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## "This is OUR AMERICA, TOO" Marcus B. Christian & the History of Black Louisiana

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“This is OUR AMERICA, TOO”: Marcus B. Christian & the History of Black Louisiana

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

By

Yulbritton David Shy

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## Abstract

Louisiana's unique social and cultural history with its three-tiered racial system (rather than the biracial system that governed much of the United States) left the region and the history of its black inhabitants, outside of familiar narratives of United States black history. Marcus B. Christian, the self-trained intellectual, sought to research, and make public, the history of blacks in Louisiana. His career demonstrates the importance of training, economic status, and geographical focus in the production of African American history. Many of the stories he told, through writing and research, retrieved the largely forgotten history of Creoles of color. In fact, his own story was an extension of the black intellectual traditions of that Creole population. Even as his work revealed black Louisiana's unique culture, it also served as the foundation for Christian's own intellectual legacy, one with both material and intellectual dimensions.

Keywords: Marcus Christian, Creole, Free People of Color, African American, New Orleans, Louisiana, Historiography

“This is OUR AMERICA, TOO”: Marcus B. Christian & the History of Black Louisiana

*After winning the battle against segregation in the courts, we must win it all over again in white people’s minds. Those minds with their cluttered compartments, labeled “black” and “white.” These compartments can be torn down only with truth. So let us tell them that Negro commissioned officers served at the battle of New Orleans and were later tendered special thanks in the records of the legislature. Tell them that many years prior to this Negroes had followed Governor Galvez in his fight against the English; that the King of Spain awarded ribbons of merit to three of these and the privilege of wearing swords...*

*What white segregationists must be told is that Negroes were helping to build civilization in Louisiana at a time when most of them were enmeshed in the feudal bogs of Europe....*

Historian and activist, Marcus B. Christian wrote these words in 1957, in an article for the *Louisiana Weekly*, entitled “Let Us Tell the World.” Seeking to confront the system of racial segregation in the South, Marcus Christian retrieved the forgotten history of black political struggles in Louisiana, particularly the long history of protest and activism among the region’s Creoles of color. As he well knew, the descendants of the free blacks who fought in the Battle of New Orleans also agitated for civil rights and racial justice for much of the nineteenth century. Those struggles culminated in the landmark *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision of 1896, which endorsed “separate but equal” public accommodations. Despite the loss of that case to the proponents of Jim Crow segregation, the efforts of Louisiana’s Creoles of color, in Christian’s view, served to define much of the civil rights revolution of the twentieth century. Indeed, he concluded “Let us Tell the World” with a proclamation: “Will somebody please tell anybody concerned that this is OUR AMERICA, TOO?”<sup>1</sup>

Christian’s social commentary, research, and poetic work argued that the black experience in Louisiana was pivotal to the nation’s historical development and an important predecessor to the development of twentieth century African American culture and black civil

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “Let Us Tell the World,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 13, 1957.

rights protest. Despite his role as a path-breaking historian of African Americans in Louisiana, and his pointed critiques of mainstream historical narratives, Marcus Christian has remained an obscure figure. Christian was a small business owner, self-trained scholar, prolific poet, archivist and collector, as well as local resource for Louisiana black history. Born Marcus Bruce Christian on March 8, 1900 in Mechanicsville, La (present-day Houma, La.), Christian received his early formal education at the Houma Academy where his father was a teacher. Marcus Christian was a twin and the fourth of six children. His father encouraged a desire for education within his son through the reading of French poetry, in the original French language. Both he and his experienced a series of tragedies during their early life, however. His mother died when he was three, his twin sister when he was seven, and his father when he was thirteen. With the death of his father, Christian and his remaining siblings were faced with financial problems which forced him to leave school and find full-time work. In 1917, he and his siblings left Mechanicsville for New Orleans where he began working as a chauffeur.<sup>2</sup> He also began to attend night classes in 1920 and was able to complete the equivalent of a high school education.<sup>3</sup>

As a young man, Marcus Christian taught himself to write poetry, conduct historical research, as well as how to make a living. He made his first attempt at publishing a book of poems in 1922, *Ethiopia Triumphant and Other Poems*. Eventually, he saved enough funds to open a dry cleaning business, in 1926, a venture that eventually succumbed to the rigors of the Great Depression during the 1930s. In 1936, after the failure of his business, Christian began

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<sup>2</sup> “Marcus Bruce Christian ,1900-1976.” Series II, Biographical Information. Marcus Christian Collection, University of New Orleans Library, New Orleans; Marriage Certificate. Emmanuel Banks Christian and Rebecca Harris Christian. June 4, 1889. Series II, Biographical Information. Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>3</sup> “On March 8, 1900.” Series II, Biographical Information. Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

working for the Federal Writers' Project (as part of the Works Progress Administration) gathering material for a black history of Louisiana until the project's end in 1942. During his employment with the Federal Writers' Project's all-black "Dillard Project," Christian contributed to published works, such as the *New Orleans City Guide* in 1938 and *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* in 1941. He also began research as one of the main writers of the still unpublished book, *A Black History of Louisiana*.<sup>4</sup> With the aid of novelist Lyle Saxon, Christian reached an agreement to leave the materials from the Federal Writer's Project at Dillard University in 1943. Later he secured a position at Dillard University in the same year. With the urging of the prominent African American writer of the Harlem Renaissance and Louisiana native, Arna Bontemps, he received a Rosenwald Fellowship to pursue historical research and continue work on the larger project, *A Black History of Louisiana*.<sup>5</sup>

Christian remained employed with the Dillard University Library until 1950, when his employment ended at the university from what was rumored to be faculty concern about his lack of a collegiate degree. What followed was a period of virtual poverty and reclusion, which lasted throughout most of the 1960s. Except for an occasional public appearance or an invitation to craft an article on a specific topic, Christian removed himself from the public intellectual life. Finally, in 1969 after making an impressive appearance at a Black History Celebration at

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<sup>4</sup> Christian's work with the WPA initiated the work which would come to be his, "A Black History of Louisiana." The WPA text was originally referred to as, "The Negro in Louisiana," as part of a planned manuscript by the Federal Writer's Project. Upon the dissolution of the Federal Writer's Project, Christian continued work on the manuscript and it became, "A Black History of Louisiana." But there were still other WPA workers. They aren't mentioned in the text. Most sources I've used in regard to Christian, and the manuscript, give him credit as the main writer and compiler of the WPA's manuscript and then refer to, "A Black History of Louisiana," as Christian's text. I refer only to "A Black History of Louisiana" in this paper. Hereafter, I will cite Christian as the main author of "A Black History of Louisiana" with acknowledgment, here, that other writers contributed to an earlier version of the work.

<sup>5</sup>Marilyn S. Hessler, "Marcus Christian: The Man and His Collection," *Louisiana History*, 28, no. 1, (1987), 37-55.



LSUNO (now UNO) he was offered a one year appointment to serve as a special lecturer.<sup>6</sup>

There he spent the last seven years of his life, a period which served as a valedictory to a prolific, but uneven career which ended when he literally dropped to the floor while teaching weeks before he succumbed to a cancerous brain tumor. He composed almost 2,000 poems over his lifetime and self published numerous books on the history of New Orleans, including the culture and accomplishments of blacks in his narratives wherever possible.

Marcus Christian was a somewhat reclusive figure. According to Historian Raphael Cassimere, Christian was, “a maverick and somewhat of a loner.” He was largely self-taught and felt he had been “burned by scholars of Louisiana history who used his research and didn’t give Christian any proper credit.”<sup>7</sup> With a disdain for the possible usurpation of his work, Christian’s status as a loner shielded him from what he perceived would lead to the further theft of his work. Remarkably, Christian was able to achieve a significant level of self-sufficiency outside of formal avenues of training. He taught himself the skills needed to operate his dry-cleaning business, printing press, as well as the skills he needed to cultivate his intellectual activity. Each of these feats allowed Christian to claim a level of autonomy that sustained him for the rest of his life.

The documents he collected related to the African American experience in Louisiana and the writings (published and unpublished) that he left behind, are his legacy. His obscurity, however, is indicative of the economic, political, and geographical boundaries that defined black intellectualism and, indeed, the narrative of black history itself for much of the twentieth century. Through the life and works of Marcus Christian, we uncover neglected strands of the African

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<sup>6</sup> Raphael Cassimere, (University of New Orleans Professor Emeritus) interview with author, New Orleans, April 9, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Raphael Cassimere, (University of New Orleans Professor Emeritus) interview with author, New Orleans, April 9, 2010.

American past as well as an intellectual tradition long overshadowed by the works of more well-known African American intellectuals.

### **Marcus Christian, Organic Intellectual**

Marcus Christian's career demonstrates the importance of training, economic status, and geographical focus in the production of African American history. His status as a self-trained scholar made it difficult for him to gain access to the scholarly realm traditionally reserved for university-trained intellectuals. This would prove to be a difficult, but not impossible, barrier to overcome in terms of acceptance of his work in academic circles. Further still, Christian's hold on middle-class status remained tenuous because he lacked a secure academic or professional post and because most of his work remained unpublished. In this sense, it is perhaps useful to consider Marcus Christian as an "organic intellectual" rather than a professional scholar.

Historian George Lipsitz has used the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual to revisit the history of the civil rights movement and its leaders. According to Lipsitz, "Unlike traditional intellectuals, whose support from patrons, universities, and cultural institutions allows detachment from practical life, organic intellectuals learn about the world by trying to change it, and they change the world by learning about it from the perspective of the needs and aspirations of their social group."<sup>8</sup>

Marcus Christian sought to research, interpret, and make public the history of blacks in Louisiana, while operating within and outside the realm of traditional intellectuals. His efforts to self-publish his work, his social commentary and articles on the black experience, and the collection of materials which resulted in the archival Marcus Christian Collection (now held at

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<sup>8</sup>George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1988), 9.

the University of New Orleans) all highlight the activities of an organic intellectual seeking to channel the history, culture, and intellectual traditions of a marginalized group of blacks in America.

Christian spent his early years in a rural environment and his life generally followed a working-class existence with some temporary instances of upward mobility. Working class members of the black community, like Christian, sought inclusion into the black middle class, which characterized much of the leadership of the community. Traditionally, the black middle class has achieved and solidified its standing within the black community by achieving the socially significant concepts of respectability through educational, behavioral, and economic achievement. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's 1945 work, *Black Metropolis*, posit the definition of black middle class status as, "trying with difficulty to maintain respectability, they are caught between the class above into which they (or at least their children) wish to rise and the group below into which they do not wish to fall."<sup>9</sup> Christian's tenuous status within the middle class of black socio-economic categories did not hinder his attempts at pursuing his intellectual goals. His employment with the Federal Writers Project allowed him to pursue his research in the same manner normally reserved for trained intellectuals. Despite a lack of the formal credentials of a professionally trained scholar, he diligently pursued his research. He took measures to self-publish his own historical works and compilations of poetry. His independent prowess resulted in the publications of *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana, 1718-1900*; *the Battle of New Orleans: Negro Soldiers in the Battle of New Orleans; From the Deep South*; and *In Memoriam—Franklin Delano Roosevelt; High Ground, and Common Peoples' Manifesto of World War II*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 524.

In the latter years of his life, his appointment as a professor of poetry and history at the University of New Orleans allowed Christian to once again operate within an academic setting.

In addition to his lack of professional credentials, Christian's focus on New Orleans and the black history of Louisiana functioned to relegate him to the margins of black intellectual culture. The region's unique social and cultural history and its three-tiered racial system (rather than the biracial system that governed much of the United States) left Louisiana and the history of its black inhabitants, outside of familiar narratives of African American history in the United States. Christian's awareness of, and frustration with, this tendency to omit the history of black Louisiana from most accounts of black history had a considerable effect on his outlook on the black experience as a scholar and activist, and may have factored into his marginality.

Although Christian's unpublished manuscript, *A Black History of Louisiana*, was intended as a comprehensive history of the black experience in Louisiana, his sections on Louisiana's Creoles of color, offer insight into Christian's overall ideology regarding the racial and ethnic dimensions of black history, in the United States. His analysis of Creoles of color was pivotal to his discussion of the black experience in Louisiana. His study included an analysis of slaves and free people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the history of Louisiana's black population and their unique place within Louisiana's racial and social hierarchy is an important facet of the history of blacks in North America. Christian wrote, "many people generally conversant with American history erroneously believe that the Negro has made no considerable contribution to the advancement of American art, invention, economic

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<sup>10</sup> "Marcus Bruce Christian, 1900-1976." Series II, Biographical Information. Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>11</sup> Violet Harrington Bryan, "Marcus Christian's Treatment of *Les Gen de Couleur Libre*," in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, Edited by Sybil Kein, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 45.

progress, education, and literature.”<sup>12</sup> As historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall points out, “the Afro-creole culture of New Orleans has had a significant impact not only on the blacks of Louisiana and Afro-American culture in the United States but on American culture in general.”<sup>13</sup> The black intellectual tradition of New Orleans exists within a different cultural and historical context than that of much of the intellectual production of other black historians.

The stories Marcus Christian told, in his writing and with his research, helped to retrieve Creoles of color the past. Their history had been largely forgotten since the early twentieth century, in part because they did not fit easily in to existing narratives about the African American experience, and in part because much of this history is contained in documents written in French or Spanish. Christian’s own story was, in fact, an extension of the black intellectual traditions of that Creole population. In his defense of the long intellectual heritage of people of color in Louisiana, and through his role as a public intellectual, he adopted and transformed the “protest tradition” of earlier generations of Creoles of color to address the civil rights struggles of his own lifetime, from the 1940s to the 1970s. And even as his work revealed black Louisiana’s unique culture, it also served as the building blocks of Christian’s own intellectual legacy, one with both material and intellectual dimensions. Because of Marcus Christian’s devotion to the dissemination of the history and culture of blacks in Louisiana, scholars now have access to the archival materials which now comprise the Marcus Christian Collection, and hence a window into the forgotten history of Louisiana’s Creoles of color.

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<sup>12</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “Introduction,” in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p.2, Box 6. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>13</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 60.

## Creole History & Historiography

The development and growth of Creole culture in Louisiana, as the opening quote from Christian points out, was the product of colonial history which contain both French and Spanish contributions. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's essay, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," addresses the development and intended usage of the term *creole*. "In Spanish and French colonies, including eighteenth-century Louisiana, the term *creole* was used to distinguish American-born from African-born slaves; all first-generation slaves born in America and their descendents were designated creoles."<sup>14</sup> Over time, individuals designated creole began to develop a new consciousness based on cultural as well racial characteristics. Hall's, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, addresses the cultural development of Creoles of color in Louisiana and highlights the creation of an ethnically different group of blacks in America. "By the nineteenth century, the mixed-blood creoles of Louisiana who acknowledged their African descent emphasized and to great pride in their French ancestry. They defined *creole* to mean racially mixed, enforced endogamous marriage among their own group, and distinguished themselves from and looked down upon blacks and Anglo-Afroamericans, though their disdain stemmed from cultural as well as racial distinctions."<sup>15</sup> This was also due to language and religious differences as well that would have been the product of colonial influences on the cultures of their respective black populations.

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<sup>14</sup>Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 60.

<sup>15</sup>Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 158.

Creoles of color developed a protest tradition that grew out of cultural and social tendencies reminiscent of France as well as the Caribbean and the rest of the Atlantic world. New Orleans' position as a pivotal port city, former Spanish and French possession, as well as a significant refuge for people fleeing the Haitian Revolution and other tumultuous events in Europe and the Caribbean allowed Creoles of color to be immersed in an environment that supported intellectual traditions with transnational dispositions. The social protest traditions of Creoles of color were reflected in literature and other means of artistic expression. With the growing influence of American culture in New Orleans, Creoles of color faced a hostile environment which made it increasingly difficult for them to express any semblance of what they perceived as their natural rights as citizens. Christian presents the growing environment of hostility threatening the status of free people of color as a product of their growing wealth and influence,

During the growth of American influence in the city of New Orleans, the rise of the free people of color in wealth and culture was marked by enactments and increasing hostility towards them. The status of the free men of color was always far removed from that of the slave, although constant restrictions were placed upon him in regard to many privileges.<sup>16</sup>

Historians Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell's essay, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900," addresses the growing pressures of Americanization on Creoles of color and details a shift in the ideological underpinnings of intra-racial attitudes among a new generation of Creoles of color. "During the Civil War, a new generation of black creole leaders emerged, who condemned such castelike attitudes and quickly came to guide and dominate the political views expressed by their community. Indeed, for the rest of the century, the most radical

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<sup>16</sup> Marcus B. Christian, "The Free Colored Class of Louisiana," in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 30, Box 7. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

and consistent position on almost every subject came from creole leaders and the small number of American black spokesmen who regularly allied with them.”<sup>17</sup> This new generation of leaders articulated an intellectual tradition that presented ideas of social protest based on moral issues and racial justice. Marcus Christian’s, *A Black History of Louisiana*, addresses the social and cultural environment which necessitated the activism of Creoles of color. According to Christian,

The growing wealth of the free colored class during the early years of the American Domination, combined with their subsequent culture, won for them a position so superior to that of the slave that they fitted naturally into the aristocratic traditions and French culture of Louisiana...

Whenever the opportunity presented itself they voiced their bitterness because the privileges of citizenship were denied them. One of the earliest examples of this type of free colored protest is a poem attributed to Hippolyte Castra, a free colored soldier who served in the Battle of New Orleans.<sup>18</sup>

The intellectual tradition of Louisiana’s population of free people of color linked literary and other intellectual production to political and social concerns. Caryn Cossé Bell’s, *Revolution, Romanticism, and Reform: The Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in the Origins of Radical Republican Leadership, 1718-1868* (1997), analyses the growth and development of the protest traditions of the Creoles of color. Bell cites inspirations stemming from eighteenth century revolutionary movements and upheaval in France and America that espoused the ideals of liberty and equality. Bell’s analysis presents the radical elements of the Creole community as a trans-nationally centered group who incorporated elements of social protest from throughout the Atlantic world.

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<sup>17</sup>Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 218.

<sup>18</sup> Marcus B. Christian. “Negro Periodicals, Literature, and Art in Louisiana,” in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 1, Box 8. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.



In the aftermath of the Civil War, whites in Louisiana began to threaten, forcibly, the rights and lives of blacks in the state. In response, many Creoles of color used political measures, publications in periodicals as well as literature in order to express their discontent. “Relegated to a debased status, deprived of citizenship, denied free movement, and threatened with violence, free blacks evaded, resisted, or fled the rising tide of white oppression. In New Orleans, some French speaking intellectuals chose to remain in the city. Like intellectuals in France and the Caribbean, they channeled some of their discontent into a new mode of artistic expression influenced by European models.”<sup>19</sup> Feeling the increasing oppression of whites, Creoles of color began to actively agitate for the civil rights of blacks in Louisiana.

Creole historian, activist, and writer, Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes, was among the new activist generation of Creoles of color. Describing the events and actions surrounding the activism of Creoles of color, historian Rebecca Scott’s, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (2005), chronicles the post-emancipation struggles of Desdunes and other people of color for acceptance and equality in post-Civil War Louisiana society. In maintaining, and chronicling, the intellectual traditions and history of Creoles of color, Desdunes was a clear predecessor to Marcus Christian. According to Scott, Desdunes was, “an active Mason who took a broad view of the struggle, which he saw as encompassing the principles of the French and Haitian revolutions, the Louisiana Constitution of 1868, and the history of the fight for equal rights across the Caribbean.”<sup>20</sup> With the collapse of Reconstruction, whites in Louisiana began to reassert control over the social and political environment of the state. Creole activists challenged

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<sup>19</sup> Caryn CosséBell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and Reform: The Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in the Origins of Radical Republican Leadership, 1718-1868*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 88.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 75.

the wave of oppression in which blacks began to be targets of increasing violence as well as political and social repression.

Desdunes articulated the social outlook that would serve as a model for Marcus Christian's own view of the plight of blacks during his own era. According to Scott, Desdunes' writings, "blended his republicanism with support for labor activism in the country side; he viewed repression of rural workers as of a piece with white supremacist assaults on the civil, political, and public rights of men and women of color."<sup>21</sup> Asserting a claim to unassailable "public rights," Creoles of color sought to insure, "that individual dignity was nourished by formal respect in public space and public culture."<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Scott's, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," engages the articulation of public rights as an integral part of the protest tradition of Creoles of color. Advocating for public rights allowed Creoles of color to develop an ideology of protest that included, "the anti-aristocratic and anti-caste thinking of the Haitian Revolution, claims to citizenship made in territorial Louisiana based on militia service by free men of color, and the language of French republicanism and the 1848 revolutions..."<sup>23</sup> Activist Creoles of color sought to combat racist whites, who were in control of the Louisiana government, and began to enact more restrictive laws limiting the social and political freedom of blacks in Louisiana. Creoles of color sought to publicly challenge these laws and bring about a definitive response to the increasing humiliation and denigration of blacks back to a status where they faced an environment where the oppression was reminiscent of slavery. The activism of Creoles of color abated temporarily after defeat in

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<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," *Current Anthropology*, 48, no. 2 (2007), 246.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Scott, "Public Rights and Private Commerce: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Creole Itinerary," 246.

the landmark *Plessy V. Fergusson* case when the Supreme Court sanctioned the “separate but equal” public accommodations law enacted by Louisiana in 1890. This doctrine would stand for much of Marcus Christian’s life and be a subject of personal protest until its repudiation beginning with the 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

### **Marcus Christian, Creole Historian**

His emphasis on Louisiana blacks and free people of color as a distinctive social and ethnic group within Louisiana black history may have functioned to relegate Marcus Christian to the margins of national narratives related to black intellectual history. Marcus Christian’s production of poetry, avid writing in local periodicals, and attempts to document black people’s contributions to Louisiana’s history were, in themselves, an extension of Louisiana’s black intellectual culture. His intellectual pursuits mirror the methods and means by which Louisiana’s free people of color commented on the racial and social realities of blacks within their communities. In reference to free people of color in Louisiana, he wrote, “Our free colored population forms a distinct class from those elsewhere in the United States. Far from being antipathetic to the whites, they have followed in their footsteps and progressed with them, with a commendable spirit of emulation, in the various branches of industry most adapted to their sphere.”<sup>24</sup> In presenting the unique nature of Louisiana’s black culture, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall states, “The Afro-creole slave culture of Louisiana, firmly established by the time the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, has not been given the attention it

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<sup>24</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “The Free Colored Class of Louisiana,” in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 26, Box 7. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

deserves. This culture was based on a separate language community with its own folkloric, musical, religious, and historical tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

There may have been other reasons, such as class or personality, that accounted for Marcus Christian’s marginalization. According to historian Jerah Johnson, “The real mystery and tragedy of the matter have to do with the question why so many forgot about this man or cared so little about his work. He was, of course, not a trained and accredited academic.”<sup>26</sup> Just three years after Marcus Christian’s death in the winter of 1979, historian Jerah Johnson tried to address the issues surrounding him and his obscurity. Johnson acknowledges the difficulties facing an organic intellectual such as Christian by stating, “the support which society in general and universities in particular gave to such men and their work was always temporary and insufficient. Christian understood this tragedy and dedicated his life, despite terrible personal sacrifices, to the continuation of his major life's work.”

The Creoles of color, in whose culture Christian took significant interest in, were generally blacks of middle class status. Many held occupations such as cigar maker, tailor, or as an employee of the municipal government. In the context of African-American intellectual culture, many of these leaders lacked the traditional training which would have garnered formal recognition as leaders in culture and education. Notable intellectuals such as Rodolphe Desdunes and Armand Lanusse were civil servants, politicians, educators, writers, as well as intellectuals. Armand Lanusse was one of the Creoles of color who comprised the poetic volume *Les Cenelles*.

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<sup>25</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Jerah Johnson, “Marcus B. Christian and the WPA History of Black People in Louisiana,” *Louisiana History*, 20, no. 1, (1979), 115.

This volume was the first published anthology of poetry written by blacks in the United States and was referenced by Christian in his own work.

Christian was himself a prolific poet and composed hundreds of works of poetry. His work with the Federal Writers' Project allowed him to earn a living from his intellectual pursuits, writing and chronicling the history of blacks in Louisiana, much in the same way a trained scholar would have. Historian Joan Redding comments on some of the ideological underpinnings of Christian and the researchers working with the Federal Writers' Project at Dillard University by stating, "the Dillard Project, perhaps more than the other black WPA activity, represents a link in the transition from a local to a national black culture during a critical decade in African American history."<sup>27</sup> This work allowed him to develop and express his ideas about the social and racial equality of oppressed people. Redding further states, "while identifying with Louisiana blacks of the antebellum and Reconstruction periods, they found the events of local history applicable to the national of their own era."<sup>28</sup> His research allowed him to write about the significance of longstanding black participation in American society. The examples set by activist Creoles of color served as a model for Christian's views on social equality and the importance of blacks to the development of Louisiana.

### **Dear Mr. Du Bois**

The significance of Creoles of color in Louisiana derives from this group's transient racial and social status within Louisiana culture. Some Creoles of color appeared to be white while others appeared to be black. This allowed some Creoles of color to integrate into white

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<sup>27</sup> Joan, Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," *Louisiana History*, 32, no. 1, (1991), 58.

<sup>28</sup> Joan, Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," 58.

society while others remained part of the black population. With a number of restrictions placed on much of their activities, Creoles of color were still free, thus not of the same status as slaves but still below whites. According to historian Paul LaChance, the racial make-up of antebellum New Orleans “struck contemporaries and continues to strike historians as *sui generis* in the ethnic composition of its population. It had a full-fledged three-caste racial system: whites, free persons of color, and slaves.”<sup>29</sup> Free persons of color and slaves were both generally considered blacks in the context of the American racial dichotomy of antebellum Louisiana. However, Creoles of color expressed a claim to an ethnic and cultural heritage that differed in substance from the prevailing view of blacks in America. Christian writes, “With the beginning of American domination in Louisiana, a new force in folksongs and folklore was introduced by way of Negro slaves speaking the English dialect. A sharp rivalry ensued between the Creole and American elements of Louisiana—both white and slave.” He further writes, “Each side looked askance at the particular type of culture-patterns followed by the other, and each element went a separate way of life.”<sup>30</sup>

Creole historian Rodolphe Desdunes addressed the issue of a cultural duality present in the New Orleans black community when he describes Creoles of color as “the Latin Negro,” and black Americans as “the Anglo-Saxon or American Negro.” Desdunes serves as a primary example of a Creole of color functioning as an intellectual and activist. Following in a similar intellectual pattern to Desdunes, Christian’s own presentation of the plight of Creoles of color facing American domination allows him to unearth and revive an obscure aspect of African

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<sup>29</sup> Paul F. LaChance, “The Foreign French,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “The Creole Dialect,” in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 14, Box 7. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

American culture. The example set by Desdunes was used by Christian to emulate the intellectual protest tradition of Creoles of color. According to historian Charles E. O'Neill, "gifted, but deprived of higher education, Rodolphe Desdunes not only provides data unobtainable elsewhere but also serves as a symbol of the people who he memorialized."<sup>31</sup> Desdunes challenged the prevailing generalizations about Southern blacks that were espoused by one of his contemporaries, W.E.B. Du Bois. Desdunes remains a relatively obscure figure while Du Bois is one of the most noted scholars of African American history.

Du Bois's analysis of the social and economic patterns of blacks in America doesn't account for the anomalous experiences of Creoles of color. While not seeking to purposefully divide the black community, Rodolphe Desdunes's, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois: "With Malice Toward None,"* seeks to counter some of Du Bois' interpretations of the status of blacks in the South. Desdunes wrote this commentary in response to Du Bois' assertion that southern blacks lacked "book knowledge" and "industrial faculty." Desdunes states, "If Dr. Du Bois was to visit our City, and he was to see the delicate work entrusted to the Negro's intelligent manipulation, he would probably change his mind in regard to the 'industrial faculty' of the Southern Negroes." Desdunes also asserts, "Right here in New Orleans, we have a set of intellects sufficiently varied and sufficiently numerous, to be representative of the masses."<sup>32</sup>

Desdunes also expressed a frustration with the political disunity developing in the black community. He alludes to the black communities' abandonment of political ideals in favor of pragmatism. He uses two character types which reflect the fundamental differences in the

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<sup>31</sup> Charles E. O'Neill, S.J., "Foreword," *Our People and Our History*, by Rodolphe Desdunes, translated by Sister Dorothea McCants, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois: "With Malice Toward None,"* (New Orleans, 1907), 10-11, no. 1063, folder 38, box 77 (microfilm: roll 57), Alexander Pierre Tureaud Papers, 1909-1972 (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La), 3..

growing disunity. Writing on the differences between “the Latin Negro” and the “Anglo-Saxon Negro,” Desdunes states, “As little as we may surmise about it, there are two distinct schools of politics among the Negroes. The Latin Negro differs radically from the Anglo-Saxon in inspiration and in method.”<sup>33</sup> Desdunes comments on the qualities that define the two groups by citing differences in moral and philosophical concepts. Desdunes writes,

One hopes, and the other doubts. Thus we often perceive that one makes every effort to acquire merits, the other to gain advantages. One aspires to equality, the other to identity. One will forget that he is a man to think that he is a Negro. These radical differences act on the feelings of both in direct harmony with these characteristics. One is a philosophical Negro, the other practical.<sup>34</sup>

As the American population grew in New Orleans, Creoles of color had to adapt to the new social structure and culture being spread throughout the city. Desdunes further states, “These disagreements arise, partly from temperament, and partly from surroundings, just as a difference in the manner of thinking will soon crystallize between the Northern Negroes and the Southern Negroes. Without going into further details we will simply remark that if it were possible to convince the American Negro on the established worth of the Latin Negro, there is no example seen in the other races, that could not find a parallel in the history of the black race.”<sup>35</sup> Assimilation would force Creoles of color to confront a bi-racial social system. Inheriting the debate promoted by Desdunes in his, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois*, Christian’s ideological convictions promote the significance of the Louisiana black experience largely by way of the

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<sup>33</sup> Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois: “With Malice Toward None,”* (New Orleans, 1907), 10-11, no. 1063, folder 38, box 77 (microfilm: roll 57), Alexander Pierre Tureaud Papers, 1909-1972 (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois: “With Malice Toward None,”* (New Orleans, 1907), 10-11, no. 1063, folder 38, box 77 (microfilm: roll 57), Alexander Pierre Tureaud Papers, 1909-1972 (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *A Few Words to Dr. Dubois: “With Malice Toward None,”* (New Orleans, 1907), 10-11, no. 1063, folder 38, box 77 (microfilm: roll 57), Alexander Pierre Tureaud Papers, 1909-1972 (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La), 13.



Creoles of color. Marcus Christian recognized that this history—a history of intellectually and politically accomplished free people of color that had been ignored since Desdunes time—was an important argument against the Jim Crow system that by Christian’s day had become an institution.

### **Activism in Print**

Desdunes critiqued the status quo through his intellectual labor, a tradition rooted in the Afro-Creole protest activities of nineteenth-century New Orleans. This radical tradition espoused by the Creoles of color utilized newsprint to demand the right of blacks to equal citizenship and the right to vote. Creoles of color founded *L’Union* (1862), the *New Orleans Tribune* (1865), and the *New Orleans Crusader* (1890). Paul Trevigne, a prominent figure in the community of Creoles of color, founded the radical bi-weekly French language paper, *L’Union* in 1862. According Joseph Logsdon and Carrie Cosse’ Bell, *L’Union* was, “in the vanguard of almost all radical opinion in the United states...”<sup>36</sup> Facing economic difficulties and white conservative backlash, Trevigne was forced to cease printing, *L’Union*. A new paper was founded called the *New Orleans Tribune* which became the first daily paper by blacks in the United States.<sup>37</sup> Christian states, “From 1864 to 1868 the Tribune [sic] fought for the rights of the Negro in Louisiana. It fought serfdom under General Nathaniel P. Banks, fought the unfavorable and notorious ordinances of the town of Opelousas and Franklin, and pleaded for unity among the

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cosse Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 222.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cosse Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans 1850-1900,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Edited by Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 229.

Negroes of the State.”<sup>38</sup> Following the tradition of the *Tribune*, the New Orleans *Crusader*, formed by the Creoles of color carried the torch of protest espoused by the earlier publications and became the only black daily paper of 1890s. Inspired by the protests of the earlier generation of Creoles of color, Desdunes continued the Creole protest tradition by founding, with the aid of other Creoles of color, the Comité des Citoyens (Citizens’ Committee) in 1890.<sup>39</sup> This organization launched the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, which would figure prominently in the life of Marcus Christian. Marcus Christian’s intellectual pursuits railed against segregation as supported by the “separate but equal” doctrine memorialized in the majority decision of the case. Much of the conceptual approaches used by the Creole’s of color used protest based on public rights and philosophical arguments aimed at questioning black oppression on civil and moral grounds. While presenting the news regarding contemporary events, the writers appearing in *L’Union*, and the New Orleans *Tribune*, also wrote articles that took the form of social commentary. Addressing the issue of the feasibility of black suffrage, a *Tribune* article titled, “How Will the Negro Vote?” is an example of some of the social commentary presented in the publication that presented some of the views expressed by Creoles of color.

He will vote like he has fought.

At the time when the question of arming the colored men was first agitated, the enemies of our race said that the black soldier would not fight; and some of the indifferent lookers on, and even some from among the Union friends predicted that the freedmen would not dare to use his musket against his former master.

The opinions on both sides of the question were wrong, and the man who took, at that time, a more sensible view of the question, displayed more logic and less arguments. Not only self-preservation, but self-promotion also, are the natural instincts of our nature. We

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<sup>38</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “Negro Periodicals, Literature, and Art in Louisiana,” in *A Black History of Louisiana*, p. 20, Box 8. Subseries XIII.1: Historical Manuscripts, Series XIII, Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>39</sup> Rodolphe Desdunes, *Our People and Our History*, translated by Sister Dorothea McCants, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 141.

are seeking the best result through the best means. And although we do not always discover at once all the bright prospects of the future, we instinctively feel a repulsion for present wrongs and oppression.<sup>40</sup>

The social commentary espoused concepts based on moral and rational grounds. The article addressed active black participation in the American Civil War. “There is no mistake that the colored man *did* fight. Had the first experiment been a failure, we would not witness to-day over one hundred and fifty regiments of color marching on toward Richmond and displaying their dark columns on the several battlefields.”<sup>41</sup>

Marcus Christian sought to continue the protest tradition of the Creoles of color in his own work. His periodical publications generally fell into two themes; social commentary and historical presentation. His social commentary is of the same style and purpose as that of the Creoles of color. Christian’s published articles combined his articulation of black uplift with his efforts to revive marginalized narratives of black Louisiana’s history. By citing people and events that reflected notable aspects of that history, Christian sought to evoke positive images of the cultural antecedents of black Americans. His articles sought to inspire blacks of his own era to seek to change the ills of his own day. The underlying protest sentiment is evident in Christian’s 1956 article, “In the fight for Civil Rights: The Proud Record of Louisiana Negroes.” He poignantly expressed the long tradition of black activism when he wrote,

Negroes were especially vigorous in their drives for civil rights during the war and Reconstruction. They sued to wipe out Jim Crow on the city’s “star cars;” sued to abolish segregation on steamboats; sued to wipe out segregation in schools and on railroads as well as for equal rights in public places...<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “How Will the Negro Vote?” *New Orleans Tribune*, April 4, 1865.

<sup>41</sup> “How Will the Negro Vote?” *New Orleans Tribune*, April 4, 1865.

<sup>42</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “In Their Fight for Civil Rights: The Proud Record of Louisiana Negroes,” *Louisiana Weekly*, July 7, 1956.

Against this backdrop of black activism, he goes on to challenge the complacency of blacks in his own era,

Yet today, they have allowed their legislators, elected by their votes as well, to enact laws which will yoke their children and grandchildren to the status of second-class citizenship, without a single protest to the legislature; without one protest to the governor...<sup>43</sup>

A frustrated Christian rebuked the complacency of blacks in his own era with a comparison of the proactive measures of Creoles of color when he writes, “the highly vaunted ‘free Negroes’ of today dare not do what their forbears, the ‘free Negroes’ of yesterday, did in regard to governors, legislators and lawmakers.”<sup>44</sup> Citing a long tradition of activism, Christian challenged blacks of his era to continue the protest tradition of the “free Negroes” of the past.

Christian’s social commentary asserted an intellectual challenge to the mainstream themes affecting black Americans. He wrote commentary challenging segregation by establishing a historical claim to the full participation of blacks in the building of America. He also proclaimed an assertion of racial pride with his explication of the achievements of notable blacks. In the article, “Let Us Tell the World,” Christian presents his views how to stifle the ideas promulgated by segregationist views:

There is one way to prevent whites from constantly filching credit and prestige from Negro hands and that is the founding of an organization- -or several kinds of organizations- -which would preserve the facts of our inalienable rights to be reckoned as builders in American history and as contributors to American culture... They could, probably without any objections from our lawmakers, return a portion of the state’s history to the group to which it rightfully belongs- -the Negro group. They could effectively spike segregationist thunder by telling the world that when all phases of America’s history was in the making, we were there.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “In Their Fight for Civil Rights: The Proud Record of Louisiana Negroes,” *Louisiana Weekly*, July 7, 1956.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “In Their Fight for Civil Rights: The Proud Record of Louisiana Negroes,” *Louisiana Weekly*, July 7, 1956.

<sup>45</sup> Marcus B. Christian, “Let us Tell the World,” *Louisiana Weekly*, April 13, 1957.

Christian advocated the founding of an organization devoted to preserving the historical facts of black participation in American history while he collected large amounts of information pertaining to black history himself. In the absence of any organizations deemed by Christian to be as devoted to the chronicling of black history as he was, Christian took it upon himself to do so. He would've also been faced with presenting the significance of particular groups, individuals, and events which would warrant attention as important aspects of black history. Continuing to publish articles in African American newspapers such as the *Louisiana Weekly*, Christian would have been able to pique the interests of readers and possibly spark a surge in the collection of historical materials pertaining to blacks.

Christian's articles presented historical themes that sought to affirm black achievements in battle, wealth, as well as culture. His discussion of Creoles of color and their peculiar racial and social standing within Louisiana figures prominently within his presentation of black history in general. In discussing free people of color in the early years of Louisiana, Christian writes:

In 1810, four years prior to the first Battle of New Orleans the city and the entire territory were predominantly Negro. For instance, there were 7,585 free people of color and 34,600 slaves, as compared with 34,600 whites. Already their wealth, culture and general education- -as well as their numbers- -placed them far. In advantages gained by this group, particularly during the comparatively liberal rule of Spain, became the special desire and envy of Negroes in all parts of the Union.<sup>46</sup>

Christian further writes:

Even when the more rigorous American rule set in, their wealth [and] ease of living attracted free Negroes from other states, who were willing to chance even imprisonment in order to take a chance on slipping into the state unobserved and becoming a part of the general population. The fast-increasing wealth of planters in the sugar regions- -among whom were many free men of color- -made them the awe of Northern cities, in which parts they were referred to as "sugar barons."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Marcus Christian, "Free Negroes in Early La. History Tops," *Louisiana Weekly*, September 7, 1957.

<sup>47</sup>Marcus Christian, "Free Negroes in Early La. History Tops," *Louisiana Weekly*, September 7, 1957.

By asserting historical instances of wealth and affluence among blacks in Louisiana, he seeks to counter many of the paternal images of hapless black slaves and mischievous free blacks that developed out of the predominant racialized images concerning the history of blacks in American thought.

By writing about notable events, people, and circumstances surrounding the black experience in New Orleans, Christian sought to insert another strand of the black experience into the wider discourse on blacks in America. He wrote an inspiring article about a black leader in the American Civil War named Captain Andre Cailloux. Christian begins to present the tale of Andre Cailloux. He writes,

Among the old line of Creoles of color I doubt if there is any hero who matches Cailloux in their minds. Try to recall, if you can, the outstanding Negro in the Spanish American War, or World War I, or World War II, and then after you have evaluated the crowning achievements of each, place those of Cailloux beside them and you will find that they easily match or tower above them.<sup>48</sup>

Christian links the significance of Captain Cailloux's exploits with the exploits of other blacks participating in American wars. Christian also posits a moral and symbolic significance to the participation of Cailloux in the American Civil War by asserting:

One fact which will forever make this hero's case a unique one is that when he led his men upon the impregnable ramparts of Port Hudson, a cloud of doubt hung heavily over all America concerning the worth of Negroes as soldiers. It was this [cloud] of doubt that was dispelled by his heroic death and the flaming heroism of those who fell upon that bloody field and whose bodies lay rotting for forty-two days in front of the breastworks against which they had hurled themselves.<sup>49</sup>

The acts of Captain Cailloux and his fellow soldiers helped to provide an answer to the questions surrounding the feasibility of having black troops serve in the Civil War, their valor, and their

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<sup>48</sup> Marcus Christian, "Captain Andre Cailloux-The Rock," Comments Here and There, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 3, 1957.

<sup>49</sup> Marcus Christian, "Captain Andre Cailloux-The Rock," Comments Here and There, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 3, 1957.

worth as soldiers. Christian's historical presentations presented the positive images of blacks that would have aided in the systematic dismantling of segregationist thought prevalent during much of his own life. Emulation and presentation of the culture of Creoles of color reinforces Christian's attempts to redefine the prevailing racial attitudes of his day.

In a preface to the article, he recalls speaking with some of Cailloux's descendants and discovering that some of their ancestor's possessions were held in a museum in Washington, D.C. Christian then made an interesting statement. "I asked Attorney A.P. Tureaud (noted black civil rights attorney and a prominent figure in the New Orleans black community) if the Creoles of color had any organizations dedicated to the preservation of their extensive history and he replied that he knew of none. I suggest here a Creole Historical Society."<sup>50</sup> Tureaud's views were very important. He handled almost all of the major civil rights cases of Louisiana for more than three decades. Indeed, his legal work contributed largely to the civil rights struggles of not only Louisiana, but other parts of the United States. By advocating the development of a Creole Historical Society, Christian expressed his desire to preserve the history of blacks in Louisiana in a form that would allow blacks an opportunity to preserve and present their own history.

### **Activism in Art**

Christian's own poetry and literary writings were an extension of his personal attempt to promote racial uplift in the same style as earlier Creoles of color. Christian's emphasis on racial uplift is evident in the writing of his, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*. Published in 1948, in an era containing a preoccupation with the Cold War, this book is a text comprised of twenty-eight pages of poetic prose written by Christian during the spring of 1943. Many blacks

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<sup>50</sup> Marcus Christian, "Captain Andre Cailloux-The Rock," Comments Here and There, *Louisiana Weekly*, August 3, 1957.

were disenchanted with the realities of segregation in the United States. Some blacks were drawn to communism and its appeal as an alternative system to that of the United States. Notable African American literary figures, such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, had associations with branches of the communist party. However, much of the black community was wary of any associations with the communism. The association of black activists with the communist party could result in political as well as financial ruin. The usage of the terms “common people” and “manifesto” in the title, and the ideas expressed throughout, this text tap into the political critique of capitalism that had begun to increase in the postwar decades. This poem addresses the issues of class and oppression in the World War II era. Yet Christian himself had struggled against a class system that discouraged intellectual production from scholars like himself who did not have the benefits of a formal education. Christian railed against classism while he was still subject to issues of class in getting recognition for his works. The class conscious nature of African American intellectual culture defined who could participate in the discourse surrounding leadership and culture.

Christian’s lack of status as a formally trained intellectual factored into the significance and reception of his work. The poem’s subject matter adds another dynamic to the conceptual understanding of Marcus Christian and his intellectual pursuits. Written during World War II this poem displays his disenchantment with the status quo and the social problems facing blacks, and other oppressed people around the world. Christian inhabited an era of uncertain political and social power in regards to blacks in American society and articulated his methods of protest and activism in literature.<sup>51</sup> Based in different linguistic and social experiences but similar to the nineteenth century Creoles of color, African American writers in the twentieth century also

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<sup>51</sup> Beth Bailey and David Farber, “The ‘Double-V’ Campaign in World War II Hawaii: African Americans, Racial Ideology, and Federal Power,” *Journal of Social History*, 26, no. 4, (1993), 817.



sought to address the social ills of American society through their writing. Margaret Walker's 1950 article titled, "New Poets," in the African American periodical *Phylon* mentions Christian and some of the motives by which African American writers, like Christian, undertake their craft. "The cry of these writers was the cry of social protest: protest against the social ills of the day which were unemployment, slums, crime and juvenile delinquency, prejudice, poverty, and disease."<sup>52</sup> In Walker's remark about Christian's, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*, itself she mentions, "It has probably not received as widespread critical notice as it deserves, but in several reviews mention has been made of its 'considerable merit.' It, too, reflects the social note of protest that was typical of the poetry of the Thirties."

The views expressed in Christian's writing reflect a transnational view of the oppressed. This conforms to some of the ideas surrounding public rights as expressed by the Creoles of color. The inspirations derived from cultural connections to the Atlantic world allowed the Creoles of color to incorporate radical ideas emanating from areas outside of the United States. Christian's, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*, presents a radical view of oppressed people in various parts of the world. His imagery links oppressed people by means of class, race, and social standing. It represents an attempt to emulate the protest tradition espoused by the poems of radical Creoles of color.

Christian presents a class-oriented presentation of the so called "common people" in Part One of this work. He writes this poem in the first person. This allows him to associate himself with the plight of the common people. He then presents a definition of what exactly comprises the common people, what the common people are striving for, and how this will be achieved. Christian constructs a section referenced to as the "Common People's Convictions." These tenets

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<sup>52</sup> Margaret Walker, "New Poets," *Phylon* (1940-1956), 11, no. 4. (1950), 3.

outline his ideological justification behind the group participation of the marginalized people of the world as a chance to redefine and renegotiate the terms of society into a favorable condition. These tenets alongside the book's five parts each detail an aspect of uplift ideology and can be presented as Christian's own expression of social protest literature. The individual parts are labeled: Overlords Versus the Common People, We the People, Mass-Production Democracy, and The American Dream. These five parts all function to present Marcus Christian's representation of his version of racial uplift and protest.

In Christian's chapter labeled "Overlords versus the Common People," readers are introduced to an opening presentation of the pains of marginalized people across the world. This opening imagery along with his first tenet of the common people's convictions presents a convincing concept of inter-group commonality. The first tenet states, "We believe that is not a war of one race against another."<sup>53</sup> The opening of the first part of the book reinforces this view by stating: "We are dying today on the bloody fields of Czechoslovakia; / We are dying in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the islands of the seas."<sup>54</sup> These statements invoke a global view of oppression and exploitation exacerbated by the advent of World War II. The overlord versus the common person is dramatically represented as the fate of the common person is death in order to preserve the freedoms of the overlord. He furthers the imagery by stating, "We are dying everywhere so that other men might be free: Yellow men, white men, black men, brown men, red men-all sorts of men-dying for freedom."<sup>55</sup> The colors of men present a racialized notion of the plight of men dying in the preservation of freedom. Christian's fifth conviction

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<sup>53</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*, (New Orleans: Handset Type and Bound at the Author's Private Press, 1948), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*, (New Orleans: Handset Type and Bound at the Author's Private Press, 1948), 3.

<sup>55</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*, 3.

reinforces the dismantling of racial antagonisms as it states, “We believe that this not a white man’s war against a yellow race-although many have tried to make it so-but a clean man’s war against a dirty coalition.”<sup>56</sup> His “dirty coalition” seems to be an attack on unscrupulous political factions. His study of the political history and the struggles of Creoles of color against segregationist cohorts would have exposed him to the consequences of the actions of “dirty coalitions.” Christian also attacks wider national concepts regarding governmental and philosophical systems as some of the underlying determinants for the war. The third tenet states, “we believe, initially, that this is a war of one type of ism against another.”<sup>57</sup> These “isms” are the social and political systems that exploit the common people. Supported by the exploitation of the common people, the overlords vie for dominance of their own system.

The next section of the book titled, “We the People,” presents his ideological definition of the common person. This presentation presents a transnational view of oppressed classes of peoples. The second tenet in Christian’s common people’s convictions states, “We believe that this not a war wherein certain groups of lands are inherently antagonistic to others.”<sup>58</sup> The poem mentions peons in South America, coolies in Asia, black men in Africa, and the Negroes of America as entities functioning as the proletariat, struggling against the autocracies of the world. This poem reflects his own identification with these marginalized groups as well as a call for solidarity. In seeking to further a moral assertion for participation in the war fourth tenet states, “We strongly maintain that this is a war of what we conceive as right against what we believe is

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<sup>56</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People’s Manifesto of World War II*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People’s Manifesto of World War II*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People’s Manifesto of World War II*, 17.

wrong.”<sup>59</sup> The moral tone induced by Christian’s conception of a war fought on the grounds of right and wrong fostered a call of solidarity that would transcend divisions prescribed by distinctions of race, class, as well as gender.

The two remaining sections of the text present Christian’s espousal of American notions of government, society, and culture. These sections labeled, “Mass-Production Democracy and The American Dream,” each promote the concepts of American opportunity. The idea of climbing up the social hierarchy and achieving a level of acceptability and social status under the auspices of the American working class work ethic is also an essential part of racial uplift. The social standing and middle class status of many Creoles of color is also relevant for the understanding of this section of the poem. The intellectual tradition and culture emulated by Christian in his own era was a product of the blending of largely middle class group ideologies of Creoles of color and African Americans. The ability to be upwardly mobile and have equal participation in “The American Dream” was an important factor in the striving of many African Americans of his own era. The promotion of “public rights” in the actions of the radical Creoles of color, in their own era, allowed a blending of different cultural meanings in order to encompass their own version of an “American Dream” with a civic-minded regard for the respect of equal citizenship rights of Creoles of color as well as African Americans. These “public rights” were an implicit part of the ideas expressed in Christian’s own social commentary.

Marcus Christian’s, *Common People’s Manifesto of World War II*, presents readers with his social commentary on the plight of the oppressed of his own era with the usage of the imagery and social protest style expressed by Creoles of color. The poem articulates an intellectual tradition that combines social protest with art. He used his intellectual affinities to aid

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<sup>59</sup> Marcus B. Christian, *Common People’s Manifesto of World War II*, 17.

in the development of social commentary that reflected opposition to oppression based on issues of race, class, and gender. The core messages and imagery within his literary work contained a note of protest in a manner that illuminates disenchantment with the social problems of his own era.

### **Documenting Activism, Past and Present**

The physical aspect of Marcus Christian's intellectual legacy is evidenced in the Marcus Christian Collection. This collection highlights his goal of the development of a repository of information pertaining to the chronicling of the black experience in America. This activity is the actual remnant of the intellectual pursuits of Marcus Christian the man, as well as the intellect, and sheds light on some of the underlying philosophical concepts involved in his intellectual work. He advocated for the development of societies and organizations devoted to the collection and dissemination of black history, whether it was the history of the Creoles of color or African American history. The life of Marcus Christian, as well as his collection, illuminates an attempt to promote black social and cultural contributions to Louisiana and, by extension, American society in order to combat the oppressive forces of mainstream American ideological convictions regarding blacks and the poor. The class-bound aspects of African American racial uplift define who is allowed to participate at the forefront of the African American intellectual community. Individuals who are otherwise separated from traditional avenues of African American intellectual production sometimes are allowed a tenuous pass into the realm regarded as reserved for the traditional ideological and cultural leaders of the community. The regionally centered significance of the black experience in Louisiana to wider discussions of African American history allowed Marcus Christian his own niche within the domain of traditional discussions of

black history. His collection is the direct result of his personal development and contextualization of his mission to promote African American racial uplift as he sought to combat the negative connotations of the concepts of race and class as well as gender through an articulation of Louisiana's unique black culture. This collection is used widely as a starting point for research into the history of blacks in Louisiana, particularly New Orleans. Outside of intellectual circles in the New Orleans area and scholars of New Orleans' African American history, Marcus Christian remains an obscure figure.

Some of Christian's mail correspondence contained in the collection present an example of his attempts to advocate positive representation of blacks in the public sphere. In writing to WWL, the predominant white-owned local radio station, Christian writes, "Although I realize that I might be branded as an insufferable bore, I am again writing you concerning the appearance and broadcasting of colored talent in your studio."<sup>60</sup> He further states, "I am offering a space- - cement floor- - 10 x 12, at my address, rent free for an indefinite period, should you think it fit to be used as a broadcasting studio for colored talent. I have been in this location for over two years."<sup>61</sup> In referring to the goals of this production Christian intones in the letter, "Men of intelligence and breeding unfailingly accord to the colored man of ability whatever considerations are due him as a man, but where intolerant white radio-listeners are encountered,

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<sup>60</sup> "Correspondence October 11, 1932. to Captain Pritchard, Radio Station WWL from Marcus Christian," Folder Labeled Correspondence Jun. 6-Oct. 12, 1932, Marcus Christian Collection Accession 11 Correspondence, Box 4, Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>61</sup> "Correspondence October 11, 1932. to Captain Pritchard, Radio Station WWL from Marcus Christian," Folder Labeled Correspondence Jun. 6-Oct. 12, 1932, Marcus Christian Collection Accession 11 Correspondence, Box 4, Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

they could be met with the all-important plea for racial goodwill.”<sup>62</sup> His presentation of the arts as a means of advancing the race also seemed to advocate for black inclusion into mainstream white American society. In another section of the letter written to the controversial black newspaperman, George Schuyler, he states,

I am at present connected with the Negro History Group at Dillard University, which is directed by Dean Horace Mann Bond and Lyle Saxon, State Administrator of the Federal Writers Project. My assignment is relative to the free people of color in Louisiana. I'd like to tell you something about the culture of this free Negro group. Dr. DuBois made mention of a book of poetry written by them, called *LES CENELLES*, in 1845. I shall soon be doing a chapter on Negro literature in Louisiana prior to Reconstruction, and if possible, may send you a copy.<sup>63</sup>

Christian's promotion of "the race" and poetry indicated a predisposition towards the arts and culture as linked in a manner that could be used to promote a solid sense of unity among sectional groups of blacks. His proposed "challenge to the educated man" seems to point towards a view that seeks to cultivate talents in possible poets rather than ignore them. In his mentioning of *Les Cenelles*, free people of color, as well as W.E.B. Du Bois, Christian succinctly summarizes his eclectic view of African American progress as the product of ethnic, cultural, and educational achievement. His employment with the Federal Writers' Project and Dillard University allowed him to build, and compile, much of the material that would become the Marcus Christian Collection while allowing him to participate within the realm of traditional African American intellectuals. The collection of newspaper clippings, articles, photographs, and books pertaining to African Americans all function to create a source with the deliberate theme

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<sup>62</sup> "Correspondence October 11, 1932. to Captain Pritchard, Radio Station WWL from Marcus Christian," Folder Labeled Correspondence Jun. 6-Oct. 12, 1932, Marcus Christian Collection Accession 11 Correspondence, Box 4, Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

<sup>63</sup> "Correspondence to Mr. Geo. S. Schuyler from Marcus Christian," Folder Marked Jan. 28-Apr. 7, 1937, Marcus Christian Collection Accession 11 Correspondence, Box 4, Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

of the racial uplift of blacks tied largely to Louisiana history. His creation of this collection served a dual purpose. In conjunction with his attempt to perform the role of archivist, he also became part of the subject matter being archived. This allowed him to insert his own legacy into the realm of traditional African American intellectuals.

Christian's own writings, both historical and literary, are contained within the collection among the information that he used in documenting the black experience in America. This allowed Christian to be both an outside observer as well as an active participant in the creation of a physical space for a body of knowledge pertaining to blacks. The subject matter he collected, the pattern of organization, as well as the presence of his own material allows the collection to be both an agent of black history as well as an agent of Christian's intellectual legacy. As a torch bearer of a marginalized and declining intellectual tradition, Christian's actions memorialized an aspect of black intellectual culture and history that lacked a vehicle to carry its legacy over time.

## **Conclusion**

Marcus Christian shared an intellectual affinity with the Creoles of color he intended to present. He applied aspects of the intellectual traditions of Creoles of color to his own era. The ideals asserted by the radical elements of the Creoles of color during the Reconstruction era served as a model by which he could inform his contemporaries about the historical tradition of civil rights agitation by blacks in Louisiana. The peculiarities of Louisiana's black history was tied to colonial influences that had an impact on the cultural environment as exemplified in the racial hierarchy. These peculiarities have functioned to marginalize Christian and the contributions of Louisiana blacks to the development of civil rights based protest of issues of race and class to the history of blacks in the United States.



In conclusion it can be said of Marcus Christian, that his lifetime experiences exposes historians to the significance and importance of training, status, and how the realities of time and space function in the production of African American history. Christian's early transition from a rural existence in Mechanicsville to an urban existence in New Orleans is indicative of the times in which he lived. Struggles and frustrations in his personal life turned Christian into a guarded individual. The relative financial security he enjoyed during the 1920s until the hardships of his failing business in the 1930s presents the realities of Christian's personal struggles to maintain suitable financial standing that would support his intellectual work. These personal struggles included his work with the WPA until his eventual departure from Dillard University and his recognition and acceptance as an intellectual by the University of New Orleans. During the 1960s, Marcus Christian made only a few appearances as a resource on historical information for various seminars and functions. In comparison to his previous years, Marcus Christian effectively entered into a period of seclusion.

Happily, with the help of UNO history professors, Joseph Logsdon and Jerah Johnson, Christian was able to redeem his personal esteem as a Special Instructor in English and History at UNO.<sup>64</sup> Thereafter Christian's own research and writings on Creoles of color became a vital source of information for succeeding scholars. Throughout his involvement with the Federal Writers' Project, and then the University of New Orleans, Christian was able to gather significant amounts of information on the African American community that has become an important resource for historians of black Louisiana.

Marcus Christian's legacy continues to be tied to the existence of the collection as well as the information contained within it. His skills as an archivist and historian have been a great

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<sup>64</sup> Marilyn S. Hessler. 1987. "Marcus Christian: The Man and His Collection." *Louisiana History*, 28, no. 1 (1987), 37-55.

benefit to the preservation of local history. His collection is highly useful and relevant to many aspects of New Orleans history as well as historically relevant national topics. His legacy remains viable as collector of a remarkable cache of historical materials pertaining to the unique African American history of Louisiana. There are still facets of the Marcus Christian Collection that have yet to be explored and may still lead to discoveries that will sustain and redefine Christian's legacy as an intellectual, activist, and historian.

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