

University of North Carolina at Asheville

The Appalling Appeal of the Octoroon:  
The Shifting Status of Mixed Race Prostitutes in Early Twentieth Century New Orleans

A Senior Thesis Submitted to  
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by  
Mesha Maren-Hogan

In January of 1917 the working women of Storyville, New Orleans, one of the “wildest and woolliest” red-light districts in the United States, were preparing for Carnival season.<sup>1</sup> For some of the district’s most affluent residents, mixed-race brothel owners such as Lulu White, possessor of “the largest collection of diamonds, pearls and other gems” in the South, and “the Countess” Willie V. Piazza, owner of a “two foot ivory, gold and diamond” cigarette holder used exclusively to smoke Russian cigarettes, Carnival season was a time of great business opportunities.<sup>2</sup> These madams were busy purchasing cases of champagne and beer, lining up musicians to entertain and ordering new evening gowns and silk stockings.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, reformers and city officials were hard at work on quite a different project. Led by Commissioner of Public Safety Harold Newman, Progressive reformers set out to clean up the image of New Orleans. One of their main pieces of legislation, City Ordinance 4118, cut right into the heart of the business that allowed White and Piazza to procure their diamonds and gold, namely the selling of the sexual favors of mixed-race “octoroon” women to white men. Ordinance 4118, set to go into effect in March of 1917, would have racially segregated the legal vice district of Storyville, forcing all non-white prostitutes to abandon their richly adorned bordellos and move into the primarily African-American area uptown of Canal Street.<sup>4</sup> Ordinance 4118 shook the core of the social traditions and legislation that had brought octoroon women like White and Piazza to such heights of fame and fortune.

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<sup>1</sup> Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds. *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1955), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Blue Book, THNOC acc. no. 1969.19.6, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection; Al Rose, *Storyville New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1974), 52-3; Saxon, Lyle. *Gumbo Ya Ya* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *State v. Lulu White*, Docket no. 15896, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans; Saxon, Lyle, *Gumbo Ya Ya*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ordinance 4118 C.C.S., Feb. 7, 1917, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library; Saxon, Lyle. *Gumbo Ya Ya*, 11; Barker, Danny, *Buddy Bolden and the Last Days of Storyville* (New York: Cassell, 1998), 99.

The legal status of the Storyville district and the historical and cultural connotations attached to the concept of the octoroon prostitute aided light-skinned women of color in turn-of-the-century New Orleans in gaining incredible amounts of wealth and power. Century-old traditions of moral leniency regarding prostitution and sexual relationships across the color line and the French and Spanish tripartite racial categorization system helped these women achieve their status.<sup>5</sup> However, while octoroon women such as Lulu White and Willie Piazza benefitted from these laws and traditions, the early twentieth century saw an erosion of these customs. The distinctive power and the precariousness of the octoroon role was exemplified in the language used in the Blue Book advertising directories of Storyville and in the Supreme Court Case of *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza*. The racial terminology of the Blue Books reflected the trend towards segregation in the categorization of the Storyville women. The case of *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza*, while it resulted in a victory for Piazza and other women of color, also demonstrated the changing views on racial classification. The language used in the case denied the women the label of “octoroon,” lumping them all under the category of “negresses.” The court clearly ruled in favor of the women due to the amount of wealth they had accumulated and the financial investments that they and other New Orleanians had tied up in businesses of prostitution across the color line. However, the court’s denial of the label “octoroon” and their insistence on the use of the word “negress” was a harbinger of the growing trend towards a more normative social morality and bifurcated black-white racial divisions.<sup>6</sup>

There have been quite a variety of academic works published over the past forty years regarding both Storyville specifically and Progressive Era Southern sex and race relations more

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<sup>5</sup> Ordinance 3267 O.S., Mar. 10, 1857, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library; Civil Code of 1808, page 24, article 8, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>6</sup> *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

broadly. In his book *The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900-1917* David W. Southern explores twentieth century social morality trends and the ways in which they led to the oppression of African Americans. His text investigates the racial aspects of Progressive Era reform in general, tracking the institutionalization of white supremacy through Progressive legislation.

Virginia Dominguez's 1986 *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* tracks racial legislation over a longer period of time and in a more specific region. Dominguez maps out both the legal and social geography of racial classification throughout Louisiana's history from the early years of the French settlements to the twentieth century.

The major historical texts dealing directly with Storyville and sex across the color line in New Orleans are all relatively recent publications. The first attempt at a general history of the red light district was historian Al Rose's 1974 text *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic, Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red-Light District*. This monograph gives a broad history of prostitution in New Orleans in general and the Storyville district specifically. Nearly half of the book is made up of primary documents such as photographs and newspaper clippings along with secondary analyses of the period between 1897 and 1917. The next significant text to be written specifically on the subject of Storyville was not published for another thirty years. Alecia P. Long's *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*, published in 2005 by the Louisiana State University Press, investigates the history of Storyville with a specific eye for how the women, both white and non-white, working in the district simultaneously sought out and mocked the traditional markers of social respectability.

Emily Epstein Landau explores similar themes in her 2005 Ph.D. dissertation for Yale University, "Spectacular Wickedness: New Orleans, Prostitution, and the Politics of Sex, 1897-1917." Landau investigates the legal landscape of sex for cash in New Orleans, the efforts to

promote it and the attempts to stamp it out and how those trends fluctuated depending on the political climate.

The unique contribution this thesis makes to the study of Storyville is its focus on the simultaneous power and precariousness of the octoroon role between 1897 and 1917 as exhibited by the shifting racial categorization in the Blue Books and the case of *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza*, along with the various Records Court cases that led up to the Supreme Court case. While the previously published literature does explore the racial and gender dynamics surrounding prostitution in New Orleans in general and Storyville specifically, none of these scholars intimately explores the relationship between the loss of the octoroon role and the victory in the case of *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* as exhibited in the changing racial language of the court cases and advertisements.

New Orleans was not the only American city to deal with the “plague of prostitution” by creating a legal but segregated vice district. San Francisco, New York, and Chicago each had their own special neighborhoods of sin.<sup>7</sup> However, New Orleans’ Storyville came out of a very different historical tradition and while the legality of the district did help women improve their financial positions, the ordinance that created the district was actually the most heavy-handed and repressive vice legislation New Orleans had ever passed. The history of prostitution in New Orleans reaches as far back as the earliest European settlers. A good number of the original inhabitants of the 1712 D’Iberville and Bienville settlement that would become New Orleans were female “deportees from the prisons and brothels of Paris.”<sup>8</sup> Prostitution flourished unchecked throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as women sought to profit from the desires of frontiersman and

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<sup>7</sup> Neil Larry Shumsky, “Tacit Acceptance: Respectable Americans and Segregated Prostitution, 1870-1910” *Journal of Social History* 19. 4 (1986): 672, [http:// 0-web.ebscohost.com./](http://0-web.ebscohost.com/)(accessed January 24, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Asbury, *The French Quarter: A History of the New Orleans Underworld* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1936), 4.

riverboat traders under the lenient gaze of corrupt governors.<sup>9</sup> The first concerted attempt to regulate and control prostitution in New Orleans came in the form of the Lorette Ordinance of 1857. However, this ordinance did nothing more than place taxes on bordellos and prohibit prostitutes from occupying the lower levels of buildings.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the ordinance lost its teeth less than two years later when an appellate court deemed it unconstitutional.<sup>11</sup> New Orleanian reformers struck again in 1890 with Ordinance 4434 C.S., which geographically limited prostitution to an area much smaller than that stipulated by the Lorette Ordinance.<sup>12</sup> Under Ord. 4434 prostitution was officially limited and unofficially tolerated and working women were subject to the whims of police and city officials. City officials severely taxed brothel owners and police officers often arrested working girls and deemed them “lewd and abandoned” for simply walking in an area outside of the blocks identified in the ordinance.<sup>13</sup>

Though Ord. 4434 was stricter in confining prostitutes than any previous ordinance, it was not enough to satisfy many self proclaimed upright citizens of New Orleans. The editors of *The Mascot* lampooned city officials’ inability to control the “lewd” women and the unfavorable public image that came from the honky-tonks and beer joints of Basin Street.<sup>14</sup> In 1896 Progressive reformer Sidney Storyville was elected to City Council and joined the Committee on Public Order. Determined to clean up the reputation of his city, councilman Storyville proposed a plan for a

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<sup>9</sup> Emily Epstein Landau, “Spectacular Wickedness: New Orleans, Prostitution, and the Politics of Sex, 1897-1917” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2005), 62.

<sup>10</sup> Ordinance 3267 O.S., Mar. 10, 1857, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>11</sup> Al Rose, *Storyville New Orleans*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ord. 4434 C.S., April 21, 1890, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>13</sup> Bertillon Card, New Orleans Police Department in Landau, Emily Epstein, *Hidden from History: Unknown New Orleanians*, <http://nutrias.org/exhibits/hidden/hiddenfromhistory.htm> (accessed January 12, 2012); Licenses to operate brothels for Eliza Murray, 67 Dryades Street and Mary Brooks, 1857 in Al Rose, *Storyville New Orleans*, 3 and 9.

<sup>14</sup> *The Mascot*, Vol. 13, No. 406, Nov. 23, 1889; *The Mascot*, No. 557, Oct. 22, 1892; *The Mascot*, No. 356, December 8, 1888; *The Mascot*, No. 538, June 11, 1892.

smaller, more tightly controlled vice district on January 4, 1897. Storyville's plan for placing the prostitutes and their dens of iniquity "where the least harm [could] result," followed an international trend of attempted isolation of vice and disease.<sup>15</sup>

While many nineteenth century reformers called for stricter control over prostitution, very few actually called for eliminating vice districts entirely. Segregation was the widely preferred method of control. Nineteenth century concepts of male sexuality led many to believe that prostitution was a necessary evil. Medical professionals explained that "if prostitution were abolished, crimes of the most heinous and revolting character would be of incessant occurrence, and no virtuous woman would be secure from the assaults of the libertine."<sup>16</sup> In the opinion of most American reformers, a segregated, controlled district for prostitution was necessary to maintain social order. The Storyville Ordinance was an attempt at creating just such order and control.

The Storyville Ordinance, legal from 1897 to 1917, occurred directly between the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 and the Eighteenth Amendment of 1919. Viewed in light of these two monumental legal proceedings, the ordinance can be seen as a stepping stone in the Progressive push towards a more racially segregated and morally upright America. Though the district was racially heterogeneous, it was itself separated from the rest of the city and could therefore be seen as part of a trend towards segregation as a solution for "social ills." Additionally, the choice of the location of Storyville demonstrated a desire for racial segregation. The area into which prostitutes were to be confined under The Storyville Ordinance was by all accounts a primarily African

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<sup>15</sup> Alecia P Long, *The Great Southern Babylon : Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 121.

<sup>16</sup> S.D. Gross, *Syphilis in its Relation to the National Health* (Philadelphia, 1874): 38 quoted in Neil Larry Shumsky, "Tacit Acceptance," 673.

American neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> By choosing to place the segregated vice district within a neighborhood of color, the city officials were also electing to segregate the people of color already inhabiting the chosen area. In this way the original Storyville Ordinance can be seen as a precursor not only to the Storyville segregation ordinance of 1917 but also to the Baltimore, Louisville and Atlanta residential racial segregation ordinances of 1910 and 1911.<sup>18</sup> In attempting to make drinking, gambling and prostitution less accessible and to protect the good, white families of New Orleans, the Storyville Ordinance was also in line with the growing anti-vice movement.

New Orleans, while clearly unique in its particular social and cultural customs and backgrounds, generally followed the larger trend of Southern Progressivism. Much of the reformist legislation passed in New Orleans in the early twentieth century worked towards the general Progressive goals of eliminating greed and vice and implementing social harmony and justice, and the more particularly Southern Progressive tradition of institutionalizing white supremacy. New Orleans led the way in the white supremacist movement with the segregation of train cars in 1890, followed by South Carolina in 1898.<sup>19</sup> The movement towards a moral righteousness that precluded racial heterogeneity was not unique to New Orleans. However, the way in which New Orleanian reformers went about seeking the desired homogeneity, through the segregation of prostitution, was particularly distinctive to the city.

The Progressive ideals of New Orleanian reformers were well articulated in the words of commentator Phillip Werlein who argued that the city needed stronger, more aggressive reform in

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<sup>17</sup> *Adeline E. Stringer v. Louis Mathis* (1889), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 10293, digested in 41 *Louisiana Annual*: 985; *L'Hote v. City of New Orleans*, Civil District Court, Docket Number 54533, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>18</sup> Roger L. Rice, "Residential Segregation by Law, 1910-1917," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May, 1968): 181, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2204656> (accessed Jan. 10, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> David W. Southern, *The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900-1917* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2005), 45 and 88.



order to save its reputation. In a series of editorials published in February 1910 Werlein declared that it was “a shame and a disgrace and it is wrong [...] that negro dives like those of Emma Johnson, Willie Piazza, and Lulu White, whose infamy is linked abroad with the fair name of New Orleans, should be allowed to exist and to boldly stare respectable people in the face.” He went on to assert that “the open association of white men and negro women on Basin Street, which is now permitted by our authorities, should fill us with shame as it fills the visitor from the North with amazement. [This association] is calculated to prejudice the casual visitor against the sacred tenet of Southern people—racial purity.”<sup>20</sup> In his writings, Werlein did not call for the destruction of the entire vice district, but rather for the separation of the races. New Orleans was far from unique in having a booming red light district. Visitors were more than likely not scandalized by the existence of prostitution but rather by the type of prostitution, namely prostitution across the color line.<sup>21</sup> Werlein and other reformers’ concerns with the public image that visitors to New Orleans might form were no doubt exacerbated by the building of the new Terminal Station on Basin Street, facing the notorious bordellos of White, Johnson and Piazza. The location of the train station, built in 1908, guaranteed that many travelers’ first views of New Orleans were of the mixed race pleasure dens of Storyville.

While the district stipulated in the original Storyville ordinance was much smaller and more strictly regulated than the vice districts of the earlier New Orleanian prostitution ordinances, it did offer security and profit to any woman willing to engage in sexual acts for cash. Unlike the previous ordinances, the Storyville Ordinance did not stipulate that madams had to buy expensive licenses for their brothels.<sup>22</sup> This opened up new possibilities for entrepreneurial women like Lulu White and

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<sup>20</sup> Werlein editorials, *Item*, Feb. 2, 15, 1910.

<sup>21</sup> Shumsky, “Tacit Acceptance,” 670.

<sup>22</sup> Ord. 13032 C.S., Jan. 29, 1897, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

Willie Piazza. In addition, while the prostitutes were technically segregated, their district did not lie on the outskirts of town. Even before the construction of the Terminal Station on Basin Street, wealthy male patrons did not have to go very far from their normal stomping grounds in order to frequent the bordellos of Storyville.<sup>23</sup> The neighborhood the prostitutes were forced to reside in was directly adjacent to the retail thoroughfare of Canal Street and the lively French Quarter.

Entrepreneurial women such as White and Piazza also capitalized on the very un-whiteness of the neighborhood in which they were confined. Playing off nineteenth and early twentieth century ideas of the exotic allure of the “other” and antebellum traditions of quadroon and octoroon concubinage, brothel owners and prostitutes turned the “colored” aspect of the Storyville neighborhood to their advantage.<sup>24</sup>

The history of the sexualization of light skinned women of color by white men for pleasure and profit, while not unique to New Orleans, was a particularly strong tradition in the city. The city failed to institute anti-miscegenation legislation until 1808. Prior to that point, the French and Spanish governors had not legally disallowed biracial marriage or concubinage. Even after the passage of the 1808 Civil Code forbidding “the contracting of marriage between free persons and slaves [and] free white persons with free people of color,” conjugal and concubinal relationships across the color line were “not infrequent.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, sexual relationships between slave women and their white masters, known to have occurred surreptitiously throughout the South, were

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<sup>23</sup> *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

<sup>24</sup> See Blue Books Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection; *Lulu White v. City of New Orleans et al*, Civil District Court Parish of Orleans, Division E, Docket 5, Number 119511, filed Sept. 5, 1917, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>25</sup> Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 26.

openly celebrated in the “fancy girl” slave markets of New Orleans.<sup>26</sup> There “handsome quadroon girls, gaily dressed and adorned with ribbons and jewels, sat in show-windows to attract attention.” The white men who fancied these women of color would pay upwards of \$2,000 to own their own personal sexual play-toys.<sup>27</sup> These women represented not only their white master’s sexual prowess but also his extreme affluence. “Fancy girls” were bought and sold for prices that were up to three hundred percent higher than those paid for field slaves and they were considered to be useless in all ways aside from their sexual appeal. Common knowledge during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held that the lighter a slave’s skin color the less hardy and able to work they were. Therefore, the “fancy girl” represented the extreme luxury available to her master because she was bought at an inflated price and would be incapable of working outside of the bedroom.<sup>28</sup>

The choice of light skinned women of color as the sexual favorites of white aristocracy shed light on the ongoing dichotomous fascination and repulsion with miscegenation. The very existence of octoroons and quadroons attested to the existence of miscegenous relationships in previous generations. However, the most popular and costly “fancy girls” appeared completely white. The combination of the white skin and “dark” blood of the quadroon or octoroon allowed white men to play out sexual fantasies they were morally prohibited from performing with their white spouses. As historian Alecia P. Long explains, “the cultural power and appeal of the octoroon as an erotic type came partly from her ability to integrate strands of the nineteenth-century sexual stereotypes of women. Octoroons were supposedly refined and cultured [...] but their physiological make-up also promised something of the rapacious sexuality attributed to those with colored skin. Their sexuality

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 238.

<sup>27</sup> Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 328-330.

<sup>28</sup> Landau, “Spectacular Wickedness,” 41.

was constrained, but not overridden, by their whiteness.”<sup>29</sup> While Southern white women were viewed as chaste goddesses, nucleus of the aristocratic family, to be worshipped and protected at all costs, “negro” women were seen as wanton, sexually-depraved harlots.<sup>30</sup> In between the two fell the erotic octoroon, one who appeared white and virginal but who could be deflowered and degraded without any social repercussions.

One trope that was intimately tied to the quadroon or octoroon stereotype was the concept of the “tragic mulatta,” the idea that mixed race women were beautiful and cultivated beings who would always be unhappy because their white skin belied their dark blood, forever casting them into a liminal space where white men would desire but never respect them. The idea of the “tragic mulatta” was a concept that was picked up by nineteenth century abolitionists and used to depict the horrors of slavery to Northern and European audiences. The “tragic mulatta” was depicted in artist John Bell’s 1860 sculpture “The Octoroon,” where an apparently white, and naked, woman stands weeping with her hands wrapped in chains.<sup>31</sup> Another classic example can be found in Dion Boucicault’s 1859 drama, also called “The Octoroon,” where Zoe, who was one-eighth black, but appeared white, fell in love with her white suitor George Peyton just as she was about to be sold into sexual slavery by an evil slave trader. Zoe’s status as an “octoroon” kept the star-crossed lovers apart. Zoe described the classic image of the “tragic mulatta” when she said, “how very unhappy I am [...] I have the dark, fatal mark [...] the curse of Cain [...] those seven bright drops [of white blood] give me love like yours—hope like yours—but the one black drop gives me despair, for I am

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<sup>29</sup>Long, *Great Southern Babylon*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1905), 305; Nancy F. Cott, *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 299.

<sup>31</sup> John Bell, “The Octoroon,” 1860, <http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-02/fried/fried-3.shtml>, (accessed Jan 12, 2012).

an unclean thing— forbidden by the laws— I am an Octoroon.”<sup>32</sup> Zoe, who poisoned herself at the close of the play, typified the trope of the mixed race woman who, not being able to join the white race and in danger of being defiled, ended her life.

Savvy New Orleanian prostitutes such as Willie Piazza and Lulu White used these concepts of sexually attractive but forbidden octoroons and the city’s intense history of miscegenation and concubinage across the color line to develop fabulously successful businesses. In the literature they distributed about themselves, the infamous Blue Book directories, women like White and Piazza were able, through carefully crafted language, to pick and choose the various aspects of the octoroon legacy which they wished to present. They forefronted the worldly glamour and exotic sexuality while overturning the tragic powerlessness. However, even in their height of fame and fortune, the Storyville octoroons’ role, like that of her early nineteenth century enslaved sisters’, was precarious at best.

The infamous brothel owner Lulu White exemplified the feisty, self-made woman who knew how to take advantage of New Orleans’ social and moral milieu. Lulu was born into slavery in Selma, Alabama, probably sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s. She arrived in New Orleans in the 1880s and began to work in the sex trade. She was arrested numerous times for selling her own body and for “white slavery,” the pimping of white prostitutes. It is not clear whether Lulu always considered herself an octoroon, however, by the time of the Storyville ordinance White was promoting herself as an “octoroon beauty.” She had attracted the attention, and the money, of an oil man, a railroad baron and a department store magnate, all of whom aided her in opening her brothel, Mahogany Hall.<sup>33</sup> Once she was securely set up in the newly legalized District, White’s

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<sup>32</sup> Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Literature Press, republished in 1970), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Blue Book, THNOC acc. no. 56-15, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection; Al Rose, *Storyville New Orleans*, 40.

fortunes grew exponentially. One Blue Book explained that “her mansion possesses some of the most costly oil paintings in the Southern country. [...] And she has the most handsome and intelligent girls.” She outfitted her place with endless luxury, mahogany staircases, chandeliers, oriental rugs, and a bevy of octoroon girls, all of whom balanced on the line between propriety and exoticism.<sup>34</sup>

The descriptions of the residents of Mahogany Hall in the 1898 Blue Book demonstrated how the women of Storyville attempted to achieve and maintain the appearance of a balance between carnal exoticism and *savoir-faire*. The biographical paragraphs in the Blue Books used carefully-crafted language to describe the working girls as beautiful and worldly but also as born-and-bred Louisiana Creole girls who would quickly become a customer’s bosom friend. Because the Blue Books were publications created and distributed by parties within the vice district, the prostitutes seem to have had a fairly large amount of control over the photographs and texts that appeared within them. These women were acutely aware of the power of words, therefore the descriptions in these books may tell the reader more about how the working women hoped to be perceived for financial gain than how they actually appeared or lived their lives. Of one Clara Miller it was written that “she has been in the principal cities of Europe and the Continent and can certainly interest you as she has a host of others. When we add that the famous octoroon was born near Baton Rouge we trust you will call on her.” Alda Halender was described similarly. The Blue Book stated that “she has been in the large European cities and learned how to entertain. She is a native of this state.”<sup>35</sup> These women’s biographies expressed the very duplicity of their natures, the fact that they not only contained within them black and white blood but also both the allure of the

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<sup>34</sup> Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 19.6; Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 19.3

<sup>35</sup> Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 56-15.

foreign and the comforts of the familiar. While the reality of their visits to Europe may be dubious, the cunning wordcraft at work in these texts is undeniable.

An 1898 Blue Book photograph and caption advertising the Mademoiselle Rita Walker once again demonstrated the carefully crafted image of the octoroon.<sup>36</sup> Walker's photo and description evoked the wilder, more exotic side of the mixed race prostitute along with her high place in society and tremendous wealth. The photograph showed a scantily clad Walker laid out on a cheetah skin rug. The caption read "The Oriental Danseuse, who some years ago set the society folks of Chicago wild about her "Salome" dance. She was one of the first women in America to dance in her bare feet. Aside from her marvelous dancing, Mademoiselle has a \$5000 wardrobe which she uses for her dances."<sup>37</sup> Though the facts of Rita Walker's Blue Book entry may be doubtful, the text skillfully demonstrates the dichotomous identity of the twentieth century octoroon prostitute. She was "Oriental," danced in her bare feet like a savage and even danced the "Salome" dance, an interpretation of the erotic, incestuous dance that Salome supposedly performed before her father in order to convince him to kill John the Baptist.<sup>38</sup> All of these descriptions cast her as an "other," un-Christian, barbaric and possibly evil. However, she was also the type of woman who mingled with "the society folks of Chicago," and spent five thousand dollars on her scanty wardrobe. Walker demonstrated her ability as a wordsmith by playing off the two aspects of her role, the part that was strange, foreign and as Boucicalt's heroine Zoe explained "forbidden by laws," and the part that cast her as a "highly cultivated lady [with a] good education and lifelong study of music and literature."<sup>39</sup> It was the very duplicity and equivocalness of the octoroon identity that made it such a powerful

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<sup>36</sup> See Figure 1 on page 30.

<sup>37</sup> Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 19.11.

<sup>38</sup> Mark 6:21-29 (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>39</sup> Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, 17.; Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 56-15; Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 19.3

role for mixed race women. They were not as hemmed in by racist ideologies as their darker sisters, nor were they subject to the Victorian morality applied to white women. They could, at least for a time, slip back and forth between various roles and identities. And many made themselves quite rich and powerful doing just that, until the moral noose tightened during World War I.

The powerful octoroon role so well articulated in the Blue Books opened the door to financial and political power for New Orleanian women of color. Lulu White again demonstrated the influence attached to this role. One Blue Book from 1905 reported that she “wore diamonds on every finger” and it was said that “to see her at night [was] like witnessing the late electrical display on the Cascade at the late St. Louis Exhibition.”<sup>40</sup> Not only was White able to invest in jewels, she also claimed that she bought her brothel outright for \$40,000 and outfitted it with \$50,000 worth of furnishings.<sup>41</sup> In addition to wealth, Lulu White’s position as the proprietor of a house of octoroon beauties lent her powerful political clout. In 1900 White was entangled in a physical brawl with another octoroon prostitute Mamie Boisseau and when the police sought to arrest her they cordially met with her in her own brothel and then allowed her to ride to the station in her own carriage.<sup>42</sup> When she was arrested again in 1904 for firing shots at her white lover, Lulu White was quickly exonerated of all charges with the help of her lawyer Edward Whitaker who, one year later became Police Inspector in charge of an area that included all of Storyville.<sup>43</sup> Once more in 1909 she was arrested for prostituting a minor and while her conviction should have carried a penalty of three years in prison, there is no evidence that she ever went to jail. Tellingly, White’s lawyer in 1909 was

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<sup>40</sup> Blue Book THNOC acc. no. 19.6.

<sup>41</sup> *Lulu White v. City of New Orleans et al*, Civil District Court Parish of Orleans, Division E, Docket 5, Number 119511, filed Sept. 5, 1917, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>42</sup> *State v. Lulu White* (1900), Criminal District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 29663, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>43</sup> Russell Levy, “Of Bard and Bawds: New Orleans Sporting Life Before and During the Storyville Era, 1897-1917,” (Master’s Thesis, Tulane University, 1967), 120.



George Washington Flynn, her financial partner in her brothel Mahogany Hall.<sup>44</sup> White's financial success, based on her ability to turn historical traditions and fascinations with miscegenation into hard cash, clearly granted her power far beyond the grasp of most women of color in the twentieth century South.

The fact that White's life trajectory carried her from the position of slave to the grand madam of one of the richest houses of prostitution in New Orleans was intrinsically tied to the legality of prostitution in Storyville and to the exotic appeal of the octoroon. Without the sanctioning of prostitution White would not have had the security to establish a place like Mahogany Hall. And without Storyville's social mores, which favored sophisticated, worldly women of color, White would not have achieved the popularity and fame that gave her so much power. Without the specific legal and social rules of Storyville it would have been nearly impossible for a poor ex-slave to transform herself into a queen of the demimonde and powerful business owner. However, White's position was based on a system of legal ordinances and cultural customs that were quickly eroding during the early twentieth century.

A look at a court case from less than a year after Storyville's closure demonstrates just how quickly White's social position changed. White retained the property that had been Mahogany Hall after the official November 12, 1917 closing of Storyville. She apparently converted the brothel into a restaurant and boarding house. However, despite her protests to the contrary, undercover federal agents found that she was still overseeing prostitution within the hall. By November 29, 1918 she had been indicted for running a house "used for the purposes of lewdness, assignation, and

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<sup>44</sup>*State of Louisiana v. Lulu White*, Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana, Docket No. 15896, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Department of Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans; Landau, "Spectacular Wickedness," 173.

prostitution” and was sentenced to serve a year and a day in the federal penitentiary.<sup>45</sup> This time, White was not saved by her white business associates and though her sentence was eventually reduced, she spent many months in prison.<sup>46</sup> White’s speedy decline from diamond-decked hostess to common criminal demonstrates the instability of the role she and other octoroon Storyville inhabitants filled.

Willie V. Piazza is another example of a woman who was able to rise to unprecedented levels of power and wealth off the racialized desires of white men. Piazza was born to a woman of color and an Italian immigrant in Copiah County, Mississippi. She was apparently so light skinned that she could have passed for white. However, at least by the time of the Storyville ordinance, she was clearly promoting herself as an octoroon. Piazza worked as a prostitute in New Orleans and was successful enough to establish her own house even before the creation of Storyville.<sup>47</sup> She played the worldly, sophisticated octoroon role to the hilt, claiming to speak four languages and to have the best library in the District with titles including *1001 Nights*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton, and several works by Alphonse Daudet.<sup>48</sup> By 1907 Piazza had made enough money to purchase the house her brothel occupied for twelve thousand dollars and furnish it “in an elaborate and expensive manner, costing approximately twenty thousand dollars.”<sup>49</sup> She filled her house with “octoroon Creole” girls who turned the idea of the helpless “tragic mulatta” on its head. Not only were these women financially well off and independent, riding their personal carriages to the

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<sup>45</sup> *City of New Orleans v. Lulu White*, Docket no. 23,010, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Department of Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>46</sup> Landau, “Spectacular Wickedness,” 192.

<sup>47</sup> Blue Book, THNOC acc. no. 1969.19.6, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection; Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Al Rose, *Storyville New Orleans*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

racetracks and going to bars and dancehalls whenever they pleased, they were also skilled as professional musicians and songwriters.<sup>50</sup> These women mimicked the abhorrent tradition of the sexual exploitation of slave women, therefore their lives can be viewed as Emily Epstein Landau claims, as “an extreme example of the sexual and racial oppression that characterized the New South.” But these women also enjoyed unique power, wealth and social freedoms. While women of color working as domestics were making between thirty and ninety dollars per year, many of the women of Storyville earned between one and two thousand dollars annually.<sup>51</sup> These women were financially much freer and more powerful than most African American women of the time period, and socially they were given much more leeway than the white Victorian “angel in the house.”<sup>52</sup>

It is clear that Piazza, like Lulu White, was able to take full advantage of and profit handsomely from the legal and social rules that made Storyville so unique. However, just as White lost her powerful and lucrative position in November 1917, so too did Piazza. Piazza’s life after Storyville is not as well documented as White’s. What evidence exists seems to show that her quality of life did not decline quite as precipitously, but even her victory in the Supreme Court in 1917 illuminates her loss in the form of the court’s refusal to acknowledge her preferred racial category.<sup>53</sup>

Much of the precariousness of the octoroon status came from the fact that racial definitions were shifting drastically during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The octoroon title and the special not-white, not-black status that came with it was based upon the French and Spanish history of *gens de couleur libre*, free people of color, and the old tripartite racial classification system. In

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<sup>50</sup> *State v. Lulu White* (1900), Criminal District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 29663, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; Blue Book, THNOC acc. no. 19.3.

<sup>51</sup> Tera W. Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 52-53.

<sup>52</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: J.W. Parker and Son, 1854).

<sup>53</sup> Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 223; *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

French colonial Louisiana, the tradition of a white male freeing his black concubine and their offspring was not uncommon. Legally and socially these manumitted people of color formed a separate, third tier in the racial classification system, falling in between the free whites and enslaved blacks. Because of the relationships that led to their manumission, *gens de couleur libre* were nearly always persons of mixed European and African descent.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, over time, the tripartite system came to stand for not only the freedom or lack of freedom of people of color, but also their skin color and racial heritage. Out of this system came the terms and identities of octoroons, quadroons and creoles. The tripartite system continued long after French and Spanish rule had ended. The language of the Civil Code 1808 clearly expressed the existence of three divisions in its prohibition of marriage between free persons and slaves and free white persons with free people of color.<sup>55</sup> Again in 1825 and 1857 Civil Codes regarding marriage recognized three distinct racial categories.

With the end of slavery, the traditional system, relying as it did on the category of slave, was upset. With the disappearance of slavery and the introduction of suffrage rights and other civil rights legislation, the legal separation of races was temporarily put on hold. But when Reconstruction ended, Louisiana whites set about reinstituting miscegenation laws and these new laws spoke less and less of three separate categories, instead lumping all those with African ancestry into the categories of “negro or black.”<sup>56</sup> By 1894 interracial marriage was once again illegal in Louisiana and by 1908 concubinage “between a person of the Caucasian race and a person of the negro or black race” was deemed a felony.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note the specificity and racialization of the terminology used in the concubinage act. While in 1808 the categories used were freedom or lack

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<sup>54</sup>Virginia Dominguez, *White by Definition*, 25.

<sup>55</sup> Civil Code 1808, page 24, article 8, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>56</sup> Act 87, 1908, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>57</sup> Act 87, 1908, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

thereof and “white” or “people of color,” by 1908 there was only black and white, and the language used, “Caucasian” versus “negro or black,” was much more specific than “white” versus “color.”

It was this very specificity of language that a certain Octave Treadaway took issue with in 1910 when he was indicted for miscegenation with an octoroon woman, Josephine Lightell. In a case that eventually went to the Louisiana Supreme Court, Treadaway’s lawyer argued that Treadaway and Lightell’s relationship did not fall under the jurisdiction of the 1908 concubinage act because Lightell was not “a person of the negro or black race,” she was an octoroon. Treadaway and his lawyer were just as aware of the power of racial language and classification terminology as the authors of the Blue Books were. In *State v. Treadaway* it was argued that “there are no negroes who are not persons of color; but there are persons of color who are not negroes.”<sup>58</sup> The defense further argued that if the state wished to outlaw relationships between white men and octoroon women they would have used more comprehensive language or included a definition of the word negro. The prosecution retorted that they had not done so because it was useless and unnecessary to include a definition of “negro.” The prosecution relied on the type of racial coding that had resolved the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the “one drop” ideology. However, the Louisiana Supreme Court sided against them with a ruling that hearkened back to the tripartite system. They argued that an octoroon was not a negro.<sup>59</sup> But the state legislature was not interested in playing word games and less than a year later they passed an act that replicated the 1908 concubinage act, but with the phrase “person of the colored race” added.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *State v. Treadaway* (1910), Louisiana Supreme Court, Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana, Docket No. 18149, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Department of Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>59</sup> *State v. Treadaway* (1910), Louisiana Supreme Court, Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana, Docket No. 18149, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Department of Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>60</sup> Act 206, 1910, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

Through the *Treadaway* case one can clearly view the importance of language, the sometimes privileged but always tenuous position of the octoroon, and the trend towards a bifurcated racial system. A review of the racial vocabulary used in several cases involving Lulu White demonstrates the same trend. In the case of *State v. Lulu White* from 1900, White was referred to as an octoroon, but by the time of her arrest in 1909 she was termed a “negress,” and again in her 1917 suit against the City of New Orleans she was referred to as being “of the negro or black race.”<sup>61</sup>

An analysis of the racial terminology used in the Blue Books demonstrates how the movement away from the use of the term octoroon and the three part system was likewise mirrored in Storyville’s own advertisement literature. In the oldest archived Blue Book, dating from 1898, there were no racial divisions used in organizing the directory. While some of the women described themselves as octoroons in their biography paragraphs, they were not set aside in a separate section of the book. This format continued until around 1904 when a Blue Book entitled “Tenderloin 400” added three separate categories apart from the general listings. These categories were “French 69,” “Beer Houses,” and “Octoroons.” While the octoroon title was obviously a racial division, the “French 69” referred to women willing to perform oral sex, and the “Beer Houses” referred to establishments that sold beer. The “Tenderloin 400” divisions appear to have functioned as aids for the man who sought a specific sort of sexual experience and not necessarily as indicators of the race of the women working in various houses. However, by the following year, each name listed in the directory was followed by the designative letters W, C, or Oct. The names still appeared listed by address and not in racially separated sections, but each woman had been racially identified. In 1906 the category of W. J. (white Jewish) was added to the Blue Book. In 1907 the category of octoroon

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<sup>61</sup> *Lulu White v. City of New Orleans et al*, Civil District Court Parish of Orleans, Division E, Docket 5, Number 119511, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; *State v. Lulu White* (1900), Criminal District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 29663, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; Blue Book, THNOC acc. no. 19.3, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection; *City of New Orleans v. Lulu White*, Docket no. 23,010, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, University of New Orleans.

disappeared entirely and all the women previously listed as octoroon, including Lulu White and Willie Piazza, were designated as colored. By 1908 the directory was even further divided. Instead of being listed by address, the listings were separated into two distinct sections, whites in the front of the book and “coloreds” in the back. Three women, Lulu White, Willie Piazza and Bertha Golden partially regained their octoroon status in the 1908 book. While being listed in the colored section, each of the three had her name spelled out in all capital letters with the designation Oct. beside it. The other women who were listed as octoroons in 1906 were simply termed colored in 1908.<sup>62</sup> White, Piazza and Golden’s special categorization may have been the result of the fact that the 1908 edition was printed in an office in a building owned by Lulu White.<sup>63</sup> The fluctuation of language in the advertising pamphlets illuminated the unstable and ephemeral nature of the octoroon role. While light-skinned prostitutes of color had been able to use the undefinability of the status to their advantage in building a new neither-here-nor-there racial category, the instability of the position also led to its elimination. The transition of the Blue Book listings from racial heterogeneity to a bifurcated black white division, mimicked the larger trend towards segregation and moral reform in New Orleans throughout the early twentieth century.

City legislation and reformist literature also clearly demonstrated this trend. In 1908, the same year that legislators instituted an act forbidding interracial concubinage, they also passed the Gay-Shattuck Law. This law regulated liquor sale and consumption, barred women from all establishments that sold liquor, enforced racial separation in saloons and banned musical

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<sup>62</sup> *Blue Book*, THNOC, acc. no. 56-15, *Blue Book “The Lid,”* THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.1, *Blue Book “Sporting Guide of the Tenderloin District of New Orleans, La, Where Four Hundred Can Be Found,”* THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.3, *Blue Book “The Red Book— A Complete Directory of the Tenderloin,”* THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.5, *Blue Book*, THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.6, *Blue Book 1906*, THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.7, *Blue Book*, THNOC, acc. no. 1919.19.9, *Blue Book 10<sup>th</sup> Edition*, THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.10, *Blue Book*, THNOC, acc. no. 1969.19.11, *Blue Book “Tenderloin 400,”* THNOC, acc. no. 94-092-RL, Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>63</sup> Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 212.

instruments from all bars.<sup>64</sup> In early January 1909 the law went into effect and “police put the lid down in the Tenderloin district,” seeking above all else to enforce the segregation of drinking establishments.<sup>65</sup> The exceptions to this enforcement were the rococo brothels of Storyville where octoroon women and white men continued to consume liquor, listen to live bands and consort in mixed company. The reason for these exceptions is probably due to the special relationships brothel owners maintained with law enforcement.<sup>66</sup> While these wealthy women were able to flagrantly ignore the Gay-Shattuck Law, the legislation denoted a movement that would eventually put an end to their businesses.

Storyville prostitutes and madams would not, in the end, be able to avoid the growing nationwide trend favoring moral uprightness and the need to preserve the purity of white Christian males. The concern over the moral purity of white males gained momentum with the outbreak of World War I. Even before America’s entrance into the war, anxieties surrounding the need for moral uprightness in order to protect the hallowed family unit grew.<sup>67</sup> Prostitution in general threatened to corrupt the pure white man through venereal disease but prostitution across the color line threatened to corrupt his very whiteness. In popular culture, the mixed race woman was portrayed less and less as a beautiful and exotic eccentricity and more and more as an avenue to the downfall of the white man. This view was explicitly visible in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Birth of a*

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<sup>64</sup> Act No. 176 (1909), Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>65</sup> “Police Enforce the Closing Law,” *Daily Picayune*, Jan. 7, 1909; “Progress of the ‘Clean Up,’” *Daily Picayune*, Jan. 12, 1909.

<sup>66</sup> *City of New Orleans v. Lulu White*, Docket no. 23,010, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, University of New Orleans; *The Mascot*, No. 557, Oct. 22, 1892.

<sup>67</sup> Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering during the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).



*Nation* where a white male character, August Stoneman, was dominated and emasculated by his mixed race concubine Lydia.<sup>68</sup>

The public outcry over the toleration of interracial sexual liaisons in Storyville culminated in the winter of 1917 in the passage of an ordinance that enforced racial segregation in the red light district. The ordinance asserted that prostitutes of the “colored or black race” could not “occupy, inhabit live or sleep in any house, room or closet” outside a four block area uptown of Canal Street.<sup>69</sup> Apparently having learned their lesson from the *Treadaway* case, the legislators used the terms “colored or black race” instead of “negro,” but even those words would not be all encompassing enough to dishearten a number of savvy Storyville madams. In February of 1917 the women of color working in Storyville were notified by the police department that they had to vacate their premises by the end of the month. But these women were not ones to give up easily. Using the wordsmith skills they honed in the creation of the Blue Books, they inspected the language of the ordinance and the language surrounding their own racial identities in search of loopholes. On March 3, Willie Piazza filed suit against the City of New Orleans in the Records Court, claiming that the Storyville segregation ordinance was both unconstitutional and too vague in its wording. More than twenty other property owners, mostly women of color but also two white brothel owners, followed Piazza’s lead and filed suit as well.<sup>70</sup> The petitioners’ arguments against the ordinance centered in two areas. First, that the ordinance violated the Constitution of Louisiana and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the United States Constitution and secondly that the ordinance was too vague in its racial language.

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<sup>68</sup>*Birth of a Nation* (1915), DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith (New York: Kino International, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Ord. 4118, Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>70</sup> *Gertrude Hammel v. City of New Orleans* (1917), Civil District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 120444, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; *Louis Quillon v. City of New Orleans* (1917), Civil District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 120190, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

In an argument similar to the one used in the *Treadaway* case, Lulu White's suit claimed that "the petitioner is not of the negro, colored or black race; although petitioner admits that she held herself out for the purposes of her business only as an Octoroon. That, however, should the Court hold that petitioner is of the negro, colored or black race that the said Ordinance is null, void and of no effect as to petitioner for the reasons more fully hereinafter set forth." White's case went on to state that the ordinance "does not apply to petitioner, in that petitioner is not of the negro or colored race, [...] that her father and mother were both Spanish people of the Caucasian race; that her said parents were duly married in Havana, Cuba, where petitioner was born of the issue of said marriage of her said parents."<sup>71</sup> While White's story is intriguing, all known evidence points to her having been born into slavery in Selma, Alabama in the late 1850s.<sup>72</sup> Her testimony illuminated her finesse in storytelling and her acute knowledge of the slippery terrain of racial categorization. White knew that while her skin color would remain the same, the set of words used to describe her heritage could completely alter her social status. She was well aware that her fate hinged on language and she was prepared to defend herself. With similar linguistic finagling, brothel owner Bessie Christmas' petition stated "that your petitioner is reputed to be and believes that she is of the negro race, being of black complexion but not as black as some white persons, but that for the purpose of this suit, she admits that she is of the Negro Race." The petition then argued that the ordinance was:

unconstitutional and void for ambiguity. That it makes a distinction between the Caucasian or white race and the Black or Colored race. The opposite state from the Caucasian or white race, is the Negro or Black race. The expression "Colored race" has no definite legal meaning and its status has not been defined by law. The Ordinance is void because indefinite, in that it should define the term "colored," mulatto, quadroon, octoroon or mestizo. Further the ordinance is void because indefinite, in that it delegates to any person power to determine who is colored and who is not. Petitioner contends that she ought not

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<sup>71</sup>*Lulu White v. City of New Orleans et al*, Civil District Court Parish of Orleans, Division E, Docket 5, Number 119511, filed Sept. 5, 1917, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>72</sup> Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 208.

be evicted and damaged on the allegation of any person that she is colored, that in some cases, judgment of this Honorable court has been given, declaring certain alleged colored persons to be white [...] that personal appearance, in such a case, is not evidence, that Brahmin's are black though Caucasian.<sup>73</sup>

The type of judgment by appearance that Bessie Christmas spoke of was also key to the case of madam Mamie Christina who argued that the ordinance did not affect her because “although she had been reared from an infant by colored foster parents, she in fact was of Indian extraction.”<sup>74</sup> It is obvious from the linguistic challenges these women presented that they were attempting to wield the power inherent in their difficult-to-define racial position as octoroon women, the city's historical tripartite system and legal challenges such as *Treadaway*.

On March 13, Willie Piazza was found guilty of violating the Storyville segregation ordinance but she immediately appealed to the state supreme court. In the brief that her lawyer, Nathan H. Feitel, prepared, Piazza's racial designation changed from “a person of the colored race” to “a negress,” and all mention of the ambiguity of the racial language in the ordinance was dropped. Probably aware of the legislators' power to reword the ordinance, as was the case with *Treadaway*, and of the one-drop precedent set with *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Feitel focused instead on the economic damages his client would suffer if the ordinance were enforced. The brief stated that Piazza and the other Recorders Court petitioners were all property owning business people who had invested upwards of fifty thousand dollars into their properties. Additionally, it was mentioned that there were white business owners who also filed suit in the Recorders Court claiming they would lose the monthly rental incomes they made from prostitutes of color. Piazza's lawyer also focused on the fact that the ordinance disallowed prostitutes of color from occupying, inhabiting, living or sleeping in the white district and disallowed agents and owners from renting, leasing or hiring houses or rooms

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<sup>73</sup>*Bessie Christmas v. City of New Orleans*, Civil District Court Parish of Orleans, Division A, Docket 5, Number 121424, filed Sept. 5, 1917, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>74</sup>*City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

to such women. The ordinance did not prohibit colored prostitutes from working in the white district, Piazza's lawyer argued, it instead prohibited them from living there. Therefore, the ordinance was not an ordinance that regulated prostitution but rather one that regulated residential segregation. For this reason, Feitel argued, the Storyville segregation ordinance violated the Constitution of the State of Louisiana and Article XIV of the Constitution of the United States through its "unreasonable, unlawful and unnecessary abuse of the police power," because it did not fall within the powers of the city police to regulate residential segregation.<sup>75</sup>

Feitel's focus on the economic aspects of the case and the overstepping of police power mimicked arguments made in the case of *Buchanan v. Warley* which, not so coincidentally, was in the Spring of 1917 currently under review by the Supreme Court. While the Supreme Court's decision that residential segregation violated the Fourteenth Amendment did not come until November, 1917, some four months after the Louisiana Supreme Court's decision on Piazza's case, *Buchanan v. Warley* was argued in April, 1916 and does seem to have affected the Louisiana Supreme Court's decision. While Piazza's brief never explicitly mentioned *Buchanan v. Warley*, the focus on the limitations set on the freedom of the use of property and freedom of contract paralleled arguments used in the Supreme Court case. The city, in its defense of the ordinance, did mention *Buchanan v. Warley* along with *Plessy v. Ferguson* and several other segregation cases including *State v. Gurry*, *Hopkins v. Richmond*, and *Carey v. Atlanta*. The city argued that with these cases a precedent had been set displaying the necessity for segregation "in the interest of public decency, health, morals, good order, and welfare." They stated that proclivity towards segregation was abundantly visible in "the prevailing sentiment of the community, based upon racial dissimilarities and antipathies, shunning social amalgamation naturally, and revolting against the very closest of physical contacts." However,

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<sup>75</sup> *Willie V. Piazza v. City of New Orleans* (1917), Civil District Court of New Orleans, Docket Number 119538, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library; *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

even they had to admit that this “natural” revulsion “against the very closest of physical contacts” was not always shared by all white New Orleanians. They admitted to white male involvement in miscegeny when they stated “the real reason for the opposition and objection [to the ordinance] is the fear of the loss of trade of those debased white men on whose indulgence of their appetites in sexual intercourse with colored prostitutes the keepers of negro bawdy-houses hope to thrive and prosper.”<sup>76</sup>

Despite the city’s strong attempts to argue that segregation was a natural and moral trend throughout the South and their efforts to demonstrate that they had provided colored prostitutes with a separate but equal vice district, ultimately the court ruled in favor of Piazza. However, while Piazza managed to have the ordinance overturned, the court case also marked a loss for her and the other octoroons of Storyville. The court’s ruling was not based on race or the privileged position of octoroons. The court instead deemed that the Storyville segregation ordinance resulted in seizure of property without due process which directly violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. In the language of the upper court case the octoroons were lumped into the category of “negresses” and the carefully crafted racial terminology arguments they created for the Recorders Court were ignored entirely. The victory hinged on the fact that Piazza and the other petitioners were property owners, meanwhile erasing the special role which had enabled them to reach that status. The disappearance of not-white-not-black racial categories in *City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* demonstrated the larger social trend toward a bifurcated and physically segregated racial stratification.

Progressive reformers were undaunted by the Storyville madams’ legal victory. On July 17, 1917, less than two weeks after the Louisiana Supreme Court decision, the city passed a law that sought to segregate Storyville just as the previous ordinance had, only this time the legislators were

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<sup>76</sup>*City of New Orleans v. Willie Piazza* (1917), Supreme Court of Louisiana, Docket Number 22624, digested in 142 *Louisiana Reports*: 167.

careful to specify that they were regulating prostitution and not residences. The ordinance stated that it was unlawful for anyone to conduct a house of prostitution that employed women of color in the white district and that it was unlawful for prostitutes of color to *work* in the white district, but not unlawful for them to *live* in said district.<sup>77</sup> Many of the women who had sued for injunctions against the earlier ordinance did the same against the new one but before their appeals could even be heard the federal government stepped in. A directive from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels ordered Mayor Behrman to close Storyville in order to protect the new influx of navy men being stationed in New Orleans. On November 12, 1917 Storyville was officially abolished.<sup>78</sup>

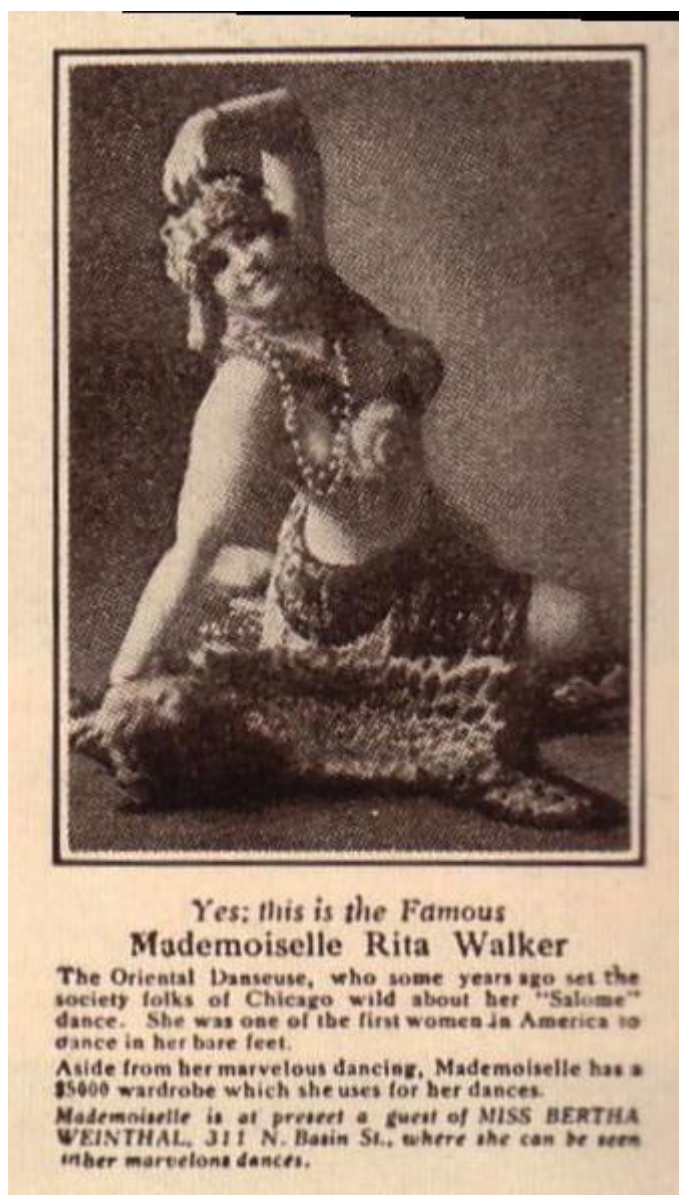
The closing of Storyville and the cases surrounding the segregation ordinances marked the end of an era of toleration both of prostitution and of racial categories that fell outside the lines of black and white. New Orleans, along with the rest of America, turned towards a new age of public moralism and black white divisions, an age marked by national Prohibition and increased and officially endorsed racial segregation. While many of the women working in Storyville, including Willie Piazza and Lulu White, continued to ply their age-old trade, they did so without the aid of the laws and social customs that had supported their tremendously successful businesses during the previous two decades. A close inspection of the lives of these women and the language they used to describe themselves demonstrates how their loss of power at the hands of white supremacists was not a move that came swiftly with the end of Reconstruction but rather a gradual process that occurred throughout the early twentieth century, paralleling the rise of the Progressive anti-vice and moral reform movements and the institution of Jim Crow legislation.

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<sup>77</sup> Ordinance 4485 C.C.S., Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

<sup>78</sup> Ordinance 4656 C.C.S., Archives of the City of New Orleans, New Orleans Public Library.

Figure 1



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