Simone Le Page du Pratz and Jean-François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny provide an account of earlier conflicts that started a series of confrontations between the French and the Natchez. According to their reports, the First Natchez War was not really a war at all. It resulted in only two deaths on the French side, and it was resolved through negotiations between the French and the Great Sun of the Natchez. Various attempts at revenge escalated from the original disagreement and they resulted in the Natchez Massacre. These two accounts differ in their details, but the main events are the same. For their accounts see, Antoine-Simone le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana: Or of the Western Parts of Virginia and Carolina: Containing a Description of the Countries that Lie on Both Sides of the River Mississippi: With an Account of the Settlements, Inhabitants, Soil, Climate, and Products*, Stan Goodman, trans. (2003), 142-150, accessed November 5, 2018 on Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9153>; Jean François Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, “*History of Louisiana: Translated from the Historical Memoirs of M. Dumont*,” 1-126, HCL, vol II, 47-49.

the loss of over 200 French settlers, the capture of nearly 150 French women and children, and the cessation of the French alliance with the Natchez and their allies.⁶⁰ The attack and its repercussions directly affected the Ursulines and further influenced the shape of their missionary development because of the chasm created between the natives and French.

Accounts of the event by French officials and soldiers detailed the violence exhibited by the Natchez that remained seared within French colonial memory. Imagery of ritually “slow cooking” captives and the ever-present leitmotif of scalping filled the pages of these reports. Statements categorizing Native Americans as devious beings are found in the memoir of the French tobacco planter living in the Natchez settlement, Antione-Simon le Page du Pratz. Referring to his indigenous neighbors in the Natchez post, Le Page wrote, “Revenge is the predominant passion of the people in America.”⁶¹ This indicates the French’s mentality of suspicion and anxiety due to the years of conflict with indigenous populations that resulted in much death and destruction.

The fearful sentiments of the French and their anxiety about the unpredictable nature of the natives inevitably found their way into the Ursuline convent. The nuns took responsibility for many of the orphans and widows who found refuge in New Orleans after they were retrieved from their imprisonment with the Natchez.⁶² The orphans and widows placed in the Ursulines’ care after the massacre had experienced trauma during their recent exposure to the life-altering events of the massacre. Accounts of the event report that the Natchez’s French prisoners witnessed the executions, torture, and utter humiliation of their fellow Frenchmen during their captivity. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Ursulines would continue to teach and house their

⁶⁰ George Edward Milne, *Natchez Country: Indians, Colonists and the Landscapes of Race in French Louisiana*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 177.

⁶¹ Le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, 146.

⁶² Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 75-76; O’Neill, *Church and State*, 223-226.

native students alongside their new emotionally scarred charges.⁶³ Clark writes about the effects of the massacre on the French:

When those widowed and orphaned by the attack resettled in the capital, townswomen who had begun to develop an association with the convent came face-to-face with the human consequences of the tragedy and must have become acutely conscious of the fragility of their own lives. At the same time, their small settlement now had to absorb a large group of motherless girls.⁶⁴

As the Ursulines faced their new circumstance in the upheaval of French society, they accepted their new reality as caregivers to a large group of orphans who eventually provided a source of income and spiritual economy between the Ursulines and the community.⁶⁵

Analysis of obituary letters of the Ursulines who taught in the convent at the time of the massacre and in the following years reveals what seems to be a lack of involvement in the teaching of native women that corresponds to the strained relations between Native Americans and the French community following hostilities with the Natchez. The only obituary letter that mentions the interest of a sister in “the instruction of the savagesses” is that of Sister Madeleine Mahieu who died before the events of the Natchez Massacre in 1728.⁶⁶ The Ursulines’ preference for the needs of the orphaned boarders was also consistent with the eighteenth-century racial hierarchy in European society that held whites and their needs above those of the perceived “uncivilized” races. As cultural and ethnological historians, Sophie White and Charles Edward Milne argue, both French and indigenous groups felt a heightened sense of racial difference and otherization in the years surrounding the Natchez Massacre.⁶⁷ French colonists,

⁶³ For an example of an account of such torture, see Dumont de Montigny, “*History of Louisiana*: Translated from the Historical Memoirs of M. Dumont,” *HCL*, vol. II, 77-79.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 75.

⁶⁵ Emily Clark, “Patrimony without Pater: The New Orleans Ursuline Community and the Creation of a Material Culture,” in *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, ed., Bradley G. Bond (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 101.

⁶⁶ Clark, *VEAC*, 99.

⁶⁷ Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Natives*, 222-228.

who had already deemed Native women to be the racial other, now assigned them a new level of danger and associated indigenous peoples with a racial threat.

The circumstances that prompted the Ursulines to distance themselves from the native populations and limit the scope of their educational mission also encouraged the creation of an Ursuline-sponsored lay confraternity of women: The Ladies' Congregation of the Children of Mary. This group of religiously motivated women approached the Ursulines in May 1730 - six weeks after months of continuous conflict with the Natchez had resulted in the public ritualistic burning of a Natchez woman by the Tunica in New Orleans.⁶⁸ As historian Sophie White suggests, one of the main reasons for the formation of this group was that it "offered a formal religious framework for expiating sins and reversing the slippage into 'savagery'" that several French women felt had occurred as they witnessed the Tunica's ritualistic torture of their Natchez prisoner of war.⁶⁹ Given the circumstances of the group's formation, it is evident that their dealings would have had little to do with the native populations that disrupted their sense of security in the colony.

The Children of Mary, and their search to recover their lost French identity and morality, proved instrumental in the evolution of the Ursulines' missionary activity and religious authority in the colony.⁷⁰ The members of the confraternity acted as a public arm for the Ursulines who were confined to their convent on the terms of cloister in their constitution. Because the Children of Mary convened in the Ursuline convent and conversed with the nuns regarding their own

⁶⁸ Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*, 76. For an account of the torture of the Natchez woman and the reaction of the French community, see Dumont de Montigny, "History of Louisiana: Translated from the Historical Memoirs of M. Dumont," *HCL*, vol. II, 96.

⁶⁹ Sophie White, "Massacre, Mardi Gras, and Torture in Early New Orleans," 536.

⁷⁰ Clark also attests to the confraternity's formation in the wake of the social upheaval during the Natchez Massacre as she asserts that the confraternity fully replicated the earlier European tradition of these lay groups that were linked to a "desire to promote morality and exert social control amid unsettling social change." Emily Clark, "By all the Conduct of their Lives: A Laywomen's Confraternity in New Orleans, 1730-1744," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (Oct., 1997), 777.

spiritual goals and endeavors, they were exposed to the teaching styles and catechism programs of the nuns. The members then took that spiritual guidance and religious education and spread it to a growing number of African slaves outside of the convent walls. The Ursulines encouraged the religious agency of laywomen by helping them establish this group to stabilize the Catholic identity of the colony.

Historians of slavery, such as Ira Berlin and Thomas Ingersoll, argue that the Lower Mississippi Valley experienced a setback in its evolution into a matured slave society soon after the Natchez Uprising. This hindrance in the growth of the slave trade was due to economic hardship and the retrocession of the colony from the Company of the Indies to the French Crown in 1729. This cut ties between slave traders in West Africa and New Orleans forged by the now defunct Company.⁷¹ However, before the stall in Louisiana's economic development, there occurred a growth in the slave population of New Orleans concurrently with the conflict between the French and the Natchez. Requests from the colonists of New Orleans for more slave labor caused a steady increase in the number of enslaved peoples brought to the colony and reported in census records around the time of the Ursulines' arrival.

The 1726 census for the entire Louisiana territory reported 1540 enslaved Africans.⁷² A count of just the inhabitants of New Orleans recorded 76 enslaved Africans in 1726.⁷³ The census of 1727 did not show a significant difference in the overall number of enslaved Africans reported in the previous census. It reported 1561 enslaved Africans.⁷⁴ However, this census was

⁷¹ Ira Berlin notes that the complete cessation of African importations at 1731 hindered Louisiana's evolution into a slave society until the beginning of the Spanish era. This was after the proposed time of the Ursuline's missionary refocusing. Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 88-96.; Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 185-186.

⁷² Charles R. Maduell, Jr., trans., *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699-1732* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc, 1972), 54.

⁷³ Maduell, Jr., 68-76.

⁷⁴ Maduell, Jr., 82.

taken across a smaller area of land than the 1726 census of all of Louisiana. The 1727 census did not include Mobile, Biloxi, Illinois, nor several other small habitations along the Mississippi River as the previous census had. This indicates that overall, the enslaved population of the areas surveyed experienced significant growth as this smaller survey area yielded a higher number than the entire colony had only a year before. The 1727 census also recorded that there were 108 enslaved Africans within New Orleans and 147 in the immediately surrounding plantation belt.⁷⁵ Census records for later years show that this growth continued until 1731-1732. The number of enslaved Africans reported in the entire census for 1731-1732 came to 3,348 enslaved peoples living along the Mississippi River in Louisiana and 252 living in urban New Orleans.⁷⁶

Census records also indicate that at the same time as the growth in the numbers of the enslaved African population, the already low number of enslaved natives decreased in the New Orleans area from 75 in 1727 to 56 in 1731-1732.⁷⁷ This is consistent with the distance between the Natives and the French created by the uprising, and it demonstrates, even more, the breakdown of interaction between the French and the Natives.⁷⁸ Documents show that falling numbers of enslaved natives are consistent with the French mentality and attitude toward enslaving natives and their general ideas about the native populations. In a letter to the Abbe Raguet, governor Étienne Périer wrote, “My opinion is that it [the trafficking of enslaved natives] is contrary to the welfare of the country . . . when we have them they are of very little service to us or they return to their nations or to some other nearer.”⁷⁹ Perier’s sentiment toward

⁷⁵ Maduell, Jr., 82-103.

⁷⁶ Maduell, Jr., 113-141.

⁷⁷ Maduell, Jr., 82 & 113.

⁷⁸ Maduell, Jr., 68-76, 82-103, 113-141. In the census of 1726 there were a recorded twenty-eight native slaves in the New Orleans area. In 1727, there were eighteen, and in the census of 1732, there were only thirteen native slaves reported within New Orleans itself.

⁷⁹ Ministry of the Colonies, Series C. 13, General Correspondence of Louisiana, Vol XI, pp 7-8, translated in *Mississippi Provincial Archives, 1701-1729: French Dominion*, vol II, trans., Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1929).

the enslavement of native people was representative of French beliefs as their attempts to enslave native populations were unsuccessful. Not only were the French unable to keep enslaved natives from running back to their nearby villages, but they also feared that mixing the enslaved natives with the enslaved Africans would lead to slave uprisings.⁸⁰

The population of newly enslaved Africans generated a larger field of missionary possibilities for the Ursulines and their new laywomen's confraternity. The increasing number of enslaved individuals who lived in the developing urban landscape of New Orleans had the most opportunity to attend the free day classes that the Ursulines offered to enslaved women, free women of color, and French girls with low-income. This was due to the lesser restrictions that urban enslaved individuals had on their movement and labor practices in the French colonies.⁸¹ In the areas just outside of the city, where growth in the slave population was even more substantial, enslaved peoples were subject to the efforts of those nineteen members of the Congregation of the Children of Mary who were the wives and daughters of some of the city's largest slave owners.⁸²

These *confrèresses* played a significant role in the Ursulines' missionary process by expanding the reach of the Ursulines' involvement in the development of the New Orleans Afro-Catholic community.⁸³ They spread the Ursulines' catechism outside the convent when the Ursulines could not. Historians have studied the baptismal records of St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans and have found that the Congregation of the Children of Mary succeeded in their mission to educate and convert the colony's enslaved population to Catholicism. This was especially true among enslaved African women with whom the *confrèresses* would have had

⁸⁰ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 74-77.

⁸¹ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 92.

⁸² Clark, "By all the Conduct of their Lives," 779.

⁸³ The French term "*confrèresse*" refers to a member of a female lay confraternity.

more contact. According to Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould, of those enslaved persons baptized between 1731 and 1733, enslaved African males and females were baptized at roughly the same rate, even though there were only two enslaved adult females for every three enslaved males in the colony.⁸⁴

The *Code Noir* of 1724 was also important to the success of the Ursulines and the *confrèresses* among enslaved populations. This document, written by King Louis XV's colonial officials in France, ensured the proper treatment and discipline of the enslaved African populations in Louisiana. It covered all aspects of an enslaved person's life in the bondage of the French. Exceptionally clear are the expectations for a French owner's religious formation of their slaves. Article II of the code outlined the proper spiritual health of the enslaved:

All slaves who will be in our said province will be instructed in the Catholic Religion, Apostolic and Roman, and baptized. We order those inhabitants who will buy newly arriving slaves, to have them educated and baptized at a suitable time or be penalized by an arbitrary fine.⁸⁵

The *Code Noir*, combined with the consistent growth in the slave population, secured for the Ursulines and the Children of Mary a group of souls that were necessary to convert. Thus, the French monarchy supported their work, even though it was feminine work, toward the conversion of the enslaved population.

The Ursuline mission soon witnessed the results of their reconfiguration of missionary focus. Baptismal records show that in the years after the Natchez Massacre the rate of enslaved baptisms increased significantly – especially among the female enslaved population – the population that would have interacted the most with the Ursulines in their day schools and the

⁸⁴ Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism in New Orleans," 422.

⁸⁵ "Edit Du Roi, Touchant l'Etat et la Discipline des Esclaves Nègres de la Louisiane." in *Recueil d'Edits, Declarations et Arrests de sa Majeste; Concernant l'Administration de la Justice et la Police des Colonies Françaises de l'Amerique, et les Engagés* (Paris: Libraries Associez), 137, retrieved Oct. 28, 2018 from Gallica, <http://visualiseur.bnf.fr/CadresFenetre?O=NUMM-84479&M=pagination>. Original French translated by author.

laywomen's confraternity. This trend grew even though the number of enslaved African brought through the French ports slowed almost to a halt around this time.⁸⁶ Thomas Ingersoll's analysis of baptismal records from St. Louis Cathedral for the years 1744 -1750 confirms the success of the Ursulines' missionary refocusing. The difference between the rates of Native American baptisms and enslaved and free African baptisms is significant. The records show that of the 1036 non-European baptisms performed during these years, 96.3% were performed on enslaved people of African descent. The baptisms of free people of African descent made up 2.5%, and only 1.2% of the baptism performed were of people of Native American descent.⁸⁷

The Ursulines' diversion from their plans of conversion of native peoples to move toward their new focus of catechizing the growing population of enslaved Africans, reveals the convent's active participation with the community. Their acceptance of the Children of Mary's request for religious guidance and supervision also indicates their attempt to reach further into the New Orleans community. The Ursulines, through their adaptation to the changing outside the community and their support of the laywomen's confraternity, transcended the restrictions that their cloister put upon their missionary goals as they gained a conduit to take their work and teachings into the public realm and their new target group.

Social Services and Authority within the Community

In seventeenth-century France, the institutional changes and social concerns of the Catholic Reformation altered work and life for women religious. The emergence of Protestantism and the perceived need to bring lost Huguenots back to Catholicism created an opening for female monasticism and religious orders – especially those that offered a solution to

⁸⁶ Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 93.

⁸⁷ Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon*, 140.

a societal problem.⁸⁸ Women’s religious groups that emerged during this chaotic moment in history often used a charitable apostolate to advance their feminine religious expression that was previously relegated to enclosed contemplation. As a result of the loosening of societal and patriarchal oversight of women’s orders, several such groups emerged with an active, public service driving their religious activity.

The New Orleans Ursulines – whose order gained authority and legitimacy through their teaching apostolate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – further expressed their religious agency in their decisions to take on the charitable works associated with multiple other female religious orders. Despite their cloistered position and lack of funds, in less than a decade after their arrival to the colony, the Ursulines were at work educating boarding students, providing free day classes for those students who could not afford boarding fees, caring for patients at the colony’s hospital, housing orphans, and occasionally providing a place of containment for the colony’s “women of bad conduct.” Marie Hachard describes this situation in a letter to her father just a year after the Ursulines’ arrival in the city:

All our community is so happy that it cannot be expressed. We are going to follow, all at the same time, the functions of four different communities, that of the Ursulines, our first and principal order, that of the *hospitalieres*, that of the St. Josephs, and that of the Refuge. We will try to fulfill each as faithfully as will be possible.⁸⁹

Hachard’s hesitation toward the new workload the Ursulines’ undertook indicates the stress the Ursulines’ were willing to preserve and eventually advance their position in the colony.

⁸⁸ Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 43.

⁸⁹ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, January 1, 1728, *VEAC*, 75. The hospitalieres were an order of religious women, though usually not solemnly vowed, that tended to the care of hospitals. The Sisters of St. Joseph was a French originated order that cared for orphans, and the “Refuge” refers to a category of religious orders that housed delinquent women. Emily Clark, *VEAC*, 75, n 34.

As Clark notes, the Ursulines were at a considerable economic disadvantage soon after their arrival in Louisiana. Clark argues that the Ursulines took on all the work necessary to serve all the city's social needs to remedy the problem of insufficient funds allotted the Ursulines by the Company of the Indies.⁹⁰ In addition to the low budget allotted the Ursulines, they also faced a ban on any new colonial admits to the convent that would have provided income via dowry. Unfortunately, the Ursulines' new duties did not garner as much income for the convent as the Ursulines needed. However, the amount of influence and increased presence in the community that their social services created expanded the Ursulines' spiritual identities and authority among the laity. The Ursulines used the fluidity and needs for institutional structure of the Louisiana frontier to shed societal expectations of submissive cloistered stagnancy under the banner of religious charity.

The Ursulines quickly established a monopoly on social services in the colony that they, like the Santa Clara's of Peru, used to develop a "spiritual economy" with the laity. The Ursulines provided much needed social services and charitable work, and in return, the lay community supported the order by providing income and recipients for the Ursulines' spiritual care.⁹¹ The Ursulines used this relationship to project themselves into society rather than remain truly cloistered. They expanded their apostolic reach in the community beyond their educational activities and presented programs and services that touched every group of women no matter their age, economic class, or race.

⁹⁰ Clark, "Patrimony without Pater," 95.

⁹¹ See Kathryn Burns' concept of "spiritual economy" in *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999). For a similar application of Burns' concept see, Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

As the Ursulines were founded as a teaching order, education was their primary means to advance their missionary zeal and their reciprocal relationship with the community. The Company of the Indies was well aware of the Ursulines' apostolate when they contracted them to take charge of the hospital in 1726. The company showed their understanding of this as they allowed for the order's continuation of educational work within their contract. However, the Company did not allow the Ursulines full reign to exercise their schooling. The Company's directors included an article in the sisters' contract that allowed the Ursulines to accept boarding students, but they also stipulated that the Ursulines could only contract borders if their education did not interfere with their primary duty to the community – the upkeep of the royal hospital. Article XXIV of the contract reads, “When the religious can do so conveniently, they may take, if they judge fit, girl boarding students . . . but no religious who is charged with the care of the ill will be distracted from it or assigned to the education of boarding students.”⁹²

Entrusting the Ursulines with the care of the hospital shows the amount of authority and responsibility the colonial government gave the Ursulines. However, when the wishes of the Company of the Indies did not coincide with the Ursulines' religious identity, they protected their interests over the Company's needs. As such, the Ursulines did not overtly reject the idea of being in charge of the colony's hospital. In fact, Marie Hachard showed the sisters' enthusiasm to take up residence in their new convent and meet their obligation at the hospital in one of her letters. She writes, “We desire nothing as much as to see ourselves in this house, finally occupied also at the hospital to serve the sick.”⁹³ However, they placed their identity as a teaching order

⁹² “*Traité Fait avec Religieuses Ursulines Par la Compagnie des Indies,*” *HCL*, vol. 3, 83. Original French translated by author.

⁹³ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, January 1, 1728, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 74.

before their newly appointed position while they awaited the construction of their convent near the hospital.

Given that nursing was not in the Ursulines' constitution and the hospital endeavor ultimately hurt the Ursulines financially, they did not devote much of their attention to their contractual obligations.⁹⁴ The Ursuline's obituary letters reveal how little they actually participated in running the hospital. Of the six existent obituary letters for the founding group of Ursulines, which reveal the duties of the nuns while they were active in New Orleans, none of them mention the sisters' work at the hospital. However, all of the letters mention— save that of the superior, Marie Tranchepain, who was in charge of administration and supervision of the other sisters—describe the sisters' work as educators.

From the first moments of their arrival to the colony, the inhabitants entreated the Ursulines to take in boarding students. Marie Hachard described the city's excitement for their educational services in one of her letters:

There are already more than thirty boarders from here and Belize and the surrounding area who insisted on being received. The parents are carried away with joy to see us, saying that they no longer worry that they will return to France since they have here what they need to educate their daughters.⁹⁵

As Hachard's letter demonstrated, the Ursuline's educational mission remained central to their work in the New Orleans community. By the end of their first year in the colony, the Ursulines housed nine boarding students in addition to the day students that came to their classes.⁹⁶

While the Ursulines' educational works garnered them support and admiration throughout the New Orleans community, the colony's officials admired most the Ursulines' decision to take on the care of the colony's orphaned girls. The adverse frontier conditions in New Orleans

⁹⁴ Clark, "Patrimony without Pater," 100-101.

⁹⁵ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, October 27, 1727, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 71.

⁹⁶ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, January 1, 1728, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 73.

increased European colonists' risk of death during their first few years in Louisiana. The Louisiana climate was well suited for the spread of disease, and poor resources led to food shortages that impacted the health of the colonists. This, along with consistent conflict between the French and the Native Americans led to numerous French deaths. The Natchez Massacre alone resulted in the death of over two hundred French colonists. The conditions in Louisiana created a fluctuating population of orphans that the colonial officials charged to the Ursulines. By taking up the care of orphaned girls, along with their educational work, the Ursulines cemented their presence and authority within the community for multiple generations. Showcasing the colony's appreciation of the Ursulines' work with orphaned girls, the colony's then governor, Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville, wrote to his superior: "We owe them the justice to say that they are very industrious and not at all selfish. They are very busy with these orphan girls whom they are bringing up well."⁹⁷ By 1733, the Ursulines had made such an impact in the community that they received praise and support from the new governor despite the continuous strain their funding placed on the colony's resources.

In an earlier 1732 letter to his superior in France, Étienne Périer, the governor of Louisiana from 1727 -1732 showed his appreciation of the Ursulines' work with the colony's orphaned girls and negotiated with the crown to send more sisters to tend to the colony's needs:

If their number is increased to twelve we think that the allowance for each will be sufficient at five hundred livres, because they will take boarding pupils . . . Sieur Salmon [the Commissioner of the Marine] could not avoid having the allowance of one hundred and fifty livres for each of the orphan girls. . . . He hopes that your lordship will approve his conduct in this respect and that you will give funds for that purpose in the future.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Bienville and Salmon to Maurepas, May 12, 1733, New Orleans, *MPAFD*, vol III, 606.

⁹⁸ Périer and Salmon to Maurepas, March 29, 1732, New Orleans, *MPAFD*, vol IV, 118.

Although the Company was, at that time, not in the position to take on any more debt to bring in more Ursulines, Périer's request shows that colony still felt the need to increase their number. The Company's willingness to bring in more women religious who in Quebec were viewed with suspicion and reluctantly accepted into the colonies indicates the level of esteem that the Ursulines garnered by enacting their religious agency and engaging with the community.⁹⁹

The Ursulines were also involved in the colony's regulation of behavior and sexuality of women. As Spear argues, during the first years of the colony's existence, colonial officials attempted to regulate the sexual ratio and practices of the colony to create a calm and stable agricultural economy out of the population of Canadian fur traders.¹⁰⁰ They believed that French women were the solution to the colony's moral depravity and financial woes. French wives would require the soldiers and *coureurs du bois* to settle down and take care of their new civilized French Catholic family rather than run into the forests with native women.¹⁰¹ The Ursulines' educational opportunities served to promote and train the good French Catholic wives that Périer and other officials envisioned for the society. Officials also asked the Ursulines to look after those French women who did not behave correctly.

Although Périer wished the Ursulines to take this responsibility, they did not obey blindly without consideration of their goals and capabilities. Hachard describes the situation in one of her letters: "The intention of the Commandant and of the principal inhabitants of the city is that we should also take the girls and the women of bad conduct. This is not yet determined on our side, but they let us hear that it would be a great good for the colony."¹⁰² However, it does not

⁹⁹ Leslie Choquette, "'Ces Amazones du Grand Dieu': Women and Mission in Seventeenth-Century Canada," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1992), 628.

¹⁰⁰ Leslie Choquette, "'Ces Amazones du Grand Dieu': Women and Mission in Seventeenth-Century Canada," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1992), 628.

¹⁰¹ Spear, *Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, 46-47.

¹⁰² Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, January 1, 1728, New Orleans, VEAC, 74.

appear that the Ursulines played much of a role in this institution as Périer only housed one such women in their temporary convent for a short time in 1728.¹⁰³ While Périer's 1728 report concerning the construction of the Ursulines' convent connected to the hospital mentioned a "house of correction built near the hospital adjoining the convent" later documents from 1731 insist that such a house is no longer needed.¹⁰⁴

As previously detailed, the Ursulines received another opportunity to advance their religious influence through their involvement with the Laywomen's Confraternity of the Children of Mary. On May 27, 1730, several laywomen of New Orleans asked the Ursuline sisters to guide them in their expression of religious devotion through adoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁰⁵ As previously argued, the Children of Mary served a vital role in the continuation of the Ursulines' missionary endeavors outside of the convent. Historians Emily Clark and Virginia Meacham Gould analyze the efforts of the Ursulines and the Children of Mary's catechism and argue that they attributed the first generation of the colony's Afro-Catholic community to the unique feminine mission of these two groups of women. They argue that because the act of religious initiation into Catholicism by these women was similar to the religious initiative and traditions of West African women, the first generation of Afro-Catholic female converts felt a sense of familiarity in the Ursulines' mission.¹⁰⁶ The first generation of enslaved African women taught by the Ursulines and the Children of Mary then reproduced their new religious beliefs in their families throughout several generations of Catholics. This trend eventually resulted in the most robust Afro-Catholic community in the territory, and later, the United States.

¹⁰³ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, April 24, 1728, New Orleans, *VEAC*, 85, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Périer and De la Chaise to the Directors of the Company of the Indies," August 18, 1728, New Orleans, *MPAFD*, vol. II, 602.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, "By All the Conduct of Their Lives," 769.

¹⁰⁶ Clark and Gould, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism," 416-422.

By securing money and authority from their social services, and not merely relying on the colonial government to support them, the Ursulines gained the ability to act independently and further follow their ambitions to advance their spiritual goals and identity throughout the colony. By taking on the social services that several different religious orders usually took care of individually, the Ursulines were just as involved with the outside matters of the colony from within their private sphere of the cloister as the fathers who were allotted interaction with the public world. Through their interactions with their students, sick soldiers in the hospital, the orphans they housed, and the occasional “women of bad conduct,” the Ursulines developed numerous avenues to spread their missionary message outside of their convent walls.

Conclusion

When Marie Hachard wrote to her father for the last time before taking her vows, she indicated her wish to be recognized for the endeavors that her and her sisters made to advance their religious zeal in the French colonies:

Your city of Rouen, does it take pride at all, my dear Father, in the honor that it was Monsieur de LaSalle and his company, almost all of them natives of the city, who made the first discovery of Mississippi? . . . in the priests and Ursuline nuns of the same city who work at all that is possible at the instruction and the salvation of the souls of these poor savages?¹⁰⁷

Hachard and her fellow women religious, like all who willingly traveled to Louisiana in its colonial period, did not do so without a plan for personal advancement in some fashion. The New Orleans Ursulines followed the success of previous women religious and many clergymen before them and ventured across the ocean to participate in missionary activity that garnered respect and acclaim.

¹⁰⁷ Marie Hachard to Jacques Hachard, April 24, 1728, *VEAC*, 89.

Despite the limitations of the patriarchal structure of the early modern Church, the Ursulines of New Orleans worked within the confines of their status in society to progress their desire to engage in the male-dominated field of missionary work. Through my analysis of various French colonial correspondence, this thesis has shown that the Ursulines, in their search for spiritual advancement and a renewed commitment to the vows that afforded them a more independent life than most laywomen, selectively defied expectations of feminine submission and the self-denial of women religious. Their decisions to leave their homes for the appeal of the New World missionary endeavor, redefine their New Orleans mission to adapt to the happenings of the community outside of their convent, and their commitment to various social services exposed their desire to achieve the same level of religious achievement of those famous missionaries before them. This group of women seized an opportunity for improvement just like their fellow male colonists, and in doing so, they expanded the categories of acceptable work for women religious.

The Ursulines of New Orleans engaged more with the community than historians like O'Neill and Eccles acknowledge. The New Orleans Ursulines were dynamic agents who reacted to the world outside of their convent walls and whose decisions had a meaningful impact on the lay community. The ways that the Ursulines assured their participation in the French colonies help uncover a larger group of ambitious women who enacted their will and influenced change in their environments. Their contributions to the history of New Orleans are more than the creation of a catechism school for girls, and additional research should be committed to women religious to assess the depth of their influence.

Future research should be more attentive to the individual agency shown by the women religious and the ways that their ambitions, rather than their blind obedience to the divine

impacted their decisions. Not only should historians explore the defiant and independent action of women religious and their effects on their communities, but there is also a need to look further into the ways that women religious rationalized their decisions to behave so. Continued analysis of the writings of women religious of the Americas will provide much-needed literature on feminine Catholic religious expression in the colonial context. Research such as this begins to address the fact that women—even those women who vowed to be the most submissive and ascetic also crossed the Atlantic in their own personal search for advancement. Not exploring this idea further negates the personal agency that women such as the New Orleans Ursulines clearly employed.

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