The Mask and the Veil:

Industrial Carnivals and the Theatrics of Social Control in 19th Century St. Louis

Benjamin Lalonde

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By: Benjamin Lalonde

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Dr. Rachel Berger — Chair

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Dr. V.K. Preston — Examiner

Dr. Theresa Ventura — Thesis Supervisor(s)

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)

Approved by _____

Dr. Matthew Penney — Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Pascale Sicotte — Dean of Faculty of Arts and Science

Abstract

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This thesis links the Veiled Prophet Society, a covert organization formed in 1878 by St. Louis' financial elite in response to the Great Strike of 1877, to the discursive transformation of procession into a “top-down” modality of power. Depicted in the *Missouri Republican* with a rifle and a bright pointed hood, the Veiled Prophet presaged the Ku Klux Klan’s later iconography, suggesting an intentional message of racial control. Accordingly, the organization’s procession aimed to indoctrinate Black and low-income communities, promoting the maxims of a burgeoning free market economy at a time of unparalleled economic disparity. This thesis thus situates the Veiled Prophet Society within a broader historical context, tracing its roots to European folk traditions like Charivari while examining its links to other American fraternal organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Krewes of Mardi Gras. By appropriating and transmuting carnivalesque folk forms into a vehicle for ideological transmission, the Veiled Prophet Society sought to reinforce racial boundaries and divide the working class amid economic unrest. The thesis draws on Cedric J. Robinson's concept of "racial capitalism" and Dubois’ “counter revolution of property” to reveal how market concerns reshaped racial constructs. Additionally, my research addresses the dual nature of secrecy and spectacle in right-wing organizations. While early scholarship viewed Klan secrecy as a necessary limitation, more recent studies suggest it functioned to attract new members and propagate ideology. This thesis advances the understanding of how "top-down" processional forms, like those of the Veiled Prophet Society, exploited the duality of secrecy and spectacle to control social narratives and maintain economic dominance, infusing processional traditions with a distinct panoptic quality.

Dedication

To the workers of the St. Louis Commune, whose defiance and determination in the face of overwhelming force serve as a testament to the enduring potential of collective resistance. This work is a small reflection on the power of solidarity and a tribute to those whose sacrifices continue to shape the ongoing fight for a more just society. May their efforts be remembered not as a distant past, but as a living example of what is possible when solidarity overwhelms both ignorance and prejudice.

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction

In 1878, the *Missouri Republican* published the first ever sketch of St-Louis' newly proclaimed "Veiled Prophet," depicting a man clad in long white robes and a tall, pointed hood obscuring his face. He is shown holding a rifle in one hand and a pistol in the other while a second rifle adorns the wall behind him. To the contemporary viewer, the resemblance is uncanny: the picture is of a Klansman. While the Veiled Prophet Society held no official ties to the Ku Klux Klan, Thomas M. Spencer argues that the Prophet's likeness to the modern Klansman was no mistake, that it "clearly intended to send a [message of] racial control."[1] Formed in response to the Great Strike of 1877 and the St. Louis Commune—a brief but jarring uprising where workers seized control of the city—the Veiled Prophet Society functioned as a covert nucleus for St. Louis' financial elite to address growing socio-economic concerns, mainly, an unruly working class and growing displays of cross-racial solidarity.

Its members were both Republican and Democrat but consisted exclusively of white men of means. In fact, nine of the organization's 74 founders served as presidents of the St. Louis Merchants Exchange between 1872 to 1887, and twenty-four of these men were listed as members of the Merchants Exchange in 1878. In the early years, the organization limited its size to 200 members, charging $100 per membership (roughly one sixth of a workingman's annual salary), eventually peaking at 5000 members by the mid 1980s.[2] The organization's member base was overwhelmingly Protestant, with only four non-Protestants among its founders, including one Jewish member.[3] Just so, the Veiled Prophet celebration culminated in dazzling

[1] Thomas M. Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995* (Saint-Louis: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 32.

[2] Ibid., 9.

[3] Ibid., 15.

and costly procession, winding through Black and low-income neighborhoods in a tour de force of unmistakable undertones. Each year, floats took on a different theme but generally espoused the conservative values of the city's Protestant elite, equating capitalist hierarchies and unregulated free markets with societal well-being. The celebration would go on to become a defining feature of urban St. Louis for decades to come, persisting well into the 21st century. In fact, the organization is still active at the time of my writing.

While scholars of the occult tend to examine fraternal groups in isolation, this thesis situates the Veiled Prophet celebration within a wider folkloric lineage, revealing this modern processional format as the culmination of a discursive cultural project enacted from above. It argues that 19th century American elites appropriated and redeployed the carnivalesque as a "top-down" vehicle for ideological transmission, seeking to reify racial boundaries and divide American workers amidst growing economic unrest. Moreover, I contend that the Veiled Prophet celebration successfully monopolized the dual nature of secrecy and spectacle, infusing otherwise liberatory and subversive cultural forms with a panoptic quality. Ushering European folk forms into the modern age, American industrialists transmuted existing cultural traditions to bolster emerging socio-economic structures of the free-market and naturalize growing wealth inequality. This study thus serves as a crucial point of entry for understanding the mutually constitutive nature of racial thought and capitalist doctrine. Drawing on Cedric J. Robinson's theoretical framework of "racial capitalism," this thesis explores how market concerns directly reshaped racial constructs as well the shifting contours of "whiteness" in relation to new economic modes of production.

Following the Veiled Prophet's debut in 1878, reporters at the *Missouri Republican* touted that "when unmasked, the actors on the floats are heads of large commercial firms or

perhaps grave and dignified judges of the law."[4] By manufacturing similar "known unknowns," Veiled Prophet members sought to inspire awe and fear in the everyday reader, engaging abstract realms of thought to specific ends. The Klan's moniker of the "invisible empire" achieved a similar effect, the organization's true size and power looming as large as imagination might allow. Veiled Prophet members thus waged a war against the hearts and minds of residential Missourians, exploiting this key tension between secrecy and spectacle to impose a desired social order. However, unlike their subterranean counterparts, the Veiled Prophet Society developed entirely from above. Determined to trammel the self-assertion of organized labour, industrialists and city fathers sought refuge in arcane images and symbols of an imagined past, blending "the esoteric with the platitudinous" to disseminate ideological rhetoric under the pretense of edification.[5] And where folk forms like Carnivale functioned through the inversion of existing power dynamics, nineteenth century elites aptly reconfigured these traditions to suit their own needs, restricting participation to reify the boundary between observer and participant: between ruler and ruled.

Few scholars have followed the expansive web which connects the Veiled Prophet Society to the "Krewes" of Mardi Gras and, going even further back, folk forms like Charivari or "rough music." Spencer's *Power on Parade* (2000), the only academic publication on the organization to date, demonstrates a keen yet brief awareness of the links connecting these various cultural institutions. For example, Spencer points to an article published in the *Missouri Republican* September 28, 1877, which "emphasizes the connection between the Veiled

[4] *Missouri Republican*, October 10, 1878, as quoted in, Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 34.

[5] Candace Barrington, "'Forget What You Have Learned': The Mistick Krewe's 1914 Mardi Gras Chaucer." *American Literary History* 22, no. 4 (2010): 815.

Prophet's carnival and the New Orleans Carnival societies."[6] By the article's own admission, "it is well known that St. Louis borrows this [distinctly carnival] feature from the Southern cities."[7] Spencer also distinguishes the participatory nature of Mardi Gras from the top-down maneuverings of the Veiled Prophet parade, a celebration which "did not involve any sort of social leveling or role reversal."[8] However, Spencer's analysis operates within an intentionally expansive scope, providing only a cursory overview of the Veiled Prophet Society and its broader implications. While he situates Mardi Gras as a potent site of role inversion, his work largely bypasses the Anglo-American efforts to reconstitute the subversive nature French Carnivale into a regulated, hierarchical procession. Here, historians Mitchell, McKnight and Gill all argue that Mardi Gras' current processional form is in fact the direct result of this Anglo-American intervention—or rather, the "American conquest of Carnival."[9] Seeking to do away with the racially transgressive nature of French Mardi Gras, the Anglo-American elite refashioned the disorderly chaos of the French celebration into a well-structured procession, significantly altering the tone of festivities while providing a sense cultural continuity. These extravagant yet linear parades not only restricted the use of masking and public participation, but regularly featured paid for advertisements, Klansmen, and strong racial rhetoric—a key steppingstone in the evolution from carnivalesque role reversal towards market-oriented, racial indoctrination. A thorough examination of these kindred organizations thus holds the potential to

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[6] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 27.

[7] "The St. Louis Carnival." *Missouri Republican,* October 6, 1878, p. 6-8, as quoted in, Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 29.

[8] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 27.

[9] Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 26; Mark McKnight, "Charivaris, Cowbellions, and Sheet Iron Bands: Nineteenth-Century Rough Music in New Orleans." *American Music*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2005, p. 409; James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 45.

reveal the unique contextual parallels linking New Orleans and St. Louis, both bound by the common thread of a mobilized Black population in former slave holding states.

Whereas scholars of right-wing populism have long recognized the rise of vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan as "a counter-revolutionary backlash against the overthrow of slavery," organizations like the Mystick Krewe of Comus are generally exempt from such descriptions, often remaining under the categorical umbrella of the carnivalesque.[10] For clarity, I am using Berlet and Lyon's definition of right-wing populism: reactionary movements "motivated or[…]defined by a backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution."[11] These movements generally consisted of both of "middle-level groups in the social hierarchy, notably middle-and working-class whites," as well as "outsider factions of the elite itself."[12] Although the identification of populist groups in the 1860s and 1870s is technically anachronistic—"populism" deriving from the Progressive-era Populist Party platform of 1892—the term has since evolved to encompass prior movements across the political spectrum, thus giving rise to the concept of "right-wing populism."[13] Accordingly, both the Veiled Prophet Society and Mystick Krewe of Comus emerged from exalted fears of cross-racial alliances, shaped by histories of multi-racial, class-based uprisings that threatened to undermine the

[10] Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 5.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 2.

[13] Ibid., 4.

prevailing racial order.[14] The phenomenon of pan-racial solidarity thus operates as a critical catalyst for understanding the emergence of these distinct yet ideologically aligned entities.

What also becomes clear in linking these reactionary enclaves to antecedent folk forms is the link between the decline of "Charivari" to the rise of right-wing populism. A European cultural import sometimes referred to as "rough music," Charivari involved a cacophonous mock serenade enacted by costumed participants aiming to punish and publicly humiliate individuals who transgressed established social norms. As Palmer explains, "the custom was most often used to expose to the collective wrath of the community adulterous relationships, cuckolded husbands, wife and husband beaters, unwed mothers, and partners in unnatural marriage."[15] In America, the polymorphic tradition evolved to encompass more hearty aims, often being used to extract charitable funds from transgressors or to happily serenade newlyweds.[16] Palmer also locates Charivari as the root of American popular action, noting the correlation between the decline of Charivari at the end of the 19th century and the rise right-wing populism. During this time, reactionary, grass-roots groups like the "White Caps"—an informal faction of masked, agrarian agitators who opposed Black emancipation, Jewish landowners, and the downward trajectory of

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[14] In Louisiana, 1794—then under Spanish rule—authorities quelled an attempted slave revolt in Pointe Coupée, just 150 miles north of New Orleans. Inspired by the ongoing slave revolt in St. Domingue, a small network of enslaved Africans, white abolitionists, and mixed-race subjects plotted to overthrow and kill several plantation owners. Twenty-three enslaved Africans were found guilty of conspiracy and sentenced to death while three white men were sentenced to six years of forced labor in Havana. Spanish colonial authorities ordered the heads of those executed to be cut off and nailed to posts along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Pointe Coupée. Hall argues that meta-narratives about the Pointe Coupée Conspiracy were later "deeply implanted into the consciousness of white Louisianians," justifying the "oppression of Afro-Louisianians as well as whites who opposed slavery and racism." In this telling of events, free and enslaved Africans manipulated gullible whites into inciting a race war of biblical proportions, negating the agency of white abolitionists and any potential reading of events as a mixed-race slave revolt. The "historical myth" quickly became a cornerstone of Louisiana state history, being taught to white and black school children well into the 1940s. For more, see: Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 344-374.

[15] Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America." *Labour / Le Travail* 3 (1978): 9.

[16] Ibid., 18.

the white farmer class—took root in the American South and Midwest. Much like those individuals who in engaged in Charivari, "White Caps" also aimed to police the moral and sexual standards of the community albeit in a manner that was increasingly violent and decidedly more racial in scope.[17] "Whitecapping," Palmer thus concludes, was a "distinctively American phenomenon" that "took up where the charivari had left off," serving as a blueprint for emerging right-wing populist movements to follow.[18] Likewise, E.P. Thompson's monograph on Charivari concludes that, "transposed through the Atlantic, [English] Charivari not only contributed to the good-humored "shivaree" but may also have given something to lynch law and the Ku Klux Klan."[19]

However, the ostensible "decline" of Charvari as an American cultural institution merits further study. While Palmer simply notes that "by the mid-1890s, the custom [had become] increasingly rare," the exact reason for Charivari's disappearance remains unclear, an unexplored entry in the annals of time.[20] Crucially, this thesis aims to expand on this connection between the decline of Charivari and the rise of right-wing populism, demonstrating how the emergence of reactionary groups like the Mystick Krewe of Comus and the Veiled Prophet Society coincided with a juridical impetus to outlaw Charivari, granting elites with a monopoly over carnivalesque folk forms. By usurping this informal mechanism for wealth redistribution and revelry, elites thus sought to integrate the carnivalesque into rising capitalist structures of authority while restricting access to bottom-up cultural expressions.

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[17] Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," 39-40. Likewise, McKnight contends that there is "no racial link showing that Black or mixed-race people either participated or were targeted by charivari." McKnight, "Charivaris, Cowbellions, and Sheet Iron Bands: Nineteenth-Century Rough Music in New Orleans," 411.

[18] Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," 39.

[19] Thompson, E. P. "Rough Music Reconsidered." *Folklore* 103, no. 1 (1992): 18.

[20] Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," 39.

The broader tension between secrecy and spectacle in American far-right organizations remains an equally understudied phenomenon. Early works on the Klan by authors Charles C. Alexander, David M. Chalmers and Kenneth T. Jackson, all take claims of secrecy at face value. To them, the Klan was, first and foremost, a highly secretive organization which concealed the individual identities of its members to avoid federal prosecution. Despite the organization's high approval rates in the American South and Midwest, Chalmers maintains that the Klan remained "a supersecret organization, masked and mysterious, with a tradition of violence."[21] Beginning in the mid 1990s, a second wave of Klan-oriented scholarship produced by historians Nancy Maclean and Leonard J. Moore only reinforced this belief. Maclean's 1994 publication, *Masked Chivalry*, argues that the Klan revivalism was largely suburban and middle-class affair. Focusing on the small town of Athens, Georgia, Maclean argues that the Klan allowed middling white-collar residents to express concerns over both the consolidation of corporate wealth and proletarian unrest.

Yet neither Maclean nor Moore sought to prod into the paradoxical nature of fraternal secrecy. While Moore acknowledges how "highly publicized social events[…]proved particularly useful in attracting new members," the purposeful contradictions which riddled Klan tactics and ideology are largely ignored.[22] In fact, one of the few works to address the duality of secrecy and spectacle amongst secret societies was a monograph co-authored by sociologists Kathleen Blee and Amy McDowall. Much like Moore, Blee and McDowall argue that eye-catching public ceremony functioned as a corrective tool, popularizing the Klan's ideological

[21] David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 40.

[22] Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 50-51.

worldview without sacrificing fraternal exclusivity. However, the article ultimately falls short of suggesting any potential symbiosis between either of these elements. Rather, secrecy "conflicted with the Klan's agenda to spread a message of racism," acting as a limitation to be circumvented rather than a feature to be exploited.[23]

Brian Hayden's *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory* constitutes one of the few academic works to directly grapple with the innate contradictions of secret societies. Though Hayden's work focuses exclusively on pre-Columbian indigenous groups, the theoretical framework established in his research is of immense value. Here, Hayden explains how fraternal secrecy had little to do with concealing identity: "everyone was usually well aware of the existence of these societies and knew who belonged to them."[24] The real secret, Hayden contends, "was the ritual knowledge that members claimed was the key to their supposed arcane supernatural powers."[25] And while notions of arcane supernatural powers may seem out of place in late 19th century America, reexamining the society's intricate relationship with secrecy allows for a deeper understanding of how supernatural powers had been superseded by access to financial wealth and political influence. As Hayden explains, if members of a secret society are to "enjoy the sense of power and privilege[...], they must, as it were, demonstrate their secrecy publicly."[26] Only two works have applied a similar framework to the study right-wing populist groups, the first being Elaine Frantz Parsons' monograph, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan." As this work sets out to question the motivations behind

[23] Kathleen Blee & Amy McDowell, "The duality of spectacle and secrecy: a case study of fraternalism in the 1920s US Ku Klux Klan." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 249.

[24] Brian Hayden, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and the Origins Societal Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 24

Klan theatricality, Parsons asserts that the role of costumes transcended the mere concealment of identity. In some cases, Parsons notes how victims were even able to identify their assailants when a Klansman's robe had been fashioned from an old dress belonging to his wife, thereby undermining the disguise's intended purpose.[27] An alternative explanation provided by Parsons is that costumes and ceremony encouraged "Northerners to read their attacks as theatrical, rather than political or military."[28] By appropriating the "symbolic language of minstrelsy, carnival, and related popular forms," Klansmen were able to "to construct a more resilient white, male, southern identity" while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability. Just as the Veiled Prophet parade sought to divide an unruly working class through pomp and ceremony, Klansmen carried out scripted attacks—some of which were reported to involve timed fireworks—"to restore the apparent clarity formerly provided by the institution of slavery."[29] Here, performance and secrecy blurred the lines between theatrical acts and explicit moments of physical violence. We might thus understand the Klan to constitute an "invisible empire" on multiple fronts, obscured not only by their furtive rituals and white robes, but also by the organization's capacity to mask acts of terror as carnivalesque performance.

Likewise, Barrington's investigation into the conquest of Mardi Gras parades contends that procession themes "become a useful lens for examining the ways American medievalism appropriates and redeploys authors, texts, and images to affirm local values."[30] However, the region's polymorphic demographic and long history of cross-racial fraternization complicate

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[27] Elaine Frantz Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan." *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 3 (2005), 825.

[28] Ibid., 828.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Barrington, "'Forget What You Have Learned': The Mistick Krewe's 1914 Mardi Gras Chaucer," 809.

simple, monolithic notions of "local character," failing to question whether these cultural forms created new values rather than merely affirming those which already existed. An in-depth analysis of Veiled Prophet procession themes reveals the discursive mechanisms through which bourgeois society inscribed new values onto the working public, values which were subsequently codified and internalized as "local character." Though research into the Klan has yielded an abundant supply of secondary literature, relatively little has been said about the duality of secrecy and spectacle within the order of Veiled Prophet. Spencer's own research touches on the issue only briefly, noting how "the only prophet whose name has ever been released to the public, [Police commissioner John G.] Priest, was well known throughout the city for his active role in suppressing the strike."[31] However, the text falls short of identifying the exact mechanisms at play. Incorporating the theoretical frameworks developed by Parsons and Hayden thus holds the potential to elucidate how modern processional forms obscured instances of explicit violence, redeploying the very anonymity which once facilitated racial transgression in cities like New Orleans to reify racial and socio-economic structures of authority.

Tracing the discursive appropriation and redeployment of popular folk forms requires a flexible temporal framework. As a result, the periods analyzed in this thesis vary by chapter and theme. The contextual examination of racial and socio-economic tensions in early New Orleans spans from 1730 to 1860, while the core analysis of the Veiled Prophet Society focuses on the years between 1865 and 1910. I draw from a variety of primary sources including travel accounts, private communiqués, and procession pamphlets, though the bulk of my research examines newspaper articles published in Louisiana and Missouri. Given that modern processional displays like the Veiled Prophet celebration were intended to draw in tourists from

[31] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 19.

neighboring states and provide a substantial boost to the local economy, newspaper coverage of these event was extensive, with parade descriptions often spanning several pages. The rich and colorful descriptions of float themes provide invaluable insights into symbolic language of power crafted by a rising class of industrial and financial elites. Moreover, print media served as a key outlet for Veiled Prophet members to publicize their secret enclave. Following in the footsteps of Spencer, I employ a hermeneutic lens which accounts for the ties between print media publication and the fraternal orders by reading these sources "against the grain." Here, Spencer concludes that the deferential newspaper articles extolling the order's secretive power were likely "written by a founding member of the Veiled Prophet organization."[32] While speculative, there is ample evidence to support the idea. For example, Col Leigh O. Knapp, founder of the Missouri Republican Guard and owner of the highly influential *Missouri Republican* was also a founding member of the Veiled Prophet Society.[33] Establishing the links between print media ownership and the order of the Veiled Prophet lends these sources even greater importance, constituting of one the main avenues through which the organization sought to exploit the American imaginary.

I also rely on a variety of analytic tools, including Foucault's concept of the "panoptic machine" and "modern disciplines," which seek to improve the exercise of power by making it "lighter, more rapid, [and] more effective."[34] Cedric J. Robinson's conceptualization of 'racial capitalism,' with its emphasis on the mutually constitutive elements of racialized exploitation and capital gain, also informs my approach. Additionally, I draw on Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of "invented traditions"—novel cultural creations that, dressed in the robes of antiquity, pose as ancient rites to advance political or socio-economic agendas. Lastly, W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of

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[32] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 7.

[33] Ibid.; "George Knapp, Missouri Journalist," *The Milan Republican* (MO, Milan), Sep. 19, 1940, 6.

[34] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 209.

the "counter-revolution of property" provides a useful framework for examining the failure of Reconstruction, the economic alliance between Northern and Southern elites following the Civil War, and the resulting "dictatorship of capital," designed "to guide and repress universal suffrage" in favor of economic interests.[35]

To fully grasp the emergence of the Veiled Prophet Society, it is equally imperative to contextualize the organization's meteoric rise within the socio-economic landscape of 19th century St. Louis, a city characterized by rapid industrialization and pronounced social stratification. Positioned at the nexus of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, St. Louis first emerged as a bustling gateway to the Western Frontier in the early 1800s, growing from a fur trading outpost of roughly 15,000 into a booming industrial metropolis.[36] By 1870, it spawned 18 miles of the riverside and boasted a population of roughly 300,000, falling just behind its closest economic competitor at the time, the great city of Chicago. Despite reeling from eastern capital flight and the ensuing Panic of 1857, St. Louis emerged from the Civil War as an unlikely center for domestic manufacture, shifting away from a mercantile model reliant on eastern capital investment to an increasingly self-directed economy.[37] By 1887, St. Louis would be home to a variety of major enterprises, including the Anheuser-Busch brewery, the St. Louis Car Company, and the Brown Shoe Company (currently Caleres & Dr. Scholl). It specialized in meat packaging, textiles, steel production, flour milling, and machine shop products while bloated

[35] W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 533.

[36] Jeffrey S. Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16; Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States* (New York: Basic Books Publishing, 2020), 2.

[37] Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West*, 16-19.

state investment in railways allowed St. Louis to remain a contending gateway to the West despite losing ground to Chicago.[38]

A city of confluence in more ways than one, St. Louis embodied broader tensions between North and South, Republican and Democrat, native born and immigrant, as well as merchant and producer. Shedding most of its French character during the population booms of the 1840s, mid-19th century St. Louis was dominated by a "Yankee" city center which was often at odds with Missouri's rural population, largely Southern Democrat farmers who had settled the Ozarks and other outlying regions. As the Missouri state legislature increasingly aligned itself with Southern traders and Confederate values throughout the emerging Sectional Crisis, pro-slavery demonstrations and blatant acts of intimidation led by Missouri politician David Atchison coloured eastern perceptions of Missouri, earning it the moniker, "Little Dixie."[39] Subsequent capital divestment from the region ultimately allowed Chicago to supersede St. Louis as the dominant commercial hub in the American Midwest. The few "Yankee merchants" who remained in St. Louis with a rising class of local entrepreneurs, filling the vacuum left by the transient branch managers of yesteryear. While financial elitism in St. Louis had previously been defined by ties to cities like New York and Boston, the exodus of eastern merchants gave way to new strata of St. Louis society. This new homegrown-elite maintained ties with the East

[38] Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 117; David T. Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (New York: August M. Kelley, 1966), 2.

[39] David Grimsted, *American Mobbing: 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 250; While numbers vary, Adler estimates that over 90% of native-born, rural Missourians came from Southern Farming backgrounds: Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West*, 28.

while conforming to Missouri's more conservative outlook.[40] According to both Jack and Adler, this developing character was neither strictly Southern nor Northern, but rather, a distinctly Midwestern constitution which favored regional capital over "flighty" New York investment firms: a pro-capitalist mentality which had fused with Southern social regionalisms.[41] Likewise, rural Missourians who previously condemned St. Louis as a "Yankee" stronghold became increasingly familiar with the advantages offered by urban enterprise, resulting in a syncretic transmutation, easing tensions between rural and urban, Northern and Southern. This shift towards a socio-regional conservatism is best exemplified by the *Missouri Republican*, a "rabidly pro-business" newspaper which, despite its namesake, advertised that it was "devoted to the interests of the West and of the South."[42] Neither were its residents a monolith, and frictions persisted between a largely pro-business, Republican city center and Democrat supporters in both working-class boroughs and rural areas of the state.

The economic boom of the 1840s brought a large migrant workforce in search of high wages. By 1850, one third of St. Louis's population had been born in Germany.[43] Likewise, Irish emigrees fleeing the potato blight flocked to the city in large numbers throughout the 1840s and 1850s, providing St. Louis with an industrial work force overnight.[44] As St. Louis reestablished itself as the third largest cotton market in America in the 1870s, thousands of African American

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[40] Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West*, 142, 164; Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*, 116. For more on rural Missouri's Southern identity, see: Christoper Philips, *Missouri's Confederate: Claiborne Fox Jackson and the Creation of Southern Identity in the Border West* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); Douglas R. Hurt, Agriculture and Slavery in Missouri's Little Dixie (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992).

[41] Ibid., 174.

[42] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 7; "The Missouri Republican" *The Missouri Telegraph* (Fulton, MO), Dec. 27, 1878.

[43] Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 139.

[44] Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West*, 94.

"Exodusters" made their way to St. Louis in hopes of reaching Kansas, shrinking the Southern labour pool.[45] Once home to a chorus of abolitionist chants and slogans, the shifting economic relations and increasingly "Southern character" of 1870s St. Louis led residents to actively marginalize Exodusters. Those fleeing were given very little aid, relying on the funds of a small number of successful Black entrepreneurs to make ends meet while being housed in churches and community homes.[46] Jack estimates that roughly 15,000 to 20,000 African Americans made their way to St. Louis during the late 1870s. While many left, those who stayed contributed to yet another population boom, increasing the city's Black population sixfold.[47] Though St. Louis is currently synonymous with state sponsored segregation, otherwise known as "redlining," Black residents were, at this time, spread throughout the city's many boroughs, often living alongside German and Irish immigrants in squalid conditions.[48] The most destitute sought lodging in one of the city's many cramped tenement buildings or shanti towns where sanitary conditions were poor and disease rampant. Slums like "Clabber Alley" and "Cross Keys" were not only filthy and crime ridden but stood in stark contrast to wealthy neighborhoods like Lafayette Square and Lucas Place, private communities (often limited to forty homes or less) where the ruling class lived in palatial mansions with all the latest amenities.[49]

Though German immigrants began settling in the Missouri area as early as 1830, the failed European revolutions of 1848 ignited another major wave of immigration, sending

[45] Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*, 115.

[46] Ibid., 160.

[47] Ibid., 110.

[48] Ibid., 139.

[49] Ibid., 140; Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 4.

thousands of radical and working-class Germans to the St. Louis region.[50] Unlike earlier waves of German immigrants, the "Forty-Eighters"—as they came to be known—were often wealthier and better educated, their familiarity with classical texts evening earning them the designation of "Latin farmers."[51] Those who failed at farming eventually moved to the city where they disseminated radical currents of thought. While the German diaspora in Missouri had historically organized its social structures around religious freedoms, segmented into Lutheran and Catholic factions, the Forty-Eighters emerged as atheistic free-thinkers. In their pursuit of freedom of expression, they convened in coffee houses and saloons, engaging in political discourse and the free exchange of ideas.[52]

The efforts and contributions of German emigrees in shaping the events of the St. Louis Commune should not be underestimated.[53] Together, they founded libraries dedicated to radical and socialist literature, agitated for abolition, and even founded social groups like the Turner Society of St. Louis, covert social groups which promoted a wide range of social reforms.[54] Amongst the long list noted Forty-Eighters was Joseph Weydemeyer, a Prussian solider turned journalist whose tireless efforts helped shape the nature and ethos of the budding American labour movement. A close friend of Marx, Weydemeyer founded the first proletarian league in New York shortly after arriving in America in 1852. He continued to work in a variety of cities,

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[50] Mark Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 135.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 140.

[53] For the sake of thoroughness, it is important to note that German immigrants, like other groups, were not exempt from prevailing racist attitudes. For example, Carl Schurz, a prominent St. Louis resident, government official, and former participant in the 1848 revolutions, "described the Caribbean as being infested by indolent Blacks" and referred to Dominicans as "lazy and shiftless." Even the local German-language newspaper, *Anzeiger des Westens*, a which was aligned with the Republican Party, openly opposed racial integration. Mark Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 39.

[54] Ibid.,148.

including St. Louis, where he fought to unite factional trade unions divided between German and English-speaking workers.[55] Following the St. Louis Commune of 1877, the same German radicals who had ensured that St. Louis remained a bastion of abolitionist attitudes and pro-Union sentiment throughout the Civil War were subsequently condemned as communist agitators: importers of ideological disease and ruffian behavior. Conversely, Veiled Prophet founders were divided on the issue of slavery. Charles E. Slayback was an ardent Confederate sympathizer who moved his business from St. Louis to New Orleans at the outbreak of the war, while his brother, Alonzo, himself a slave owner, served the Confederate army as a Colonel.[56] Other founding members were pro-business Republicans who championed emancipation to expand the modern labour market. The St. Louis Commune would thus go on to exemplify unfolding ideological shifts in the American landscape as well as the limits of American republicanism. Former Republican radicals abandoned the party in favour of staunch socialist affiliations while former Confederate and Union generals who had fought against each other in the Civil War now united against a common adversary: the rising threat of organized labour and Marxist doctrine. As Burbank notes, "conservative white leaders in the South took their stand with Northern industrialists against agrarian and labor radicalism."[57] The Compromise of 1877 and the subsequent withdrawal of Northern troops from the American South signaled a new phase in the Republican Party, one in which the financial and political interests of the elite took

[55] Karl Obberman, *Jospeh Weydemeyer: A Pioneer of American Socialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 37; Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 64-65.

[56] Although the Slayback family history is sparsely documented, Alonzo Slayback's own grandson, Tim Adams, wrote a 2017 op-ed piece which confirms that Alonzo owned at least one enslaved person which he and his wife received as a wedding gift: Tim Adams, "An unapologetic defense of un-PC Confederate flag issue," *Daily Inter Lake*, Jan. 01, 2017, https://dailyinterlake.com/news/2017/jan/01/an-unapologetic-defense-of-un-pc-confederate-6/.

[57] Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 7.

precedence over the party's lofty ideals of racial and socio-economic equality, forming a coalition that would pave the way for support of the Veiled Prophet Society.

Concomitant with these political shifts was the Great Strike of 1877, an all-encompassing labor dispute that underscored the mounting tensions between industrialists and laborers. The strike itself was triggered by repeated wage cuts for railway workers, the prevalence of chronic and extended backpay, increasingly unsafe working conditions, predatory business practices which kept workers idly paying room and board days on end, the widespread use of child labour —all coupled with the inadequacy or unwillingness of existing unions to address these growing concerns.[58] Disruptions first began on July 16th when West-Virginia workers on the Baltimore-Ohio Line went on strike protesting yet another wage cut, the third salary reduction for workers on the Baltimore-Ohio Line that year. Within days, railway workers were striking in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Kansas City, and St. Louis, ultimately extending as far West as San Francisco. The immediate shutdown of commercial train transport produced jarring effects throughout the country, halting one of the country's most crucial transport lines. As labour disruption soon spread to other sectors of the economy, political and financial elites spoke in hushed tones of class warfare and nationwide rebellion. On July 24th, future secretary of state John Hays wrote to his wealthy father-in-law, warning that, "any hour the mob chooses it can destroy any city in the country—that is the simple truth."[59]

Tensions quickly mounted as state militias either sided with workers or simply refused to intervene. President of the Baltimore-Ohio line, John W. Garrett, was reportedly mortified when

[58] Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 7; Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 14-15; Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Pathfinder Publishing, 1977), 18.

[59] Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877,* 9.

the West-Virginia militia refused to act against strikers in Martinsburg.[60] Much to the dismay of railway executives, strikers captured union depots around the country with little resistance. John W. Garrett promptly urged local politicians to deploy federal troops against strikers, an unprecedented maneuver that raised significant legal concerns regarding whether these actions constituted a violation of civil liberties. While Hayes initially refused the request, sustained pressure from business interests and state governors eventually led to President Hayes deploying federal troops in the states of West-Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois.[61] The order resulted in a wave of fatalities throughout the country with Baltimore, Chicago, and Pittsburgh being noted sites of bloodshed. For instance, when federal troops numbering 600 confronted Pennsylvanian strikers on July 21, the ensuing conflict led to the death of some 20 workers as well as several dozen injuries.[62]

Somewhat ironically, the resulting loss of life emboldened workers in Pittsburg to lay siege to railroad property, burning 39 buildings of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, 104 engines, 46 passenger cars, and over 1,200 freight cars—a monetary loss which the railway company recouped the next year when it successfully sued the county of Allegheny for $4.1 million dollars.[63] The chaos in Pittsburgh eventually diminished and the exasperated crowd, having nothing left to burn, slowly returned home. Just so, the upheaval ended nearly and quickly as it began, and by July 31st, impromptu strike committees had been suppressed as authorities gradually restored order throughout the country. Crucially, Foner and Burbank both suggest that the hysteria surrounding the conflict was a major cornerstone in shifting political

[60] Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 11.

[61] Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 47-48.

[62] Ibid., 74-75.

[63] Ibid., 77.

allegiances away from a North/South binary towards a more class-based lens which prioritized the rights of propertied men.[64]

In St. Louis, the strike first took root when railway workers in East St. Louis (a key relay junction connecting the Eastern and Western railway system) formed an informal strike committee on the night of July 21st. The Workingman's Party of the United States, then a little-known political organization and the first Marxists political party in America, took command of the strike on the same evening, demanding an immediate restoration of the 1873 wage scale—roughly 50 percent higher than the reduced wages of 1877.[65] Its member base was largely German but also included a minority of American members. The following day, they elected an executive committee and issued "General Order #1" halting all commercial freight traffic beginning at midnight. What thus began as a small contingent of striking railway men soon spread across the river, growing exponentially as workers from other sectors of the economy soon joined in the strike. Reports of national corruption, reoccurring bank runs, ubiquitous wage cuts and record high unemployment had already led to widespread disaffection amongst the working poor and provided the perfect fodder for a far-reaching general strike to take form. Strike leaders thus had little trouble in convincing other industries to join their cause.[66] On Monday, July 23rd, a mass meeting in the industrial hub of Carondelet, attended by heavy industry workers and railway employees, signaled an impending upheaval. The ensuing mayhem, with boisterous crowds openly roaming the streets, shutting down factory after factory, became a major cause of hysteria within the city's elite. With the bloody events of the Paris Commune

[64] Burbank notes that at the outbreak of the St. Louis Commune, "ex-Generals Smith and Marmaduke, representing the North and the South respectively, were put in charge of the resistance to the revolutionaries." Burbank, *Reign of Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877*, 45; Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 144.

[65] Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 201.

[66] Ibid.; Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 14.

looming in recent memory, men of property became increasingly weary, mobilizing to protect their interests. J.A. Dacus' 1877 history of the strike noted that in St. Louis, news of the strike "created not only a sensation, but a profound feeling of alarm."[67] As the strike's momentum grew, it eventually "involved every section of the country and assumed proportions threatening to the existence of the Government itself."[68] St. Louis' ruling elite prepared themselves for class warfare: "they slept in their clothes, sent their families outside of the city for safety, and hoarded food and water in case of a complete breakdown of society, when necessities would become impossible to obtain."[69] The memoirs of prominent St. Louis resident Albert Warren Kelsey recount how, on the morning of Tuesday the 24th, Mayor Overstolz gathered an "assemblage of[...]merchant princes and moneyed men" to his office to organize a volunteer militia.[70] Amongst them were "the Catholic Bishop Ryan, the principal bank presidents, the police commissioners, [and] journal editors," a conservative response force which the *Missouri Republican* whimsically described as the "best educated classes of society; men whose light fitting and fashionably cut clothes but partly conceal brawny muscles and magnificent physical powers."[71] This paternalistic, top-down response would go onto inform the establishment of the Veiled Prophet Society, as numerous public figures instrumental in suppressing the strike assumed pivotal roles within this fraternal order.

Though similar labour disputes were unfolding across the country, the St. Louis Commune was unique in several regards. Firstly, the WPUSA had finally achieved a considerable degree of racial unity despite its history ethnic tension: Black organizers spoke at

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[67] J. A. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Library, 1887), 366.
[68] Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States*, 366.

[69] Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 209.

[70] Albert Warren Kelsey, *Autobiographical Notes and Memoranda* (Baltimore: Munder-Thomsen Press, 1911), 96.

[71] Ibid.; "Ways of Iron," *The Missouri Republican* (St. Louis, MO), August 2, 1877, 3.

rallies to the applause of largely white audiences, participated in high profile meetings with local government, and were even elected to leadership positions within the party's Executive Committee. Secondly, the St. Louis Commune was relatively non-violent compared to disruptions in cities like Chicago and Pittsburg. Workers protected railway property and factories while not a single fatality was recorded throughout the entire affair. Rather, the takeover of St. Louis was perhaps more ideologically threatening than anything else. According to Kruger, what truly distinguished the St. Louis Commune from other strikes was its doctrinal genealogy, descending directly "from the 1848 European revolutions, the Paris Commune, and Marx's First International."[72]

Predictably, elites wasted no time responding to the takeover, exerting pressure on federal politicians to deploy the National Guard while organizing volunteer militias in the interim. By July 30th, authorities had already arrested key strike leaders, swiftly dismantling the St. Louis Commune from above.[73] However, the brief strike also demonstrated that workers could manage a major American city: administering city services, operating select manufactures—even maintaining law and order through volunteer patrols. Above all else, their actions gave credence to the notion that owners of industry constituted an entirely expendable stratum of society. The ensuing response form elites thus sought to invert displays of civil disobedience, facilitating the congealing a new bourgeois identity while reaffirming the necessity of financial elites. This rising bourgeoisie of the 1870s also constituted the first non-transient class of modern elites to operate out of St. Louis. Though many were indeed industrialists, fitting the classification of the Gilded Age's *nouveau riche*, others were of the mercantile class, often making their fortunes as

[72] Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 185.

[73] Ibid., 235.

grain merchants. Many even began as merchants but quickly transitioned into manufacturing, leveraging their capital and networks to capitalize on the region's economic expansion. In fact, the exodus of Eastern merchants from St. Louis throughout the 1850s meant that most elites were, by this time, "new money."[74] The tension commonly observed between emerging industrialists and the old guard of elite merchants was thus notably less pronounced in St. Louis as it was in other American cities. The sweeping turmoil of the St. Louis Commune, halting all commercial traffic in its wake, further joined merchants and manufacturers into a unified front. Here, Beckert argues that labour disputes were a major catalyst in the formation of this new bourgeois identity nationwide, galvanizing a heterogenous grouping of financial elites to unite in their opposition to an unruly working class.[75] Moreover, this new bourgeoisie distinguished itself from earlier iterations of financial elitism in several regards: they consolidated large swathes of both economic and political power, fostered cross-industry interconnectedness, developed a strong class consciousness, and actively reshaped urban spaces to reflect their dominance, embedding their interests into the physical and cultural fabric of the city. Thus, by founding the Veiled Prophet celebration, members of this insular consortium participated in what Beckert refers to as the creation of a "shared class culture," forging a new cultural form that, while directed at the working poor, also shaped the group identity of rising regional elites.[76]

It should also be noted that Veiled Prophet founders were considerably less wealthy than their New York counterparts while the organization was itself far more regional in scope.

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[74] The term "local elites" merely refers to individuals with permanent residency in the city of St. Louis, though it should be noted many of the elite were born out of state or abroad. In fact, only 24% of the Veiled Prophet founding members were born in Missouri: Adler, *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West*, 174; Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 11.

[75] Sven Beckert, *Monied Metropolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2001), 8.

[76] Ibid., 12.

Though the Veiled Prophets would later include amongst their ranks veritable business magnates like Adolphus Busch—widely considered one of the wealthiest men in America by the turn of the 20th century—many of the order's founding members presided over comparatively modest enterprises and lacked Busch's extensive resources. For instance, Veiled Prophet founder John A. Scudder (president of the Memphis Packet Company, banker, and real estate mogul) was incredibly affluent by regional standards but fell short when measured against the colossal fortunes of the Vanderbilts, Goulds, and Rockefellers of the same era. Hence, where the New York Bourgeoisie constituted the pinnacle of financial elitism in the city, often seeking to distinguish themselves from the "petty bourgeoisie" and lesser elites, the Veiled Prophet Society constituted a more inclusive grouping of the upper classes.[77]

This is not to say, however, that the elite of St. Louis perused modest lifestyles either. Veiled Prophet member George Bain was a Scottish immigrant who made his fortune as a grain merchant and later as the owner of the Atlantic and O'Fallon Sawmills. These relatively small-scale business ventures allowed Bain to build an opulent 8,000-square-foot mansion on Lafayette Square where he lived secluded among the city's wealthiest residents.[78] Much like New York City in the 1870s, city planning in St. Louis was directly shaped by the intense social stratification.[79] Prussian-born architect and real estate developer Julius Pitzman was well known throughout St. Louis for his development of private streets: exclusive enclaves which not only

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[77] Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 211.

[78] St. Louis History and Architecture, "The George Bain mansion in Lafayette Square," Facebook, Jan 14, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/stlhistoryandarchitecture/posts/the-george-bain-mansion-in-lafayette-square-is-one-of-the-lesser-known-historic-/327383851440642/. For contrast, Alva Vanderbilt's summer cottage spanned 140,000 square feet and exemplified the extravagant scale of Gilded Age excess, costing an estimated $3,000,000 when it was built in 1892: Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 258.

[79] Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 56, 155; Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*, 139-140.

reflected but also reinforced the emerging social hierarchies of the era.[80] The Veiled Prophet organization thus enabled a more wide-ranging group of regional elites to cement a unified group identity, facilitating class expressions by transforming the city into a site where their dominance was both naturalized and enforced. Crucially, Beckert argues that a key distinction between the working poor and this rising tide of producer-based elitism was the use of collective action. Whereas workers could "only exert power when they overcome divisions and act collectively," bourgeois New Yorkers "exerted extraordinary power even without engaging in collective action, thanks to their control of capital."[81] However, a comprehensive study of the Veiled Prophet Society illustrates how regional elites, perhaps due to a lack of individual resources and influence, closely mirrored and inverted the cooperative spirit of the working class. Through this collective enterprise, they inscribed a unified vision of St. Louis, one that disciplined the populace into accepting and reproducing the capitalist ideologies and racial values that sustained their power.

This project thus serves a dual purpose. First, it provides a historiographic intervention into conventional interpretations of fraternal secrecy and its role in the perpetuation of racial and economic ideologies. Second, it connects disparate yet inextricably linked histories, connecting the usurpation of folk forms with racial capitalism and the counter-revolution of property. Accordingly, my first chapter provides comprehensive context for the emergence of the Veiled Prophet Society, emphasizing its role as a strategic and deliberate countermeasure to racially unified labor movements. It contends that Charles Slayback, drawing from his experience as a

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[80] Catalina Freixas and Mark Abbott, *Segregation by Design: Conversations and Calls for Action in St. Louis* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2018), 597. For more on urban planning and residential segregation in St. Louis see: Colin Gordon, Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

[81] Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 13.

member of the Mystick Krewe of Comus in New Orleans, played a pivotal role in shaping this new cultural form, subsuming Southern cultural practices within the burgeoning capitalist order. This chapter also examines the racial dimensions of these fraternal orders, juxtaposing instances of cross-racial fraternization with obverse episodes of racial antagonism in both New Orleans and St. Louis. This analysis reveals how racial tensions catalyzed the formation of these fraternal and reactionary societies while illuminating a broader lineage of appropriating folk traditions to reinforce capitalist and racial ideologies. My second chapter explores the "spectacle of secrecy." It posits that the organization's fixation with secrecy was not intended to conceal information, but rather to promote "known unknowns" in print media, engaging abstract dimensions of thought to foster a culture of paranoia and self-surveillance. Drawing on descriptions of float themes and procession imagery, it contends that the modern processional format constitutes a living panoptic construct, reordering the former chaos of carnivalesque revelry into well-structured displays of civil obedience that amplified the explicit visibility of the passive observer. My third chapter focuses on the Veiled Prophet celebration's role in blending racial and political imagery. It demonstrates how the Veiled Prophet celebration's use of medieval imagery not only obscured explicit instances of physical violence, but also deployed degrading depictions of African Americans to disseminate both inter and intra-racial distinctions and guide the shifting racial contours of post-emancipatory America. Ultimately, this analysis aims to denaturalize notions of inherent racial animosity among the working classes, demonstrating how the co-constituent elements of racial thought and free enterprise had to be woven into the lower echelons of the American social fabric. This process yields key insights into the phenomenon of "top-down populism," a force which sought to target those bound, not by racial creed, but by the structures of capital and a shared experience of exploitation.

Chapter 1: Labour Disputes and Racial Politics— The Elite's Crusade Against Working Class Solidarity

On July 30th, 1877, the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* published an article detailing the situation in St. Louis, which had only now begun to recover from a week-long strike unlike any other in American history. Under the headline, "Not Ended Yet," a series of sub headers paint a vivid image of urban disarray:

> Business of all Kinds Suspended…Refusing to Move Trains at any Cost…That Quiet Village Converted into a Bustling fortress…United States and State Troopers Preserving the Peace…Peace Effectively Restored on the West Side of the River…The Reign of Terror Ended in St. Louis…Volunteer Companies Still Policing the City...Turbulent Workmen Returning to Their Labors.[82]

In the absence of any documented fatalities, news outlets strove to frame the general strike within a discourse of impending catastrophe, employing exaggerated apocalyptic rhetoric to evoke a sense of societal collapse. The strike's profound rupture of racial norms—uniting workers merely twelve years after the end of slavery—proved an excellent target for editors. As columnists disparaged strikers as unruly vagrants, they demonstrated an ever-vigilant interest in the inter-racial composition of strikers. An article published in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on July 26 detailed how a particularly riotous detachment of workers, "black in proportion of four to six" and "filling the air with the wild yells particular to excited negros, ran down Lombard Street to attack the Saxony Mills," presumably forcing it's employees to shut down production against their will.[83] According to the same report, the racial composition of strikers ostensibly darkened as confrontations grew more violent. When the same detachment of strikers was reported entering the Atlantic Mills mere moments later, an argument erupted between the strikers and

[82] "Not Ended Yet," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* (St. Louis, MO), Jul. 30, 1877, 4.

[83] "A Riotous Mob," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Jul. 26, 1877, 5.

mill owner, George Bain, leading one of the demonstrators to strike Bain in the face. The reporter here noted that "the crowd was by this time almost exclusively black," and "what few white men remained were but the scum of the levee."[84] The author also characterized the primary instigator of the assault as "a negro thief who would not work if he had a chance."[85] Columnists thus oscillated between two poles: white strikers were dismissed as communist ideologues intent on "driving well-employed men, women, and children out of factories and shops," while Black strikers were brandished instigators with no desire to work.[86] This bi-polar manoeuvring blamed civil unrest on the city's Black population while simultaneously dismissing the symmetrical participation of supposedly less-violent whites. Any physical agitation was coded as Black (and therefore uncivilized), while the participation of more "redeemable whites" was discredited as the product of an internationalist plot. Hence, if Black strikers were unemployed vagrants and white strikers were fanatical communists, readers were thus encouraged to believe that the only reasonable, hardworking Americans were those who had chosen *not* to strike. This very sentiment was reflected in an address given by St. Louis County Sheriff, John Finn. While attempting to assemble a citizen's militia of 5000 men, Finn implored:

> It is the duty of every class of our citizens, poor as well as rich, to stand up and defend their homes and property against the unlicensed fury of a mob not composed of honest labourers of the country, but of resident and imported vagrants, who under the fair colors of workingmen, are endeavoring to pray upon the community.[87]

Even those religious authorities who were skeptical of industrialists for their maltreatment of workers urged the "laboring man [to] recognize his providential position without murmuring."[88]

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[84] "A Riotous Mob," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Jul. 26, 1877, 5.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

[87] "Sheriff's Proclamation," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Jul. 26, 1877, 5.

[88] "The Strike as Viewed from the Pulpit," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Aug. 03, 1877, 5.

Beneath these well-crafted caricatures, the WPUSA's concise demands for safe working conditions, an eight-hour workday, and a minimum wage were entirely absent from mainstream media coverage. Moreover, in coding Black participation as both violent and uncivilized, media outlets sent a clear message to readers: that a foolhardy alliance between the races had exposed the city of St. Louis to the ravages of Black violence. Members on the WPUSA's executive committee were all too aware that print media outlets had exploited the "race question" to turn public opinion against the strike. One such member, Henry Allen "gave a postmortem of the strike suggestive of this connection between racism and retreat." Another member of executive committee, Albert Currlin, openly blamed the movement's failure on a "gang of niggers" after a troop of Black militiamen was sent into the city to break the strike, ignoring Black labour's wider contributions in the process.[89] Evidently, the racial wedge bolstered by newsprint rhetoric was already well at work.

For all the movement's progress in unifying the city's working class to a solitary front, blatant anti-Black sentiment remained a persistent issue.[90] Even so, the unprecedented solidarity of Black and white workers who participated in the takeover of St. Louis shook industrialists to their core. As Marxist doctrine threatened the existing social order like never before, financial elites sought to establish a new cultural form, one capable of disseminating increasingly complex ideological messages. This multi-pronged ideological end point was no easy feat. It aimed to legitimize wealth inequality, "Americanize" German-born residents and local dissidents, and reassert racial norms under the banner of a unified "White" identity. The solution, as it turns out, would lie with Charles Slayback, a Missourian Confederate and wealthy grain merchant whose

[89] David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working-Class History* (London: Verso Publishing, 1994), 103.

[90] Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 232.

brief sojourn in New Orleans inspired the city's newest tradition. While the Order of the Veiled Prophet was largely founded by individuals who had played key roles in suppressing the St. Louis Commune, including city police commissioner John G. Priest and adjutant-general of the citizen's militia, Leigh O. Knapp, Slayback's often overlooked connection to New Orleans holds the key to tracing the evolution of modern processional forms. Accordingly, this chapter aims to contextualize the emergence of the Veiled Prophet Society as a reaction to racially unified labor movements, employing race as a critical framework to draw parallels between the Krewes of Mardi Gras and the Veiled Prophet Society. It argues that the Veiled Prophet celebration constitutes the culmination of a discursive cultural project originating in New Orleans: the definitive articulation in a broader lineage of co-opting folk traditions to advance a capitalist ideology undergirded by racial distinction.

1.1: Carnivalesque Revelry and Elite Discontent in Mid 19th Century New Orleans

In his 1806 travelogue, French traveler Berquin Duvallon expressed his unbridle shock at the lax colonial norms he encountered in New Orleans. Mixed-race women lived "in open concubinage with the whites"—albeit "incited more by money than any attachment"—while Blacks while Blacks and whites mingled freely in taverns, engaging in raucous revelry that blurred the boundaries of race and propriety.[91] Here, "low orders of every colour, white, yellow, and black, mix indiscriminately at these receptacles."[92] One could even observe "slaves, free people of colour of both sexes, and sailors […] capering to the sound of fiddle" and "roaring out

[91] Berquin Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the year, 1802, giving a correct picture of those countries* (New York: I. Reily & Co., 1806), 80.

[92] Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas,* 54.

some dirty song."[93] Anglo-American new-comers similarly disparaged New Orleans, an eccentric backwater where a significant population of both free and enslaved Blacks coexisted with whites in relative harmony. With the increased import of enslaved Africans into Louisiana under Spanish rule throughout the latter half of the 18th century, enslaved Africans accounted for roughly 55 percent of the total population of lower Louisiana by 1790, and 63 percent of the population of New Orleans by 1811.[94] Moreover, increasing instances of self-manumission under Spanish rule (largely due to the efforts of enslaved African women) had led to a sizable free Black population in the region as well.[95] This demographic shift toward a Black majority subverted prevailing notions of a typical slave society, disrupting established social hierarchies and exacerbating anxieties among an increasingly Anglo-American elite preoccupied with the specter of insurrection and the erosion of racial dominance.

Though Duvallon's depiction of a night out in New Orleans may strike contemporary readers as somewhat utopian, scholars argue that it was precisely this form of interracial fraternization that incentivized Anglo-Protestant factions to "gentrify" Mardi Gras, thereby altering the celebration's structure and spirit.[96] Where the masked balls of Mardi Gras traditionally allowed for a variety of racial disruptions—"quadroon balls" being a particular

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[93] Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas,* 80.

[94] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in Eighteenth Century*, 278; Richard W. Bailey, "The Foundation of English in the Louisiana Purchase: New Orleans, 1800-1850," *American Speech* 78, no. 4 (2003): 364.

[95] While figures vary, most scholars agree that black residents (both free and enslaved) accounted for roughly 50 to 60 percent of New Orleans' population by 1800. In addition, Hanger claims that free black residents in New Orleans accounted for 33.5 percent of total residents by 1805: Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans*, 1769–1803 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 139; Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in Eighteenth Century*, 278; Thomas N. Ingersoll, "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1991): 173, 198.

[96] Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 6; James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 75.

enticing event for white men in search of mixed-race mistresses—Anglo-Protestant social norms forced the French celebration out into the public and away from the shadowy ballrooms where high and low—as well as white and Black—society co-mingled under the influence of anonymity and ale.[97] The masked celebrations which once filled the streets and ballrooms of French New Orleans during festival season were thus deeply transgressive in nature: emancipatory gatherings whereby the city's already lax restrictions on race, sex, and class became increasingly blurred by the whimsy of revelry and play.

Likewise, Bakhtin contends that European carnival "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order"—marking "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions."[98] While fleeting, the commingling of a temporarily unstratified world led to "a special type of communication impossible in everyday life," a rare but crucial dialogue linking the lower and upper echelons of society.[99] This "half-forgotten idiom" served as a key bonding agent, smoothing the edges of social inequity through humour and inclusive satire. It is here that "the entire world is seen in its droll aspect" and "gay relativity."[100] Whereas the modern satirist "places himself above the object of his mockery," carnival's "ambivalent laughter[...]expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it."[101] Echoing this notion of a shared cultural realm, Jame R. Creecy details a Mardi Gras parade he attended in 1835, noting how "men and boys, women and girls, bond and free, white and black, yellow and brown, exert themselves to invent and appear in

[97] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 49.

[98] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid., 11.

[101] Ibid., 12.

grotesque, quizzical, diabolic, horrible, strange masks, and disguises." [102] Historian Joseph Roach refers to this phenomenon as "indulged transgressions," instances where the dominant culture both permits and even encourages cultural indiscretion and social laxity.

In fact, some of the earliest documented evidence of Mardi Gras dates to a 1781 Cabildo debate, held at the height of Spanish rule, concerning the frequency of these social transgression.[103] Transcripts of the debate recount how Spanish officials were outraged at reports of free and enslaved subjects of colour sneaking into ballrooms reserved for upper-class whites, a phenomenon which was generally tolerated under French rule.[104] The incident led to an unsuccessfully enforced ordinance banning the use of masks throughout the city, a measure American authorities would also fail to enforce in the coming decades.[105] Later in 1827, Anglo-American city councilors drew attention to the widespread flouting of the ordinance banning masks, citing the lewd nature of sustained Mardi Gras festivities. Prominent French residents vigorously defended the tradition, even starting a petition to repeal the ordinance during carnival season.[106] During the ensuing debate, Anglo-American city-councilor Maunsel White protested the demands of French residents, stating "it's been reported that several women of this city's supposed upper-class have gone so far as to debase themselves by attending colored balls *en masque*." White then added "that they could only have been driven to it by vice or by the devil

[102] James R. Creecy, *Scenes of the South: and Other Miscellaneous Pieces* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1860), 53.

[103] Joseph Roach, "Carnival and the Law in New Orleans," *The Drama Review (TDR 1988-2018)* 37, no. 3 (1993): 60.

[104] R. Randall Couch. "The Public Masked Balls of Antebellum New Orleans: A Custom of Masque Outside the Mardi Gras Tradition." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 35, no. 4 (1994): 406.

[105] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 31.

[106] Couch. "The Public Masked Balls of Antebellum New Orleans: A Custom of Masque Outside the Mardi Gras Tradition," 405.

himself!"[107] Mardi Gras' brief dissolution of a class-based, racial order thus proved too grave a disruption for New Orleans' Protestant faction to bear, the very notion of a "shared world" being tantamount to devil worship.

Moreover, this "shared world" had, over the preceding decades, materialized in the embodied reality of a burgeoning mixed-race population. To this end, New Orleans certainly struck Anglo-American newcomers seeking to capitalize on the explosive cotton boom as a bizarre and outlandish locale. White residents were increasingly outnumbered by people of color, while the practice of *plaçage*—in which white men maintained mixed-race or Black mistresses in exchange for financial support—contributed significantly to the city's rapidly growing free black population.[108] English visitor James D. M'Cabe recorded his impressions of Mardi Gras festivities in 1846, stating that "the strangeness of the scene was not a little heightened by the blending of the negroes, quadroons and mulattoes in the crowd, and we were amused by observing the ludicrous surprise, mixed with contempt, of several unmasked, stiff, grave Anglo-Americans[...]."[109] Hence, as Anglo-Protestant newcomers sought to integrate New Orleans into the burgeoning capitalist economy—and claim their share of the profits in the process —they

[107] "Conseil de Ville." *L'Abeille* (New Orleans, LA), Jan. 3, 1828, 2, my translation.

[108] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 34; Amy R. Sumpter, "Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans." *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 1 (2008): 22. It should also be noted that predominant historical understandings of plaçage have recently come under criticism. For example, Kenneth Aslakson argues that previous interpretations, particularly in Anglo-American accounts, sensationalized and distorted practices of interracial relationships in New Orleans, reducing them to mere financial or transactional arrangements between white men and women of color. Rather, Aslakson emphasizes that these relationships were embedded within a unique French-Caribbean cultural context, where the status of free women of color was more fluid, and interracial unions often carried genuine emotional and social complexity, not simply driven by economic incentives or racial subjugation. Kenneth Aslakson, "The 'Quadroon-Plaçage' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)Interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon." *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2012): 709–34.

[109] James D. M'Cabe, *The Great Republic: a descriptive, statistical and historical view of the states and territories of the American Union* (Philadelphia: William B. Evans & Co., 1871), 723.

also aimed to redefine Louisiana's cultural landscape according to their own ideological framework.

In early 1857, an Anglo-American faction of elites led by druggist John Pope pooled their resources to form the Mystick Krewe of Comus, a clandestine ensemble of businessmen and politicians determined to elevate the moral character of pre-Lenten festivities. Together, they would stage a Mardi Gras procession the likes of which New Orleans had never seen. McKnight and Gill both point to the "Cowbellion" as a key source of inspiration, a linear processional format originating in Mobile, Alabama around the 1830s.[110] Itself a variant of Charivari, the Cowbellion served as "good natured fun" for the community of Mobile, a rowdy New Year's Eve celebration enacted by young men dedicated to "booze, beer, bourbon, and broads."[111] Here, young bachelors "costumed themselves in grotesque clothing and masks and marched noisily through the streets of Mobile with cowbells."[112] As the Mobile tradition grew in popularity, some of these clubs "travelled regularly to New Orleans to participate in Carnival festivities throughout the 1830s and 1840s."[113] While similar noise-oriented folk forms like Charivari traditionally targeted social transgressors—focusing on offences like unsavoury age-gap marriages, adultery, spousal abuse, and out-of-wedlock births—the Cowbellion constituted a watered-down variant of Charivari, devoid of its original purpose and easily co-opted to other ends. The resulting procession organized by Comus was to be a grand affair inspired by Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, complete with elaborately costumed maskers and a marching band.

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[110] McKnight, "Charivaris, Cowbellions, and Sheet Iron Bands: Nineteenth-Century Rough Music in New Orleans," 409; Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 49.

[111] Sam Kinser, *Carnival American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 14.

[112] McKnight, "Charivaris, Cowbellions, and Sheet Iron Bands: Nineteenth-Century Rough Music in New Orleans," 409

[113] Ibid.

The undertaking also represented a key step in reifying the boundary between participant and observer, the procession being led by a police escort and surrounded by a regiment of servile, Black torch bearers.[114] By leveraging political connections and producing costly, eye-catching floats, Comus effectively reduced residents to the role of passive observers, deploying spectacle to assert dominance and control the public gaze. As Gill notes, the Mystick Krewe of Comus "became an emblem for an emerging elite determined to keep the rest of the populace once removed."[115] This was no longer the Mardi Gras celebration James R. Creecy described in 1835 with paradors trammeling around in "rich confusion, up and down the streets, wildly shouting, singing, laughing, drumming, [...]and all throwing flour."[116] Where the disorderly and haphazard character of early Mardi Gras festivities mirrored the inverted, transgressions of a "world upside-down," the Anglo faction's comparatively linear procession aimed to reinforce the existing power structures in a city they understood to be fraught with racial heterodoxy and boisterous hooliganism. Interpreting Milton's "Paradise Lost" for their inaugural parade was thus a fitting choice, a lyrical retelling of Adam and Eve's fall from grace that emphasized themes like moral corruption, lust, and repentance. Each float painstakingly mirrored scenes from the poem and allowed Krewe-men to disguise themselves as Satan and his army of foul demons, a pertinent reminder of what awaited those who strayed from the path of good virtue.[117]

The same year Comus made their debut, the city of New Orleans, largely under the control of Anglo-Protestant councilmen, adopted a new ordinance which made it illegal "to abuse, provoke, or disturb any person; to make charivari, or to appear masked or disguised in the

[114] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 45.

[115] Ibid., 45.

[116] Creecy, *Scenes of the South: and Other Miscellaneous Pieces*, 44.

[117] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 47.

streets or in any public place."[118] Yet Comus, counting amongst its members mayor Charles Waterman, continued to parade the streets of New Orleans, masked and customed, without consequence.[119] As no written exemptions were required, Comus sent a strong and clear message to the public: that private krewes of sufficient standing and resources were beyond the reach of law. This legalistic shift ushered in a new era of procession, the Anglo-Protestant faction having finally gained the upper-hand over the city's white creoles and their relatively lax views on parading, masked balls, and any resulting cross-racial fraternization. Whereas masking and inclusive forms of procession had previously served as vessels for a variety of transgressions to surface in broad daylight, Anglo-Americans sought to "channel the creolized interculture of Louisiana into a binary system," reshaping "legal codes[...]into more rigidly polarized black/white, high/low, and male/female oppositions."[120]

The ordinance of 1857 also restricted alternate forms of expression which had previously served as critical outlets for distinct communities within New Orleans, limiting access to various forms of self-assertion. While the anglicized "Black Codes," adopted in 1807 forbade enslaved people from gathering on both private and public property, Mardi Gras festivities provided enslaved people with "a liminal space on the margins of the law," one in which "dances, masquerades, and processions could act out that which was otherwise unspeakable."[121] The satirical roots of carnival festivities even allowed enslaved people to "mimic (and most likely parody, in a sophisticated, West African way) the up-tight quadrille of their masters."[122] Hence,

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[118] Roach, "Carnival and the Law in New Orleans," 60.

[119] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 46.

[120] Roach, "Carnival and the Law in New Orleans," 57.

[121] Ibid., 53.

[122] Ibid.

the new ordinance not only sought to limit participation in carnivalesque procession, but in turn, aimed to monopolize the content, sentiments, and subjectivities they expressed.

The Anglo-American faction's attempt to outlaw Charivari also marked another key shift in the gentrification of European folk forms, stripping New Orleans of a collective economic institution. According to historian Jacques le Goff, Charivari—the act of causing egregious amounts of noise on makeshift instruments to protest ill-matched couplings and breach of social norms—"constituted a key form of wealth distribution," a practice which was still widely practiced in 19th century New Orleans. James R. Creecy's travel accounts detail the customs and practices of "Captain Ricardo's celebrated sheet-iron band," an ensemble of roughly 500 residents who regularly engaged in Charivari in response to reports of an ill-arranged marriage.[123] According to Creecy, Ricardo would lead the sheet-iron band to the newlywed's home playing "soft and gentle music," serenading the couple with songs like "Home, Sweet home" and "Sweetly Ring the Marriage Bells."[124] Captain Ricardo would then ask for a donation of "one, two, four, five hundred, or a thousand dollars [...]for the benefit of the Female Orphan Asylum" before turning to more extortionary measures.[125] The request, Creecy continues, "is generally complied with; when the company, with much good feeling, serenade the bridal party sweetly."[126] Research by historian Mark McKnight not only confirms the existence of this mythic captain, "verified in several New Orleans city directories from 1840 to 1860," but also that his "chief aim[....] appears to have been to raise money for charity."[127]

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[123] Creecy, *Scenes of the South: and Other Miscellaneous Pieces*, 49.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

[127] McKnight, "Charivaris, Cowbellions, and Sheet Iron Bands: Nineteenth-Century Rough Music in New Orleans," 417-418.

Though more research is required to fully understand the complex, inter-class relations of Louisianan Charivari, evidence does point to the existence of a "bottom-up" cultural apparatus whereby residents leveraged the matrimonial transgressions of financial elites to fund key social services. An article published in the *New Orleans Crescent* initially claimed that "disparity in age is the crime to be punished by fine," though a more complete image of Charivari develops in the following paragraph.[128] Here, the article details the iron-sheet band's distaste for "the sanguine youth who is on his knees for a venerable spinster and her moneybags" or "the gouty millionaire who totters to the feet of mammon-infatuated girl hood."[129] Given that the referred to "fine" or "tax" was generally reported to have been paid promptly and with little protest, one can assume that the main aim of Charivari was much less to "reify social norms," as McKnight claims, but rather, to capitalize on the moral indiscretions of financial elites and redistribute their wealth accordingly.

The notion that Charivari primarily functioned as a crude form of wealth-redistribution is supported by another article published in August of 1850. Defending the virtues of Charivari—which, by the mid-19th century had fallen under the scrutiny the city's American Anglo elite—a reporter at the *Weekly Delta* wrote that "the principle of the custom is that those who have extracted great wealth from the community in which they reside should be compelled to give their abundance to the suffering and destitute."[130] During their tenure, Captain Ricardo and his iron-sheet band collected "no less than $45,000[...]for the benefit of the various charities in our city," a crucial effort in a world before state operated safety nets.[131] Charivari, much like

[128] "Manhattaner in New Orleans," *The New Orleans Crescent* (New Orleans, LA), May 21, 1850, 1.

[129] Ibid.

[130] "The Crescent and Charivaris" *New Orleans Weekly Delta* (New Orleans, LA), Aug. 05, 1850, 5.

[131] Ibid.

Carnivale, sought to bridge opposing ends of the socio-economic spectrum, generating a shared world which extended well into the realm of public finance, encouraging the city's "gouty millionaires" to develop a sense of civic responsibility for those living in a world once removed. Following the ordinance of 1857, the varied assertions, transgressions, and fundraising initiatives falling under the umbrella of the "carnivalesque" thus became endangered cultural forms: a once collective and polymorphic institution increasingly centralized into the hands of the few. Accordingly, elites sought to reshape the momentarily transmuted geographies of the carnivalesque into a linear phenomenon hinged on the legally secured duality of the participant and non-participant observer; and where the spasmodic nature of Mardi Gras once facilitated complex forms of class and race-based interplay, it now grew closer to serving as an exclusive vessel for top-down ideological transmissions, reifying the very boundaries it once subverted.

Even prior to the ordinance of 1857, the Louisiana state legislature ratified an amendment to the Black codes, explicitly banning enslaved people from attending masked balls in 1855.[132] The law spoke to yet another growing anxiety among Anglo-Americans: the looming threat of emancipation. In addition, the Louisiana state legislature passed a law banning manumission in 1857 while an ordinance ratified two years later in 1859 strongly encouraged all free people of colour to find a new owner and voluntarily re-enslave themselves.[133] Comus' emergence signaled the wider arrival of a new and rigid socio-ethnic order in New Orleans, one shaped by the Protestant and segregationist values of the city's Anglo-American reformers.

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[132] Roach, "Carnival and the Law in New Orleans," 59.

[133] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 56. For more on re-enslavement law, see: Ted Maris-Wolf, *Family Bonds: Free Blacks and Re-Enslavement Law in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Kathleen Hutson, "The Re-enslavement of Free Black People in Texas, 1858–1864." *Journal of Southern History* 90, no. 4 (2024): 699-740.

Though Comus would soon disband during the civil war, the organization would vigorously reconstitute itself during reconstruction with the addition of several newly formed Krewes, spurred into action by a decidedly free Black populace and erratic fears of a Black uprising. It was precisely during this time that the Anglo-Americans began sharpening their ideological talons, cementing procession as a vehicle for racist ideology. In 1873, the Mystick Krewe of Comus unveiled a tableau titled "Missing Links to Darwin's Origins of the Species," in which the Black subject was personified as Darwin's "missing link," depicted as a "half-human, half-gorilla, playing a banjo and wearing a pink collar."[134] Meanwhile, the typical Republican "carpetbagger" was depicted as a fox with human features. Newspapers described the typical Republican as "the cunning fox who joins with the Coon."[135] This direct appeal to the rising tide of social-Darwinism not only painted African Americans as subhuman, but equally condemned whites who supported their cause, delineating a clear line between the races that was not to be crossed. This bizarre ideological maneuver, or as Mitchell describes it, "social Darwinism with no accompanying belief in Darwin," would serve as a continuing thread in New Orleans for years to come.[136] In fact, the "missing link" tableau was so popular that it was recreated the following year by a visiting Krewe from Memphis.[137]

[134] "Ye Mistick Krewe of Comus," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Feb. 26, 1873, 4.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 66.

[137] Ibid.

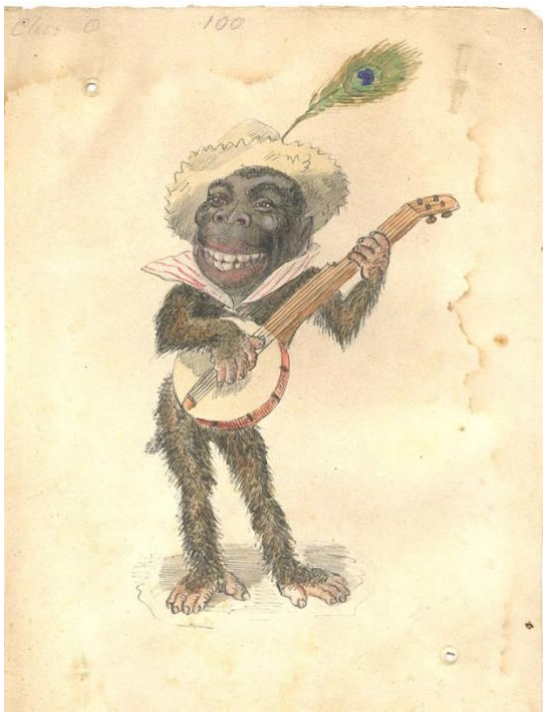

Figure 1 - Artist rendition of Darwin's missing link, "Gorilla Africanus," from a series of sketches commissioned by Comus.

Charles Briton, "Gorilla Africanus," *100 Missing Links*, 1873.

https://static.cambridge.org/binary/version/id/urn:cambridge.org:id:binary:20210319144712475-0786:S1054204320000064:S1054204320000064_fig10.png?pub-status=live

In the following years, Comus and its emerging sister Krewes formed close ties with white supremacist organizations like the Crescent City White League, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Knights of the White Camelia, figuring as a cultural bulwark against the integrationist policies enacted by northern "carpetbaggers."[138] For instance, a parade held by The Krewe of Rex in 1872 was reported to feature in its procession a "a gentlemen in a very red suit[...] possessed of a face ugly and ferocious enough to frighten a common, low white man, let alone a respectable negro."[139] These men, readers were informed, represented "that mysterious order of negro exterminators, the K.K.K."[140] The same parade also incorporated elaborate float advertisements, a new feature which French newspapers Condemned as being in poor taste. One such ad for

[138] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 85-87, 98; Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 68, 78; Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan," 29.

[139] "The Heroic Muse," *The Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), Feb. 14, 1872, 5.

[140] Ibid.

"Carré's plantation cabins" garnered its fair share of media attention as a full-sized cabin mounted on wheels depicted a "typical country scene in the South."[141] This "most laughable yet practical incident" touted a large cast of "darkeys peeping out of every window" and "dancing on the platform of the car."[142] Rex, having found a way to embed the carnivalesque into the modern market economy, exemplified the ever-converging interests of Anglo-American racial thought and capitalist enterprise. This "true to life" scene, as the reporter described it, preserved the confederate gaze well into reconstruction, determined to see Black residents remain a source of cheap (if not indentured) labour.[143]

As Louisiana politician and New Orleans resident Oscar Dunn ascended to the role of acting lieutenant governor in 1868, being the first African Americans to so, the procession reassured audiences by presenting them with depictions of the stereotypically self-effacing and "happy-go-lucky" plantation family. These nostalgic displays not only reinforced existing social hierarchies amidst the turbulent political climate of reconstruction, but also served as ideological foment for more nefarious acts. Notably, more than 120 members of Comus would participate in a bloody coup against Louisiana Governor William Pitt Kellogg and his racially integrated administration in 1874, capturing three howitzers and two Gatling guns before turning them on Republican royalists.[144] Participants of the coup were even memorialized in carnival historian J. Curtis Waldo's *The Roll of Honor: Roster of the Citizen Soldiery Who Saved Louisiana.*[145] Roach's analysis of theatricality as a tool for advancing and legitimizing domestic acts of terror

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[141] "The Heroic Muse," *The Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), Feb. 14, 1872, 5.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 111.

[145] Joseph Roach, "Kinship, Intelligence, and Memory as Improvisation: Culture and Performance in New Orleans," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 2006), 227.

posits that "performance offers itself as an alternative or a supplement to textual meditation," revealing that beneath "the veneer of boyish self-invention seethed a deep capacity for violence."[146] The linkages between "self-invention" and acts of violence expose the contradictions inherent to the elite's appropriation of carnivalesque modes, wherein practices ostensibly aimed at elevating the moral character of a region simultaneously deploy ceremony and self-invention to obscure atrocity under the guise of cultural reclamation.

However, even in the face of domestic terror, the krewes continued to encounter cultural resistance and a deep-rooted aversion to linear processional forms. By the late 1860s, individual maskers remerged on the streets of New Orleans, once again reveling in improvised costumes and dousing unsuspecting bystanders with flour. As earlier ordinances proved unenforceable, pressure mounted on Anglo-Protestant factions to revitalize their parades when columnists disparaged float themes as pretentious and "too high toned for poor people."[147] The newly formed Krewe of Rex chose to capitalize on frictions by integrating individual maskers (then referred to as "promiscuous maskers") from the public into its own ranks around.[148] Seeing this as an opportunity to reinvigorate the Mardi Gras parade while establishing authority over the rabble-rousing public, Rex embraced individual maskers into the fold of their new processional format but banned the use of flour as well as "all indelicate or improper displays."[149] They also required maskers to parade in their "proper divisions" and show deference to the Mock sovereign known as "Rex," seeking an opportunity to control the terms of public involvement and curtail

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[146] Roach, "Kinship, Intelligence, and Memory as Improvisation: Culture and Performance in New Orleans," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 221, 227.

[147] *The Republican* (LA, New Orleans), Feb. 17, 1877. As quoted in, Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 61.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid., 62.

its more spontaneous elements. However, when so-called "promiscuous maskers" continued to assert "their vulgar, sexual, disrespectful natures," the Krewe of Rex promptly changed its open-door policy, once again banning public participation from their parade in 1877. Rex would now require all would-be participants to apply in advance and provide character references.[150] However, while Mardi gras Krewes could effectively police their own individual parades, they would ultimately fail to monopolize carnival in its entirety. Just so, African American Krewes began organizing in opposition to the often-racist float themes concocted by Anglo-Americans, once again "acting out that which was unspeakable."[151] Perhaps Comus's most significant success lay in its capacity to segregate Mardi Gras festivities into racially distinct categories, resulting in the emergence of a parallel "Black Carnival."[152] While this new divide was a far cry from the racially complex and integrated Mardi Gras of old, it effectively demonstrated that Anglo-American factions would never truly eradicate Mardi Gras of its democratic pedigree.

Conversely, St. Louis had no established tradition of commemorating pre-Lenten festivities. Where the Anglo-American elite in New Orleans encountered several nodes of resistance while attempting to transmute these deep-rooted cultural institutions, elites in St. Louis would generate an entirely new cultural form where none had existed before. Blank canvas in hand, the Veiled Prophet Society would envision one of the most ostentatious and mesmerizing processions in American history, a costly yet clannish affair which cemented processional involvement as the exclusive right of the upper-class, firmly relegating the remainder of the population to the status of non-participant observers from the outset.

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[150] Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 62.

[151] For more on the Black Krewes of Mardi Gras, see: George Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans," *Cultural Critique*, no. 10 (1988): 99–121.

[152] Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 141; Roach, "Carnival and the Law in New Orleans," 61-62.

To achieve this aim, Charles E. Slayback strategically imported the methodologies and float materials utilized by the Mystick Krewe of Comus into Missouri. A wealthy grain broker and Confederate sympathizer, Slayback first ingratiated himself within the Louisianan elite when he moved his business from Missouri to New Orleans at the outbreak of the civil war, joining the Krewe of Comus sometime in the late 1860s.[153] According to a private communiqué between Slayback and Albert Stephens, a former journalist and the Veiled Prophet society's chief propagandist, Slayback purchased $20,000 worth of float materials from Comus to stage the Veiled Prophet's inaugural parade.[154] Hence, while scholars have argued Charivari and the Cowbellion served as a blueprint for modern processional forms in New Orleans, the Comus parade provided Slayback and other Veiled Prophet founders with a detailed template of their own: proof of concept that anonymity, masking, and parading could be harnessed to serve the ideological and financial interests of the city's ruling elite. Newspaper articles promoting the arrival of the Veiled Prophet made constant reference to the Krewes of New Orleans. One such report made subtle allusions, announcing the arrival of a "mystic band of Veiled Prophets."[155] Other articles more plainly stated that the Veiled Prophets "were supposed to be similar to the Mystick Krewe of New Orleans."[156] In fact, one journalist at the *Missouri Republican* described the inaugural parade as an improved version of the Mardi Gras celebration, noting the absence of any social levelling or public participation:

> In St. Louis there is no intention to imitate the day procession, the general masking and the accompanying riot and license, which are an essential part of the Mardi Gras carnival in New Orleans. There has been chosen the pageant of a mystic society, as the best feature of the Creole carnivals and the one most likely to take root in St. Louis, to fill out a list of attractions in

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[153] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 9.

[154] Ibid.

[155] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 03, 1878, 2.

[156] "About Town," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Jul. 06, 1878, 8.

> connection with our Exposition, races and fair, which no doubt, it is meant to repeat every year.[157]

Just as one might meticulously curate an ensemble, Veiled Prophet founders strategically dictated to the public which aspects of the French Carnival tradition were to be emulated and which were to be discarded, crafting a cohesive vehicle for ideological transmission under the guise of curbing hooliganism.

The celebration would consist of two primary events: a public parade for the enjoyment of the masses followed by an exclusive grand ball—to be held at the chamber of commerce, no less. This bifurcated celebration delineated the two separate spheres of existence, one belonging to the working poor, and the other to financial elites. Tickets to the procession were sold throughout the city, but as one newspaper noted, tickets to the "grand ball[...]are not sold, and everybody who receives one may consider himself fortunate."[158] Gossip columns amplified the sense of exclusion at every turn, stating, "the veiled prophets are tearing the hearts of the community wide open by not providing every able-bodied voter with a ticket to the *bal masque*."[159] Another column touted that "there are a hundred men in town who would give a hundred dollars for a ticket."[160] Fervor over the grand ball grew to such heights that multiple newspapers were forced to publish attendance protocols issued from the "Temple of the Veiled Prophet." The notice clarified that "it is by authority announced that the transfer of tickets to admission to the chamber of commerce is positively prohibited, no other person than the one named upon the ticket will be permitted."[161] The missive then concluded with one final

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[157] "The St. Louis Carnival," *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis, MO), Oct. 6, 1878.

[158] "About Town," *St Louis Globe & Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Sep. 26, 1878, 5.

[159] "About Town," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Oct. 01, 1878, 6.

[160] "About Town," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Oct. 04, 1878, 6.

[161] "Proclamation," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Oct. 04, 1878, 2.

command, that "only veiled prophets are allowed to appear *en masque.*"[162] Even those in direct orbit of the Veiled Prophet were thus prohibited from masking, the privilege being reserved for a clandestine few. This exclusionary tactic signaled yet another death in the ongoing decline of Bakhtin's shared cultural realm, regulating the participatory body of carnivalesque practices according to a strict criterion of property and influence.

Though scholars have recently critiqued Bakhtin's decidedly optimistic notion of a "world upside-down," framing the carnivalesque as "a domesticated parody" which ultimately reinforces dominant cultural hegemony, the persistent efforts of colonial and state authorities to restrict these practices reveal a more complex interplay of power dynamics.[163] As literary theorist Michael Holquist asserts, "outsideness"—or the subjectivity of the "other"—is crucial to achieving social pathos "precisely because it permits the finalized quality needed for the whole of a culture to be seen."[164] However, the stark socio-economic disparity characteristic of America's Gilded Age epitomized the death of the "other," effectively shutting out subaltern perspectives through systemic disenfranchisement. As the wealth gap widened throughout the latter half of the 19th century, industrialists assumed an almost epistemological authority over their employees, dictating the spiritual and economic needs of an impoverished population kept at a deliberate distance. This dynamic became evident during the strikes of 1877 when railway companies displayed a blatant disregard for their workers, drastically cutting wages and refusing to negotiate under any terms. Rather than engaging in dialogue, they opted to suppress dissent

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[162] "Proclamation," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Oct. 04, 1878, 2.

[163] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso Publishing, 1981), 148. For more on the Carnivalesque and social inversions, see: Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebian Culture and The Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2014); Petter Stallybrass and Allon white, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithica, Cornell University Press, 1986).

[164] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25.

through the deployment of citizen militias, the National Guard, and paramilitary groups like the Pinkerton Detective Agency, thereby reinforcing the notion of separate spheres—one violently exerting control over the other under the pretense of paternal care.[165] Following an interview with William Vanderbilt, Railroad tycoon and owner of the New York Central, one reporter wrote:

> The owners of the road could not consent to let the employees manage it. There [are] great principles involved in this matter, said Vanderbilt, and we cannot afford to yield, and the country cannot afford to have us yield.[166]

The message was unequivocal: workers should be prohibited from voicing concerns and they had stepped outside of their prescribed role in doing so. Railroad trustee J. H. Wilson took a similar position, stating in a letter that "I shall certainly not permit my employees to fix their own rate of wages, nor dictate to me in any manner what my policy shall be."[167] This very sentiment would go on to inform the spirit and ethos of coming processional forms, top-down displays of power which stripped the carnivalesque of its coagulant—the death of a shared world.

Beckert reaches a similar conclusion about the famous grand balls thrown by Cornelius Martin in 1890s New York City, ostentatious celebrations organized for the exclusive benefit of a small, elite clique whereby conspicuous consumption functioned as both a display of power and a

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[165] Allan Pinkerton, founder of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, detailed his agency's involvement in the Great Strike in his 1878 retrospective, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives*. Here, Pinkerton clarifies that "ever since the great strikes of '77, my agencies have been busily employed by great railway, manufacturing and other corporations, for the purpose of bringing the leaders and instigators of the dark deeds of those days to the punishment they so richly deserve. Hundreds have been punished. Hundreds more will be punished." And while Pinkerton attempts to sympathize with the workingman who "is never the gainer—but always the loser," he ultimately concludes that "trades-unions of every name and nature are but a relic of the old despotic days," reinforcing free-market doctrinal beliefs that unions "force capital to compensate labor to a point where the use of that capital becomes unprofitable and disastrous." Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1878), x, xi.

[166] "The New York Central," *Globe-Democrat*, July 24, 1877, 1, as quoted in, Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 181.

[167] J. H. Wilson, letter to Carl Schurz, July 22, 1877, David Burbank Collection, State Historical Society of Missouri, as quoted in, Kruger, *The St. Louis Commune of 1877: Communism in the Heartland*, 181.

mechanism for reinforcing social hierarchies.[168] In addition, Beckert notes that the exclusive nature of these lavish balls signaled a "significant departure from antebellum times," quoting Alexis de Tocqueville who observed the elite of the 1840s took "great care not to stand aloof from the people."[169] Gone was the "universalism" of the 1840s and 1850s which saw the working poor through the lens of evangelical absolution. Rather, Beckert contends that the rising bourgeoisie of the 1870s "would paint [the working poor] as[...]beyond redemption," an irredeemable opponent, not to be saved, but vanquished.[170] Hence, even if, as some scholars have argued, carnivalesque forms reinforced the hegemonic order of the ruling elite, this "new procession" sought to eradicate carnival's last vestige of play and communion in favor of tone-deaf "edification," the last morsel of reprieve in a life of toil supplanted by high-production propaganda.

1.2: The Counter-Revolution of Property — *Carnival as Capitalist Theater*

While the emergence of carnival societies parallels the formation of other reactionary, right-wing groups like the Klan—both spurred into action by the emancipation of marginalized populations and the profound instability introduced by the restructuring of labor markets— significant distinctions warrant critical examination. Notably, these movements were not merely driven by social or cultural impulses but by the economic motivations of financial elites seeking to secure their power and influence. In this context, W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "the counter-revolution of property" becomes instrumental for analyzing this cultural phenomenon through a materialist lens. By positioning property as the basis of political power, these societies sought to embed

[168] Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, I, 265.

[169] Ibid., 2.

[170] Ibid., 76.

white supremacy deeply within the fabric of American cultural consciousness. According to Dubois, the scramble for wealth in the post-war era and the ensuing panic of 1873 allowed for a new class of Northern elites to accrue large swathes of undeveloped land and make enormous capital gains, ensuring an end to the chaos of speculative bubbles. The ensuing "dictatorship of capital" soon rose to guide "the industrial development of the nation[...]by methods of efficiency of accomplishment and control never surpassed among so many millions of men."[171]

However, Northern elites also needed to integrate the South into national economic systems, facilitating southern industrial expansion and resource extraction. The resulting bargain of 1876—or as Johnson bluntly suggests, the "bargain between capitalism and white supremacy"—brought an end to reconstruction, securing for the North capital gains in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops and the turning of a blind eye to unconstitutional laws which would eventually form the basis of Southern Black disenfranchisement.[172] This newly established alliance between Northern and Southern capital restored and upheld the economic control of the white elite nationwide, ensuring a cheap and controllable labor force for both Northern industrialists and Southern landowners. Crucially, Robinson contends that elites who deployed "race hate and black disfranchisement as a permanent program of exploitation" demonstrated an implicit understanding that racially unified labour posed a substantial threat.[173] As the Veiled Prophet Society sought to defend itself against this very threat, the organization can perhaps best be understood as an ideological arm of the "counter-revolution of property." Following the strikes of 1877, St. Louis and Missouri's increasingly Democratic leaning state government would go on to enforce Jim Crow policy and employ anti-labor legal maneuvers to

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[171] Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 523.

[172] Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 154.

[173] Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 560.

hamper organized labour. Missouri's state constitution had already imposed restrictive voting requirements that disproportionately disenfranchised Black voters in 1865, mainly in the form of literacy tests and poll taxes, while the *Residential Segregation Ordinance of 1916* would soon systematically exclude Black communities from crucial housing opportunities throughout the city of St. Louis.[174] Moreover, the widespread use of yellow-dog contracts (agreements that required workers to pledge not to join labour unions as a condition of employment) and anti-conspiracy laws further stifled the labour movement, ensuring that both racial segregation and labour suppression became entrenched features of the region's political and economic landscape.[175]

However, it was the hearts and minds of St. Louis residents that would be subject to the festive displays of the Veiled Prophet Society, achieving that which laws could not. Hence, just as the "white elite of New Orleans responded violently to change[…]by establishing new cultural forms," so too did elites in St. Louis.[176] Yet the threat faced by the Missourian upper classes was considerably more complex than that faced by their Anglo-American counterparts in New Orleans. Rather than contending with the mere assertions of an emancipated Black population, owners of industry and financial elites were met with the rising influence of Marxism, a potent European import which threatened the very foundation of this dictatorship of capital by establishing cross racial alliances. Only by following the blueprint laid out by the Krewes of New Orleans were Missourian capitalists thus able to synthesize the right of capital with a

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[174] Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 252; Charles L. Zelden, *Voting Rights on Trial: A Handbook with Cases, Laws, and Documents* (Camden: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002), 296.

[175] W. Davis Slawson, *Binding Promises: The Late 20th-Century Reformation of Contract Law (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 14.*

[176] Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 66.

constructed superiority of the white race, embedding a racial wedge deep within the collective ethos of the city. The Veiled Prophet's inaugural pageant epitomized this very synthesis, deploying secrecy and spectacle to imbue the procession with a panoptic quality wherein media-driven paranoia cultivated a culture of self-surveillance. The interplay of these elements would become a cornerstone of the elite's broader strategy for decades to come, seeking to maintain control over a rapidly shifting socio-economic landscape.

Chapter 2: The Spectacle of Secrecy — Print Media Pageantry and the Living Architecture of the Panoptic

The Beloved Despot

The Veiled Prophet is always young;
always inviolate; always superb!

He brings with him a freshness, an
urgency, a noble impulse!

The white haired patriot's throne
is raised in the hearts of his
subjects, for the seeds of the Divine
which he sows in the minds of men.

The Veiled Prophet never knows
the weight of human hours—
nor the sweet shadows of twilight.

He is a morning whose uprisen sun
no setting ere shall see;

A day that comes without a moon—
The spirit everlasting!

His Mysterious Majesty the Veiled Prophet's Golden Jubilee: A Short History of St. Louis' Annual Civic Carnival, St. Louis: The Veiled Prophet Press, 1928.
From the Veiled Prophet Collection, St. Louis Library, MO

Applying the full force of their journalistic acumen, reporters across St. Louis began to probe into the sudden appearance of the Veiled Prophets, asking, as one such reporter did, "who are

they, where are they, where did they come from and what are they going to do?"[177] Despite their best efforts to penetrate the "inwardness of this mystic order," certainty eluded reporters at every step.[178] As another writer at the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* confirmed, "all attempts to lift the veil that conceals them has been met with failure, or such limited information as to be useless in gratifying the cravings of public curiosity."[179] However, one thing was certain: these men "are known to be possessed of vast resources of wealth and power, and among their members are many men of influence."[180] Likewise, a reporter at the *Missouri Republican* touted that "when unmasked, the actors on the floats are heads of large commercial firms or perhaps grave and dignified judges of the law."[181]

While easy to dismiss these reports as falling on the deaf ears of a disinterested working class, it should be noted that St. Louis was, by the 1870s, a highly literate society. In fact, literacy rates in late 19th century St. Louis had risen to roughly 90 percent of the overall population, well above the national average. As Jack notes, "even in the poor sections of town, people read the news religiously," having access to over seventy newspapers and periodicals in a variety of languages including French, English and German.[182] During his visit to St. Louis, British traveler William Morris observed how "in some of the back slums through which I passed, I had to step over and between the legs of scores of men as they lay in the door-ways of the houses, and on the pavement, reading their newspapers."[183] The fabrication and distribution

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[177] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Sep. 03, 1878, 2.

[178] Ibid.

[179] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Sep. 08, 1878, 9.

[180] "Announcements," *Bates County Advocate* (Butler, MO), Jul. 03, 1878, 2.

[181] *Missouri Republican*, October 10, 1878, as quoted in, Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 34.

[182] Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters*, 132.

[183] Ibid.

of "known unknowns" through print media thus served as a key tool in the war against labour throughout the late 19th century, constituting one of the Veiled Prophet society's principal forms of outreach. Moreover, these reports also illustrated the new axis of power being forged at this very moment: a marriage between capital and law—or rather, capital's growing reach over the liberal democratic apparatus. Though the federal response to the St. Louis Commune had already shone a light on the existing and even thriving relationship between capital and government structures of authority, the partnership now entered a new realm of shadowy possibilities, looming forever large in the American imaginary.

The Veiled Prophet Society's own member base reflected this blurring of economic and political spheres, revealing underlying transformations within the American political landscape brought on by industrial advance and the growing consolidation of wealth by industrialists and large-scale merchants. For example, Veiled Prophet founder John G. Priest held the position of police commissioner in 1877 but was also an incredibly successful real estate speculator; George Bain served as Republican Alderman but also owned both the Atlantic and O'Fallon Sawmills; David R. Francis was a grain merchant, banker, and real estate developer who served as the mayor of St. Louis between 1885 and 1889 and later as a Democratic state governor between 1889 and 1893; and Leigh O. Knapp served as the adjutant-general of the Missouri citizen's militia but was better known as the heir to the illustrious Knapp family where helped run the highly influential *Missouri Republican* newspaper with his father, George Knapp. While commercial interests had long played a role in shaping Missourian legislation, the political landscape was previously characterized by a mix of merchants representing various commercial interests and middling lawyers who often served as intermediaries between local business concerns and political power. Beginning in the 1870s, this new alignment of commercial and

industrial elites within the political sphere constituted a broader reconfiguration of power whereby capital increasingly dictated political authority, an evolution of governance practices whereby the political office became an instrument for elites to directly consolidate economic hegemony.

Hence, as newspapers suggested that the actors might be "heads of large commercial firms or[…]grave and dignified judges of the law," they subtly reinforced the discursive formation that linked economic capital to juridical power—that these "heads of large commercial firms" could also serve as "grave and dignified judges."[184] Whereas contemporaneous elites in New York City had grown tired of direct political involvement, preferring instead to influence local and national policies as remote committee figures, members of the Veiled Prophet Society embraced the more hands-on approach characteristic of the 1850s mercantile elite.[185] This strategy likely reflected the organization's limited national influence and regional focus, favouring the local leadership style of "city fathers" over the more distant and politically entrenched operations of figures like August Belmont. Moreover, the organization's bi-partisan member base continued to underline the new alliance forged by the rising dictatorship of capital. Their joining of noted Democratic politicians like David R. Francis with Republican alderman George Baine underlined this fusion of political and economic elites across party lines, reflecting the broader, national trend towards laissez-faire economic policy and pro-business conservatism that would become the central focus of Veiled Prophet displays.

[184] *Missouri Republican*, October 10, 1878, as quoted in, Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 34.

[185] Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 81.

2.1: Manufacturing Uncertainty — *The Veiled Prophet's Invisible Hand in Media*

As Veiled Prophet members spared no expense in preparation for the inaugural parade, curated articles promoting the celebration appeared in virtually every newspaper in the city. Reporting on the city's newest fraternity grew increasingly fantastical, imbuing the reported events with elements of whimsy, intrigue, and subterfuge. As some newspapers opined that the Veiled Prophets were "really the original Rosicrucians, or the Brotherhood of the Rosey Cross," holding "rare knowledge of chemistry," others asserted that they were "a new tribe of men which has sprung up in the last six months."[186] Entirely unrelated articles covering political squabbles demonstrate the mounting paranoia surrounding membership. Judge J.C. Normile, prosecutor for the State of Missouri, wrote into the *Globe and Democrat* to clarify "that connecting him to the Veiled Prophets was a trick of his enemies as he is not a prophet," while the St. Louis Post Dispatch wrote, "we are requested to deny the statement that Elijah Gates of the treasury is one of the Veiled Prophets."[187] Hence, as gossip columns across the city speculated, "who are the Veiled Prophets?"—journalists turned the question back on itself, concluding finality: "we can never learn the names of our benefactors, and so the mystery of the Veiled Prophet will endure forever."[188]

Crucially, Spencer asserts that these articles were likely authored by members of the organization itself, particular any articles appearing in the *Missouri Republican*. As previously noted, Colonel Leigh O. Knapp, founder of the Missouri Republican Guards and owner of the

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[186] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 08, 1878, 9; "The Veiled Prophet" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), Sep. 03, 1878, 12.

[187] "St. Louis in Splinters," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Jul. 28, 1878, 5; "The Gates of the Treasury—Still Closed," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis) Aug. 17, 1878, 4.

[188] "About Town," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Jul. 26, 1878, 4; "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 8, 1878, 9.

influential *Missouri Republican*, was also a founding member of the Veiled Prophet society.[189] However, the acquiescent tone and claims of having an "inside source"—which Spencer identifies as evidence of Veiled Prophet involvement—are consistent features across a variety of publications. As Spencer himself admits, owners of industry "viewed journalists as dependents because much of a newspaper's profits came from the advertisements they placed."[190] Accordingly, it's certainly possible that other, less influential publications may have been just as amenable to printing vetted or pre-written material on behalf of the Veiled Prophet Society. One such article printed in the *Globe-Democrat* recalls with scintillating detail how one of their reporters was hypnotized and abducted by a "ghostly" and "medieval" visitor.[191] Upon awakening, the author was granted an audience with the Veiled Prophet himself. In a tale more akin to fiction than journalism, the unnamed reporter goes on to detail his whimsical abduction, including an encounter with a fantastical monster known as "Himei-Muk-Amuk," hinting at the extraordinary sights spectators might soon witness during the parade.[192] As the absurd, fantastical tale reaches its conclusion, the reporter plainly admits, "finally, the Veiled Prophet explained just how the Globe-Democrat was to write the affair up."[193]

It should also be noted that late 19th century American newspapers were a far cry from their modern-day equivalents, operating with a marked absence of the rigorous, albeit contested, standards of objective reporting which later came to define the journalistic practice. As Pasley

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[189] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 28; "George Knapp, Missouri Journalist." *The Milan Republican* (MO, Milan), Sep. 19, 1940, 6.

[190] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 21.

[191] "The Veiled Prophets: A Mysterious Visit to the Office of the Globe-Democrat," *St. Louis Globe Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 22, 1878, 12.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid.

argues, the 19th century press was "the political system's central institution[...]purposeful actors in the political process, linking parties, voters, and the government together in pursuing specific political goals."[194] This notion of a "partisan press" becomes particularly evident when we examine the overt political affiliations signaled by newspaper titles such as the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* and the *Missouri Republican*, news outlets whose primary function was not merely the collection, composition, and distribution of news stories, but rather, the deliberate advancement of a specific political agenda. It would have thus been in keeping with contemporary journalistic norms for the press, working in concert with Veiled Prophets, to publish highly biased material in the pursuit of a variety of socio-political goals.

However, the Veiled Prophet Society's influence over the press was particularly unique in its bi-partisan support, transcending the traditional political affiliations that typically defined 19th century newspapers. Far more than a mere continuation of partisan manipulation; it constituted a new phase in which the press, while pushing a specific agenda, increasingly served the interests of a powerful elite straddling the political divide. This evolving basis of power finds further expression in the Veiled Prophet Society's expansive membership, uniting Confederate sympathizer and noted Democrat Charles Slayback with longtime Republican George Bain—a north-south divided reconstituted through the class-based lens of the rising dictatorship of capital. Moreover, the methods of print-based manipulation deployed by the Veiled Prophet Society were considerably more complex than any partisan persuasion, engaging abstract realms of thought to embed this emergent socio-political order with a panoptic omnipresence. Around the same time, the *St. Louis Evening Post* published an article that included a blatantly fabricated

[194] Jeffery L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 3.

interview with an unidentified woman, referred to only as "a fair young lady." Throughout the interview, The Post's unnamed informant attempts to provide information on St. Louis' newest fraternity but ultimately fails to do so, reinforcing the organization's unknowable nature. When asked "Who are the Veiled Prophets?" the woman simply answers, "I don't know."[195] When the author then presses, "are they of seraphic, demoniac or human kind?" the woman replies that "Of human kind[...], but whether prophets of good or evil, I know not[...], I imagine they are a grave, sober set of people."[196] The author goes on to note that the undisclosed identity of its members constitutes the organization's most "profound and never-to-be-revealed secret." In fact, "so dark is the secret," the author continues, "that a member does not know whether[...]anybody else is a member."[197] Overstating the secretive nature of the organization also left journalists in the awkward position of having to explain their access to information from a group ostensibly committed to concealing itself from public view. As Spencer confirms, journalists made repeated claims of having access to an "inside source," when the information was instead likely dictated to newspapers by the organization itself. For example, the very same reporter at the *Evening Post* claimed that "by hook and by crook, a reporter of the Post has seen some things and heard some things that enable him to speak with some certainty of what the Veiled Prophets will do on the night of October the 9th."[198]

Though several of these reports go to absurd lengths to evoke the cloak and dagger machinations of the Veiled Prophet Society, another article printed in the very same newspaper three weeks later paints a very different image. The Ominously titled article, "You Are

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[195] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Evening Post* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 3, 1878, 5.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Ibid.

[198] Ibid

Commanded," begins by stating that "the following mysterious message found its way into the office of the evening post with a request to be published."[199] The formal missive extended invitations to a selected number of businessmen to attend the Veiled Prophet Ball, scheduled to take place at the Chamber of Commerce, and listed upwards of forty names. The organization would go on to ritualize and repeat this formal and very public invitation every year.[200] Even more perplexing, however, is that the second name on this list belongs to none other than Alonzo William Slayback, brother of Charles Slayback and one of the organization's founding members. Herein lies the central paradox of fraternal secrecy: that a secret only becomes a secret when its contents are known. According to Hayden, the most pervasive misconception surrounding secret societies lies in the depiction of "clandestine meetings conducted by people whose memberships and activities are carefully concealed from public scrutiny."[201] Rather, "everyone was usually well aware of the existence of these societies and knew who belonged to them."[202] The real "secret," Hayden contends, "was the ritual knowledge that members claimed was the key to their supposed arcane supernatural powers."[203] While notions of super-natural powers may appear incongruous in late 19th-century America, examining the resurgence of fraternal orders like the Veiled Prophet Society reveals a reconfiguration in which supernatural authority was effectively supplanted by proximity to financial wealth and political influence. Hence, if members of this secret society were to "enjoy the sense of power and privilege[...], they must, as it were, demonstrate their secrecy publicly."[204] Conversely, if secret societies were truly concerned with

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[199] "You Are Commanded," *St. Louis Evening Post* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 28, 1878, 8.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Hayden, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and the Origins Societal Complexity,* 8.

[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid., 7.

[204] Ibid., 16.

fraternal bonds and ritual exaltation, as is the case with monastic orders, "there would be no need for public displays."[205] Hayden thus concludes that this fixation with spectacle points to the "major political or practical motivation behind the formation of secret societies," primarily the dissemination of cultural values and the increased centralization of power.[206] Accordingly, it is not surprising that Alonzo Slayback may have chosen to publish his own name amongst the list of invitees, for if the public could not associate him with the Veiled Prophets, then how else might he enjoy the sense of power and privilege? Spencer's research establishes that the Veiled Prophet organization was founded in March of 1878 when a letter arrived at the doors of approximately twenty St. Louis businessmen, some seven months prior to the publication of this article.[207] The list of invitees sent to the Evening Post thus serves as a form of metonymic theatre, recreating a private moment on a public stage for all to see. It is the very fabrication of this open-ended secret and the uncertainty it generates, however, which so deftly exploits the imaginary realm. Slayback is identified as an invitee—far from being a founding member—affording him the opportunity to deny any active involvement with the Veiled Prophets. He could thus assert his status as a guest of this inscrutable fraternity, establishing a connection to the Veiled Prophets while preserving a façade of plausible deniability.

Spencer argues that the identity of the Veiled Prophet was typically a closely guarded secret, with the notable exception of the inaugural Veiled Prophet—revealed to be St. Louis Police Commissioner John G. Priest. As a founding member, Priest was a key city official actively engaged in suppressing the strike of 1877.[208] According to a pamphlet published by the

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[205] Hayden, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and the Origins Societal Complexity, 24.*

[206] Ibid.

[207] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 8.

[208] Ibid., 18.

St. Louis Emergency Defense Committee, a pro-union advocacy group protesting McCarthy-era legislation in 1952, "this was the only time the VP's identity was ever revealed."[209] Conversely, an article published in June of 1878 claimed that "Col John Finn will impersonate the great mogul."[210] Another article covering the events of the veiled prophet celebration on Oct 8th identified Police commissioner John G. Priest as the "Plowman" of the agricultural float, while Sheriff Col John Finn played the part of the "Centaur."[211] Interestingly, the reporter made no effort to identify the "great mogul," only describing him as "the most intellectual man[...] in a long line of nobilities."[212] Among the other masked participants identified by the St. Louis Globe-Democrat were: Senator David H. Armstrong, who had helped coordinate the cavalry attack on strikers outside Schuler Hall a year prior; Charles Slayback, founder and 'patron saint' of the Veiled Prophet Society; Col. George Knapp, organizer of the Citizen's militia and owner of the *Missouri Republican*; George Bain, prominent businessman and longtime Republican alderman (the same George Bain who was reportedly struck in the face by a demonstrator in his own saw mill during the strike of 1877); Judge Louis Gottschalk, recently nominated for the Missouri state senate; and Judge J.C. Normile, who had written to the Globe-Democrat two months earlier to deny any involvement with the Veiled Prophet Society."[213]

The contradictory nature of these reports raises important concerns. Primarily, it calls into question the historian's tendency to rely on primary source material as credible and actionable information. In researching the nebulous links cast by the Veiled Prophet Society, scholars

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[209] St. Louis Emergency Defense Committee, "Veiled Prophet: How It Began." As quoted in, Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 107.

[210] "Readers of Yesterday's Globe-Democrat," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Jul. 07, 1878, 4.

[211] "A Reporter's Stratagem," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 9, 1878, 6.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Ibid.; "Nominations" *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 15, 1878, 3.

confront an archive that preserves the very feelings of paranoia and uncertainty which the organization sought to instill in residents well over a century ago, confined to a world of speculations, likelihoods, and uncertainties. However, I argue that whether the Veiled Prophet was assumed by Colonel John Finn or John G. Priest is largely inconsequential, provided that the public perceived the "mogul" as a wealthy and influential figure complicit in dismantling the strikes of 1877. At this point, we might even consider the Veiled Prophet to be something akin to Schrodinger's cat—or rather, "Schrodinger's Mogul." As the veil obscures the prophet's face, he is at once all these men and yet none of them. Hence, rather than employ an empirical lens to ascertain with mechanistic precision the exact roles individuals played within the organization, as scholars have thus far, I propose a hermeneutic approach that moves beyond the constraints of the empirical archive and explore what these constructed ambiguities reveal.

Crucially, the clear and persistent links made to known men of great wealth and power served two distinct purposes. Beyond the more obvious intent to intimidate the working public and reinforce a hegemonic order, these links forged opaque visions of authority rooted in the cabalistic: a new, impalpable form of power entrenched in the shadowy realm of fraternal secrets and back door agreements whereby subterfuge, contradiction, and plausible deniability all played a crucial role in exploiting the American imaginary. Here, the "unknowable secret" is fabricated, not to conceal information, but rather, to generate interest and stimulate abstract dimensions of thought. When the "unknowable secret" is then paradoxically revealed, the answer is awash in a world of contradictory reports and ambiguity—known, but never certain. The result is an intangible force which reasserts itself over the course of decades: a discursive process whereby private circles within the elite seek to impose abstract and imaginative forms of authority over the city's "lesser residents." The nature of this power is hence twofold. As members "parade

through the village in their masks," making themselves "felt as a force," there is also an intangible construct at play, an imaginary force which leaves the worker decidedly aware that, as one reporter noted, "the city is full of the Veiled Prophets, and you may jostle against them in the streets[…], but you will never know one as such."[214]

2.2 Panoptic Visions of Progress — *Countering dissent through Myth*

Cultivating this pervasive sense of paranoia, Veiled Prophet members had not merely appropriated folkloric conventions but had also developed, in its place, a rudimentary form of panoptic power. As Foucault explains, the panopticon creates and sustains "a power relation independent of the person who exercises it."[215] Just so, the veil fulfils the very function of the venetian blinds in Jeremy Bentham's prison design, concealing the watchman to both deindividualize and automatize power. Here, "any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine," or in this case, the veil. Perched above a gaudy throne on the procession's final float, the grand oracle—just like the watchman—"sees everything without ever being seen."[216] However, the uncertainty generated by the prophet's concealment takes on a greater importance than any act of observation, creating the *sensation of being observed* rather than the act of observation itself. This new mechanism is thus "exercised through its invisibility," imposing "on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility," albeit a visibility that is more phenomenological than literal.[217] As masking underlined the tacit unknowability of the

[214] Hayden, *The Power of Ritual in Prehistory: Secret Societies and the Origins Societal Complexity,* 16; "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Evening Post* (MO, St. Louis) Sep. 03, 1878, 5.

[215] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 201.

[216] Ibid., 512.

[217] Ibid., 475.

Veiled Prophet Society, it imposed onto everyone else a potent and palpable visibility, naked before the all-seeing oracle.

Among the key business figures who were publicly invited to attend the annual ball were, Adolphus Busch, brewing magnate and owner of the Anheuser-Busch brewery; William MacMillan, founder of the Missouri Car and Foundry Company; and William H. Thompson, founder and head of the St. Louis Streetcar company.[218] Much like Alonzo Slayback, William H. Thompson's name regularly appears on the list of grand ball invitees despite being a founding member, showcasing his involvement for all to see. How would employees react to seeing their employer's name printed amongst the list of invitees to the Veiled Prophet's grand ball? And how might this have changed their willingness to engage in labour disputes? Though the St. Louis Commune had come and gone, workers had not stopped organizing. On April 12th of 1878, workers of St. Louis' first ward declared themselves an official branch of the "socialistic labor party," soon to be followed by another branch in the sixteenth ward.[219] Much to the dismay of the city's financial elite, these branches began drilling in June of the same year, leading to widespread hysteria as reports emerged suggesting that these groups had begun arming themselves. The St. Louis Chief of police told the *Globe-Democrat* that, if this were true, the wards would have to be "put down."[220] The comment was vigorously contested by party leaders who noted that even if they had imported rifles, it was their "constitutional right to form a militia and bear arms."[221] Crucially, it was precisely at this juncture that the Veiled Prophet Society implemented extensive promotional strategies in newspapers. While gossip columns in the *St.*

[218] "More Gorgeous Than Ever," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 03, 1897, 45.

[219] "Socialism," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Apr. 12, 1878, 7.

[220] Ibid.

[221] Ibid.

Louis Post-Dispatch observed that "the veiled prophets still remain a mystery, no one having so far succeeded in lifting the veil," the paragraph immediately below noted that "the socialists held another section of their convention yesterday."[222] These opposing camps thus drew a sharp line in the sand, foregrounding contested visions of American society and the future of labor relations—one fervently defending the rule of capital, the other boldly challenging the maxims of the free market. The Veiled Prophet, portrayed as a larger-than-life figure who was to "be recognized as infallible," deftly encapsulated the growing might of capital in this industrial age.[223] His very conception embodied the anxieties born out of the St. Louis Commune: a mask worn by men whose authority, wealth, and status had been so gravely threatened by the "other half." It is in this context that we can also understand the Veiled Prophet Society as a project of self-deification, conjuring the unquestioned authority of the monarchs of old.

Days before the Veiled Prophet was to make his first ever appearance in St. Louis, the Globe-Democrat printed an extensive description of float themes "issued by the arcanum of the grand patriarch" himself.[224] Its purpose, readers were informed, was "the edification of the vulgar," a supplement for those who might otherwise "fail to grasp the true import of the display."[225] The procession, titled the "tableaux of human progress," guided audiences through a temporal journey from the "glacial period" to "primitive animals," "fruits," and "plowing," culminating in its three most notable floats: "industry," "wealth," and "the Veiled Prophet."[226] Other tableaus depicted memorable scenes from Greek mythology such as "Centaur," "Pluto in

[222] "About Town," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Sep. 23, 1878, 4.

[223] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 3.

[224] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1878, 16.

[225] Ibid.

[226] Ibid.

Hades," and "Triptolemus." Though not always thematically coherent, these depictions appropriated and redeployed the cultural authority of Greek mythology to specific ends: propagating an ever-burgeoning Protestant work ethic while naturalizing wealth inequality. As the Globe-Democrat's itinerary of the parade explained, "the first tableau suggests the barren conditions of the earth until vivified by the life principle of production."[227] This notion of a "life principle of production" presented readers with a world view whereby Lockean maxims were not only so axiomatic as to constitute a "life principle," but the source of vitality itself, bringing colour to once dreary and inhospitable world. The Greek goddess of agriculture, Demeter, was also depicted on a float with "Father Time," holding in her possession "the orb of progress."[228] Economic production and the creation of private wealth thus defined societal advancement, providing audiences with the ultimate metric of human progress.

Likewise, the "Wealth" float depicted Minerva, the Greek Goddess of wisdom, as the "protectress of industry, the preserver of the state and everything which gives the state power and prosperity."[229] Surrounding Minerva were the "jewels, ornaments and precious stones which constitute the apex of civilized possessions."[230] At a time when capitalist doctrine faced mounting opposition in the form of labour unrest, the Veiled Prophet Society reconfigured Greek mythology to equate wealth with progress and societal advancement, carving an intellectual landscape in which any ideological opposition to capitalism was decidedly counter to human progress, and, to this extent, woefully unwise. Moreover, if wealth creation is the defining marker of human progress, then any political ideology that jeopardizes this process o is not only

[227] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1878, 16.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid.

[230] Ibid.

figuratively backwards but also threatens to plunge society into a state of temporal decline—a march of regress, if you will. This dichotomous outlook imposed a temporal linearity onto workers, cogs in a machine anchored by the past glories of a Greek golden age and the eventual triumph of capitalism as both the natural and inevitable outcome of a civilizational climax. Here, the deification of a faceless prophet once again proved a most effective strategy, resulting not in the deification of any singular person or monarch, but rather, the deification of wealth itself, cementing capital as a source of cultural and political authority. Accordingly, the procession simulated acts of obedience under the pretense of performance, encouraging and instructing the audience on how to show deference—even if as an act of stage craft—to a faceless despot surrounded by jewels.[231]

These deeply contorted interpretations of Greek mythology bring into question the validity of the Veiled Prophet Society's intent to "edify" audiences. A study of Comus' 1915 Mardi Gras parade and its redeployment of Chaucer reaches a similar conclusion. Here, Barrington notes how the appropriation of highbrow cultural material not only justified otherwise dubious claims of edification, but also contributed "to the Krewe's sense of mysterious erudition," demonstrating their cultural superiority over audiences.[232] Rather than edify, Barrington continues, "generic displays of regal splendor" merely reinforced "that Comus and his Krewe deserved the privileges they enjoyed."[233] Likewise, the Veiled Prophet's presented

[231] An article published in the St. Louis Globe Democrat covering the Veiled Prophet celebration of 1883 instructed audiences on how to demonstrate subservience to the Prophet, noting that "reverence for the Prophet requires that a certain degree of silence should maintained, respecting his domestic life, and that he should be allowed to move in a mysterious way." "Through Flaming Streets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 03, 1883, 9.

[232] Barrington, "'Forget What You Have Learned': The Mistick Krewe's 1914 Mardi Gras Chaucer," 815.

[233] Ibid.

themselves as enlightened social stewards with access to esoteric and arcane knowledge which would otherwise baffle the common man.

Though no other float spoke to the fears roused by the St. Louis Commune like that of the "Veiled Prophet." This final float was to depict "the grand oracle" sitting "in august majesty upon his resplendent throne."[234] In his right hand he was to hold a "magic mirror," a relic with the power to "read all from nature, not only what has been, and what is, but also all that will be."[235] Those of the "uninitiated mind," the article explained, were welcome to gaze into its depths but would only see their own reflection. While the working residents of St. Louis had just showcased the immense power of collective action, challenging the paternal authority of their employers in the process, the all-seeing oracle had finally arrived and would not be bested.[236] The prophet's magic mirror figures as a near perfect embodiment of Foucault's "disciplinary gaze," the all-seeing "eye that nothing would escape," a "centre towards which all gazes would be turned."[237] Veiled Prophet members thus reconfigured the human geography of St. Louis into a living panoptic monument, concealing themselves at the center of an eye-catching spectacle that rendered all others into passive observers. The human architecture of the panoptic not only brought order and structure to the once frenzied streets of a city in the throes of revolution, but also "impos[ed] a compulsory visibility" onto fixed subjects who, gazing outwards at the prophet and his mirror, saw only themselves.[238] Eyewitness reports of the parade published the following day describe the veiled prophet as being "a gigantic figure" accompanied by a scribe,

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[234] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1878, 16.

[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 173.

[238] Ibid., 510.

two high priests, "fierce and warlike" guardsmen, and lastly, a "villainous looking executioner" standing by a "blood curling butcher's block."[239] When a child reportedly asked the butcher if he was hungry, another child bashfully replied, "I bet you he's a bar keep!" Though the executioner "properly took no notice of either," the reporter at the *Dispatch* noted how his eye "glittered as if he could have a chance to try his axe upon them."[240] Ironically, it is only by reviving the specter of regal adulation and monarchical cruelty that Veiled Prophet members were able to enact a more modern, panoptic modality of power. The executioner's "huge axe" poses no real harm, nor does it truly threaten to. Rather, the axe functions as a prop of medieval play, underlining the supposed irrelevance of corporal punishment in the modern age.

Along with the rising web of disciplines and institutions which constitute modernity, the Veiled Prophet procession sought to expedite the use of power by rendering it "lighter, more rapid, [and] more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come."[241] As Foucault elaborates, "punishment is only one element of a double system" that is the punishment-gratification duality.[242] Just as the teacher "must avoid[...]the use of punishment" and "endeavor to make rewards more frequent than penalties," state mechanisms incarcerated the worst offenders of the St. Louis Commune but rewarded residents with an awe-inspiring parade.[243] In this bizarre inversion of their own making, Veiled Prophet members thus paraded as the "stupid despot" who "constrain[s] his slaves with iron chains" to obscure from view the "true politician," binding "them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas."[244]

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[239] "Golden Glory," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis). Oct. 09, 1878, 5.

[240] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 4.

[241] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 209.

[242] Ibid., 180.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Ibid., 102-103.

With the added influx of German revolutionaries springing into St. Louis throughout the mid-to-late 19th century, Veiled Prophet members aptly incorporated the carnivalesque into modern systems of discipline, seeking to homogenize residents within prescribed norms and redeploying procession as a form of corrective training. Moreover, Brian M. Jack's analysis of Black migration patterns in the American South reveals that following the North's failure to uphold the promises of Reconstruction and the withdrawal of Northern troops in 1877, Black communities migrated upriver from Louisiana to Missouri, with many settling in St. Louis. This increasingly polymorphic demographic led to a population base which industrialists recognized as both foreign and fraught with ideological danger. While the seed of civil disobedience had long been planted, establishing a monopoly over procession provided city fathers and the financial elite with the tools to dictate the "local character" of St. Louis, a city they saw as "vivified by the life principle of production."[245] Accordingly, the Veiled Prophet celebration was not merely "a show of physical power," as Spencer contends, but an exercise in power's productive capacities, seeking "to increase the possible utility of individuals" by embedding them within socio-economic systems of the industrial age.[246]

Similarly, local enterprises affixed themselves to the Veiled Prophet name, capitalizing on the cachet of city's great mogul to sell a variety of items including "Veiled Prophet cigars," brimmed hats, and dry goods (see Figures 2 and 3). Where folkloric traditions like Carnivale once subverted the socio-economic order, the Veiled Prophet celebration sought to embed the carnivalesque into the modern economy, appropriating these cultural forms and re-inscribing

[245] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1878, 16.

[246] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 3; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 210.

them within the logic of consumption. This patent fixation with economic production also sought to shape common perceptions of financial elitism at a time of unparalleled financial disparity.

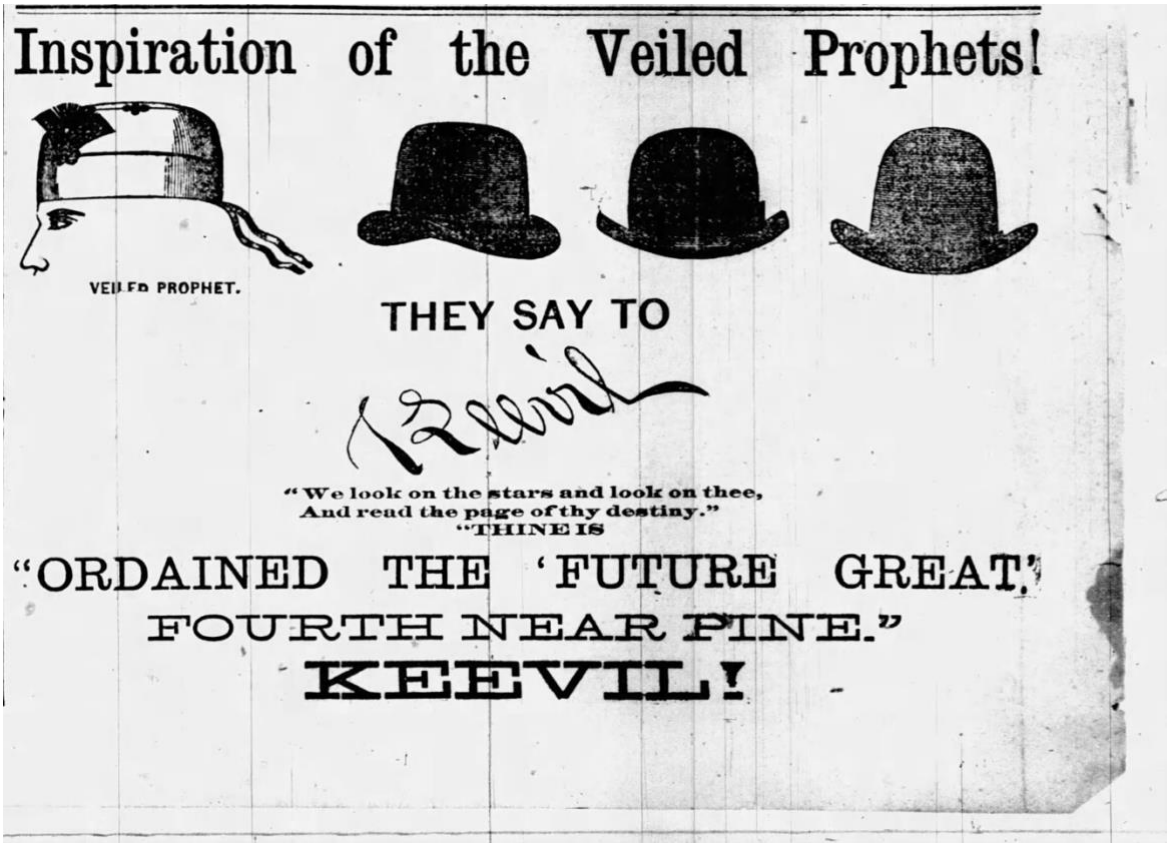

Figure 2 - Advertisement for Keevil Brimmed Hats, *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 8.

Crucially, early populist groups in the region began setting their sights on "idle elites" during the late 19th century, scapegoating specific factions within the upper class for the downward trajectory of the white workingman and farmer. The "Whitecap Manifesto," published 1893, lambasted the "European and Wall Street gold-bugs" as well as "the accursed Jew" who, "owning two thirds of our land," had brought the workingman to the "verge of ruin."[247]

[247] *"Whitecap Manifesto," Magnolia Gazette*, Mississippi, August 19, 1893.
As quoted in, William F. Holmes, "Whitecapping: Anti-Semitism in the Populist Era." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974): 244–61.

As the manifesto went on to lament "the earnings of millions, boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few," it also proposed several solutions. Firstly, "to control negro laborers by mild

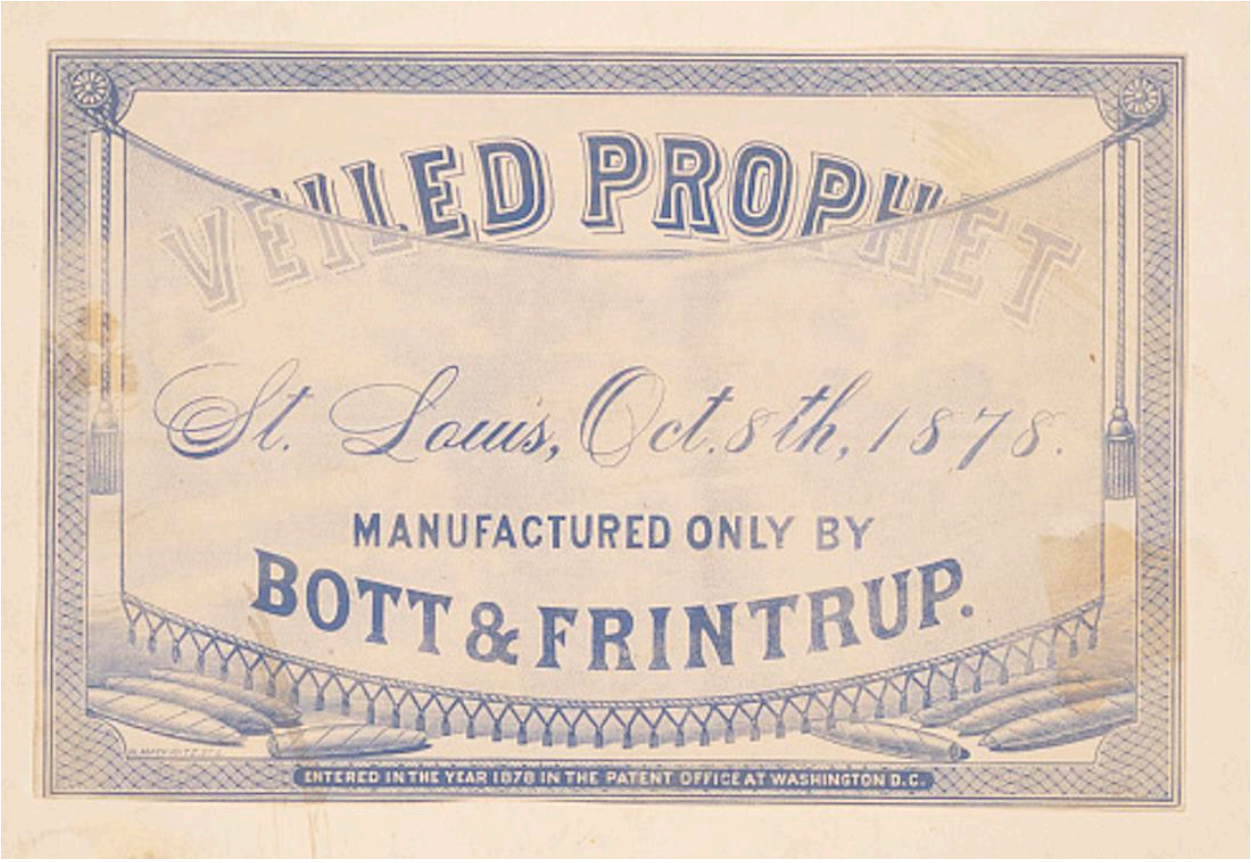

Figure 3 - Trademark registration for "Veiled Prophet Cigars," Registered April 15, 1879.

means, if possible, and by coercion if necessary," and secondly, "to control Jews and Gentile land speculators, and, if necessary, force them to abandon our country and confiscate their lands for the benefit of the white farmers."[248] By reinforcing their roles within the rising economic schema, the Veiled Prophet members thus sought to escape the negative connotations surrounding speculative finance, presenting themselves instead as a critical component in this new golden age of capitalist production—as "productive elites" and "job creators." This

[248] *"Whitecap Manifesto," Magnolia Gazette*, Mississippi, August 19, 1893.
As quoted in, Holmes, William F. "Whitecapping: Anti-Semitism in the Populist Era." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1974): 244–61.

rhetorical shift allowed them to align their economic ambitions with broader populist sentiment, positioning themselves, not as exploiters, but as benefactors of the working class.

Chapter 3: White masks, Black Labour — Bodily Harm and the Theatre of Racial Hierarchy

In 1872, a Memphis chapter of the Ku Klux Klan staged a parade inspired by the Mardi Gras tradition of New Orleans. Under the Headline "First Celebration of Fat-Tuesday in Memphis: Fun, Frolic, And Fanfare," the reporter at the *Memphis Daily Appeal* explains how the "Ku-Klux appeared in full regalia," even performing a mock lynching to start off the procession.[249] The "negro was executed," the reporters noted, "according to all the form made familiar by Nast's cartoon and by the trustworthy correspondence at the Cincinnati times."[250] Most likely referring to Thomas Nast's 1867 cartoon, "Southern Justice," the reporter apparently sought to satirize the eleven-panel portrayal of extrajudicial murders in the American South. Moreover, the Klan's performance (as well as the subsequent reporting) mocked Northern perceptions of Southern racism as overblown and fictious, even in spite of well documented lynchings throughout the late 1860s and early 1870s.[251] In fact, Black Union army veteran Wash Henley was brutally murdered in Memphis just three years prior for attempting trying to run away with his white employer's daughter.[252] The men believed to be responsible for the murder were never investigated while the exact site of his grave is still unknown. Even so, the reporter assured readers that "a thousand or two other negros saw how the horrid deed was done and strange to say they seemed to enjoy the scene, the death-struggle, the efforts to escape, even more keenly than the whites."[253] Another article from the *Memphis Avalanche* goes on to detail how, during

[249] "High Carnival," *Memphis Daily Appeal* (TN, Memphis), Feb. 14, 1872, 4.

[250] Ibid.

[251] "Sites." Lynching Sites Project. Accessed October 04, 2024. https://lynchingsitesmem.org/lynching/sites.

[252] "The Lynching of Wash Henley." James Madison University. Accessed October 04, 2024. https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/lynchingmarkers/tn1869011501/.

[253] "High Carnival," *Memphis Daily Appeal* (TN, Memphis), Feb. 14, 1872, 4.

the same parade, "it was a favorite bit of pleasantry to lasso a negro."[254] As if to assuage readers once more, the report added, "no violence was offered but the contortions and grimaces of the captives were highly amusing."[255]

Here, Elaine Frantz Parsons' work on the Ku Klux Klan and the organization's deployment of theatricality provides an invaluable lens through which to view procession and its ability to obscure physical violence. Parsons contends that the use of robes and ceremony encouraged "Northerners to read [Klan] attacks as theatrical, rather than political or military."[256] By appropriating the "symbolic language of minstrelsy, carnival, and related popular forms," Klansmen were thus able to "to construct a more resilient white, male, southern identity" while obscuring physical aggression under the guise of "post-racial play."[257] Just as the Veiled Prophet parade sought to create a more subservient workers through mass entertainment, Klansmen carried out highly scripted and theatrical attacks—some of which were even reported to involve timed fireworks.[258] Hence, as the Memphis Klan staged "mock lynching" with a Klansman costumed in blackface, other members of the organization openly engaged in brazen acts of intimidation obscured by the veneer of theatricality and the carnivalesque. To assert that the Veiled Prophet celebration functioned purely as an incentivizing measure or ideological trojan horse thus undermines certain complexities of the celebration.

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[254] Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan," 835.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ibid.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid., 822.

3.1: Pleasure or Punishment? — *Bio-Power in the Age of Revelry*

While Foucault figures punishment and gratification as two forces occupying opposing ends of the same coin, the Veiled Prophet celebration serves as crucial a site of investigation whereby the distinctions between punishment and gratification—as well as between bio-power and sovereign authority—are not merely oppositional but interwoven. Likewise, Scholars have rigorously contested Foucault's assertion of a shift toward non-corporeal forms of punishment. They argue that Foucault grossly underestimates the persistence of state violence perpetrated against marginalized bodies both inside and outside of the modern carceral apparatus.[259] The cultural forms developed by the Krewes of Mardi Gras and the Veiled Prophet Society thus illustrate the coalescence of the punishment/gratification binary within a singular instance, engendering a symbiotic relationship in which acts of gratification both facilitate and obscure explicit manifestations of corporeal punishment. For example, the Veiled Prophet procession was reported to have been led by:

> A squad of policemen, mounted and fully equipped, breaking away the great surging crowd. At times it appeared as though the dense mass of humanity would triumph, and that the procession had run against an insurmountable barrier, but the sharp points of the saber would eventually make an opening. Just back of the advance guard came two platoons of the finest looking and best of the Metropolitan Police, with Chief McDonough at their head. They all held bright gleaming sabers, and presented a very warlike appearance.[260]

Prior to the ubiquity of motorized vehicles, American city streets were central to the individual's social world. These multi-vocal platforms not only facilitated merchants, pedestrians, and street performers, but also served social causes: a civic arena where citizens voiced concerns and

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[259] Angela Davis contends that while the "category of class plays a pivotal role in [Foucault's] analysis [of modern carceral punishment], gender and race are virtually absent." Angela Davis, "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" in *The Companion to African American Philosophy* (Malden: Massachusetts, 2006), 360. Similarly, James Joy contends that "Foucault's elision of racial bias in historical lynching and contemporary policing predicts his silence on the racialization of prisons and the death penalty in the United States." James Joy, *Resisting State Violence* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1996), 34.

[260] "The Pageant: Head of the Procession," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 3.

advocated for change. As Spencer notes, the advent of the Veiled Prophet procession coincided with a larger effort to restrict access to city streets, requiring permits for all processions, spectacles and demonstrations.[261] This undertaking engendered in its wake the notion of the "unregulated" or "illegal" assembly. Hence, as officers broke "away the great surging crowd," elites engaged in a decidedly physical conflict over the use of public space. The threat posed by the "bright gleaming sabers" of officers is, much like the mock lynching in staged in Memphis, obscured by the play and whimsy of the carnivalesque. Audiences were not witnessing the emergence of a burgeoning police state, but rather, the triumph of a fictitious mogul. As the procession ferried the Veiled Prophet and his "warlike guards" about town, the metropolitan police presented an equally "warlike appearance"—the threat of violence aptly neutralized by the procession's use of theatrical modes and medieval imagery.[262]

The obfuscation is hence twofold. While carnivalesque imagery eclipsed the advent of modern disciplinary mechanisms and productive forms of power, it simultaneously obscured the duality inherent to the modern disciplinary apparatus. As Wacquant's posits, "America's urban (sub)proletariat lives in a 'punitive society,' but its middle and upper classes certainly do not."[263] Dialectically, the tension between corporeal regimes of discipline and modern carceral systems is only resolved once the former is subsumed and reinvented by the latter. In this configuration, punitive legal frameworks reconstitute slavery under the guise of convict leasing, embodying a strategy whereby the Prophet's spectacle of punishment obscures the birth of new regulatory powers perpetuating physical subjugation and brutality within the bounds of juridical

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[261] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 2

[262] "The Veiled Prophets" *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 4; "The Pageant: Head of the Procession," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 3.

[263] Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 297.

authority. The emergent police state here functions as an apparatus which both legitimizes and normalizes coercive mechanisms, transforming exploitation into a 'lawful' expression of state power which consolidates control under the rubric of public order and legal discipline.

Just so, the procession's physical hold over the streets of St. Louis mirrored the events of the St. Louis Commune: a riotous labour dispute as viewed through the lens of a camera obscura. Though where strikers had taken the city by force, the residents of St. Louis would be, as one newspaper asserted, "giving up the city to the control to the Veiled Prophet Chief."[264] What strikers had achieved during the St. Louis Commune, the Veiled Prophets would achieve with full support of the law, inverting displays of civil disobedience to affirm hegemonic constructions of class. As Spencer notes that "five of the Original Fourteen [members] had large and very public roles in putting down the strike" of 1877.[265] This included St. Louis police commissioner John G. Priest, Sheriff Col. John Finn, and adjutant-general of the citizen's militia, Leigh O. Knapp.[266] The careful positioning of key juridical figures, increasingly linked to the Veiled Prophet Society through the gossip columns, cemented the procession as another piece of metonymic theatre, reenacting the strike break of 1877 as processional performance. Hence, as officers broke through the "dense mass" of disambiguated lives, they engaged in the visceral theatre of human violence, reaffirming the inevitability of state discipline—both its corporeal manifestations and modern carceral practices—under the guise of an invented folk form. The Veiled Prophet procession was thus unique in so far as it blended both polarities of the punishment-gratification binary: a polymorphic form of power which was as generative as it was punitive, ideologically pointed and yet physically potent with a growing sense of racial

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[264] "V.P." *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 1.

[265] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 18.

[266] Ibid.

awareness. Directly under the notice that residents were "giving up the city to the control of the city to the Veiled Prophets," another large print header stated, "observance of traditional rites in all the old-time grandeur."[267] Though the procession was an entirely foreign phenomenon to the residents of St. Louis, a city with no history of practicing carnival festivities, Veiled Prophet members worked tirelessly with print media to engage in what Hobsbawm and Ranger refer to as the "invention of tradition," dressing novel practices in the robes of antiquity. These new means of discipline and corrective training were presented, not as the novel practices that they were, but as the observance of an ancient rite. This temporal sleight of hand provided bourgeois society with a trapdoor through which to introduce a panoptic modality of power unnoticed. By 1964, a reporter at the St. Louis Post Dispatch would write of the parade that "thousands of St. Louisans still go out to see something that is distinctly their own," cementing the parade's once foreign intrusion as a longstanding cultural tradition.[268]

3.2 Market Forces and Racial Discourse — *The Cost of 'Freedom'*

It is here worth noting the Veiled Prophet celebration's absence of racial commentary, particularly when compared to the vitriolic brand of racism diffused by the Krewes of Mardi Gras. Rather, the Order of Veiled Prophet initially focused on Anglo-Saxon ideals and free-market worship, repeating the "Tableaux of Human Progress" in its first three years. Nevertheless, Spencer maintains that early depictions of the Prophet were no mere coincidence, intending to send a clear "expression of class and racial control."[269] Remarkably, the wood-engraved image depicting this "Hooded Prophet," prominently reproduced in countless op-ed

[267] "V.P." *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 1.

[268] "Veiled Prophet Tradition Began at Fair in 1878," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Feb. 16, 1964, 10.

[269] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 7.

pieces and Walter Johnson's 2020 Book, *The Broken Heart of St. Louis*, is widely misrepresented. While the image appears to presage modern Klan iconography with uncanny accuracy, the image more accurately depicts an Illinois Klansman. Remarkably, the *Missouri Republican* first published the same illustration three years prior, appearing under the headline "Illinois Outlawry: the Ku Klux Klan of Southern Illinois."[270]

Figure 4 – Wood Carving based image depicting an Illinois Klansman first printed in the *Missouri Republican*, 1875. "Illinois Outlawry," *Missouri Republican* (MO, St. Louis), Aug. 23, 1875, 5.

Figure 5 – The same image purporting to depict the Veiled Prophet. Printed in the *Missouri Republican*, Oct. 06, 1878. As show in Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 160.

Although the precise motivation behind the use of substitutional imagery is impossible to determine, what remains clear is that someone at the *Missouri Republican* (possibly Col. Leigh O. Knapp himself) believed the image provided an adequate representation of the city's newest

[270] "Illinois Outlawry," *Missouri Republican* (MO, St. Louis), Aug. 23, 1875, 5.

mogul, as if to say, "close enough."[271] The editors' readiness to link the two organizations—whether born of a lack of preparation or strategic intent—underscores how the Veiled Prophet Society's early parades employed covert racial messaging. This approach functioned to evoke the specter of subterranean populist movements while carefully abstaining from acts of domestic terrorism and extrajudicial violence, thus preserving a veneer of respectability. Accordingly, while the Veiled Prophet Society held no direct ties to the Klan, the chosen strategy betrays a calculated proximity to populist movements, signaling an alignment with their underlying grievances while maintaining a strategic disavowal of their most overt expressions of violence. In this way, the Veiled Prophet Society might be better understood as being "populist-adjacent," a group adept at channeling the energies of extremist backlash into socially acceptable forms of dominance. I would also argue that the organization's use of Klan imagery does little adduce the existence of vitriolic racism amongst its members, but rather, demonstrates an explicit understanding of the utility of promoting racial hatred as a strategy to fracture workers along racial lines.

Curiously, the gun toting figure initially depicted by the Missouri Republican and so fervently dissected in more recent scholarship would never see the light of day. Instead, the mogul was "costumed in red and green," opting for a veil in place of the hood (see figures 6 and 7).[272] The white robes currently synonymous with the Klan would only come to prominence later during the 1920s, largely the result of Griffith's and Gish's silent film *Birth of a Nation*, first

[271] This misrepresentation has recently been the subject of informal debate. Retired St. Louis Journalist, George Garrigues, recently critiqued both Spencer and Johnson in his self-publish book, *The Failed Joke of the Veiled Prophet*, arguing that the 1878 article published in the *Missouri Republican* which falsely identified the Klansman as "the original Veiled Prophet himself," was, in fact, intended as satire (much less a message of racial control). However, Garrigues also fails to consider how, much like the Mardi Gras Parade staged in Memphis, 1872, humour and satire were often deployed to mask and obscure racist beliefs and intent. See: George Garrigues, *The Failed Joke of the Veiled Prophet* (Kindle: 2022).

[272] "Golden Glory: The Veiled Prophet," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 09, 1878, 5.

shown in 1915.[273] In fact, scholars argue that earlier iterations of Ku Klux Klan constituted more of a rag-tag ensemble of vigilantes with no unified aesthetic, often riding under the cover a repurposed materials such as stockings, bedsheets and women's dresses.[274] To this extent,

Figure 6 – Official 1882 Veiled Prophet Procession Program, State Historical Society of Missouri. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/veiled-prophets-will-appear--622130136036483378/

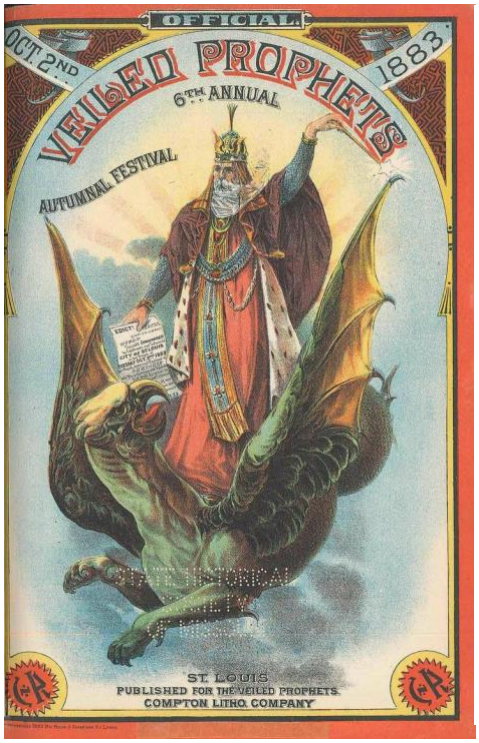

Figure 7 – Official 1883 Veiled Prophet Procession Program, State Historical Society of Missouri, Ref Coll: H235.44 V533. https://in.pinterest.com/pin/104356916340366714/

the Prophet's eventual appearance in red and green robes may have been just as effective at communicating this "message of racial control," particularly when considering that the

[273] Rory McVeigh, *Rise of the Ku Klux Klan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 20-21.

[274] Parsons' meticulous research reveals how early Klan "costumes featured 'all kinds of fixings'—fake beards or tassels, for example, or one to four horns pointing up or down. Some Ku-Klux wore 'scarlet stockings' underneath their costumes. Some attached pieces of reflective metal to their disguises. Some had red paper hats with 'square stars tacked about on' them. One victim described the costumes of the men who attacked him as 'white gowns, and some had flax linen, and red calico, and some red caps, and white horns stuffed with cotton. And some had flannel around coon-skin caps, and faces on, and next to the caps their gowns came down so that I could not see only the legs below the knees...'" Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 81; Parsons, "Midnight Rangers: Costume and Performance in the Reconstruction-Era Ku Klux Klan," 825.

Klansman who paraded the streets of Mardi Gras in 1872 was described as "a gentleman in a very red suit."[275]

The organization's namesake fulfilled a similar function. Taken from Thomas Moore's poem, "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan," founders most likely sought inspiration from 18th century orientalist literature to cultivate an outlandish mystique. Appropriating outmoded cultural elements is, according to David Cannadine, a core mechanism of the invention of tradition, particularly for elites and clandestine groups seeking "to enhance mystery and the magic of ceremony."[276] However, the nominal designation is indeed curious when we consider that the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan was in fact an antagonist of epic proportions. Scholar Jeffery Vail argues that Moore's poem was, first and foremost, an allegorical critique of the French Revolution and its descent into tyranny. To this extent, Moore's "sinister Veiled Prophet" serves as the "embodiment of false Jacobin liberty," a "revolutionary demagogue" who sold his followers a false vision of a facile and bloodless end to bondage.[277] As the Prophet claims to veil himself to shield the "mortal sight" of his followers, he invokes a construct wherein his beauty—ostensibly beyond comprehension—becomes both a protective veil and a tool of dominion, positioning the onlookers as fragile beings, vulnerable to the mere presence of transcendent authority.[278] As the narrative later reveals, the Prophet's silver veil more accurately conceals the

[275] "The Heroic Muse," *The Times-Democrat* (New Orleans, LA), Feb. 14, 1872, 5.

[276] David Cannadine, "The Context Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition' c. 1820-1977," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013),106.

[277] Jeffery Vail, "Thomas Moore in Ireland and America: The Growth of a Poet's Mind," *Romanticism* 10, no. 1 (2008): 55.

[278] Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*, "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan" (Los Angeles: Library of the University of California, 1868), 33.

prophet's disfigured face, described as both "maim'd and monstrous."[279] While scholars continue to debate the exact target of Moore's allegorical ire, there is no doubting the poem's censure of the Veiled Prophet: an "imposter...who had more than once thrown off his soul's disguise."[280] Why founding members were thus compelled to name the organization after the object of Moore's scathing literary criticism is perhaps confounding, but not unimaginable.

As Moore's work continued to penetrate the Western literary zeitgeist, proliferating references to "Veiled Prophets" in print media may serve to illuminate the increasingly complex cultural connotations surrounding this shadowy figure. One illustrative article, published in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat in 1878, details the life of the recently deceased Pope Pius IX. Condemning the Jesuit order for its transformation of the Catholic church into a source of "despotism," the report refers to the Jesuits who had so deftly ingratiated themselves within the papacy as the "Veiled Prophets behind the papal chair."[281] Likewise, an editorial critique published in the *Kansas City Times* censured the local Mormon community for "establishing a theocracy" and endorsing polygamy, stating that the denomination "had a following as blind as and devoted as that described in the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan."[282] Other references to the figure of the Veiled Prophet took on an increasingly pejorative connotations. For example, in October of 1876, the *St. Louis Daily Globe Democrat* published a speech given by Judge John F. Long at a Republican convention in South St. Louis. Here, Judge Long admonished the Democratic party, which he stated, "are worshipping a Veiled Prophet."[283] Long elaborated that

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[279] Jeffery Vail, "Thomas Moore in Ireland and America: The Growth of a Poet's Mind," 55; Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*, "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan," 68.

[280] Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*, "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan," 49.

[281] "The Dead Pope," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Feb. 11, 1878, 8.

[282] "Hendrick's Speech," *The Kansas City Times* (MO, Kansas City) Mar. 7, 1876, 2.

[283] "Hayes and Wheeler," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis) Oct. 19, 1876, 3.

"Gov. Tilden is that veiled prophet[...], remove the veil, and the democratic party may find some of that rottenness, disease and corruption they so much complain and talk about."[284] Even more prescient is an article published by the Lexington *Weekly Caucasian* in April of 1868. Announcing the Ku Klux Klan's arrival to the state of Missouri, the report details how "one of the cyclops of the K.K.K. paid our city a visit a few nights ago[…], remaining only long enough to establish a den."[285] As the article goes on to explain, "we have never seen one of these ubiquitous and Veiled Prophets, nor do we sufficiently understand their mission on terra firma to enlighten those who, like ourselves, 'want to know.'" [286] Curiously, the figure's deployment in this context is patently positive, infusing events with a sense of wonder and excitement. As the article elaborates, "from all we read about them, and the care despots are taking to suppress them, we conclude they are a pretty clever kind of fellows."[287] Conversely, an article published in Green Bay Wisconsin, 1871, derided the Klan as "Veiled Prophets of crime, more hideous than their great prototype and pattern."[288]

This recurring association between the Klan and the figure of the Veiled Prophet not only suggests a mental link had been forged between the two—implying an element of both mystery and manipulation—but also demonstrates the bi-polar nature of societal perception wherein figures of authority are simultaneously venerated and vilified, reflecting broader anxieties surrounding power, identity, and the very fabric of social order. Where some read Moore's "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan" and saw an imposter or false messiah, others saw a master

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[284] "Hayes and Wheeler*," St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis) Oct. 19, 1876, 3.

[285] "Ku-Klux-Klan," *The Weekly Caucasian* (MO, Lexington), Apr. 18, 1868, 3.

[286] Ibid.

[287] Ibid.

[288] "The State Press," *Green Bay Weekly Gazette* (WI, Green Bay), Jun. 03, 1871, 1.

manipulator: a shrewd and cunning worthy of aspiration. This inquiry into the evolving cultural significance of the Veiled Prophet exposes him as a sort of cipher, a figure who channels ideological tensions and maintains a dual capacity for influence. He is at once emblematic of unquestioned, monarchical authority and yet deeply subversive: a counter-cultural icon whom "despots" aim to "suppress" and the very embodiment of the "outsider elite." Through this constructed ambiguity, the Veiled Prophet Society deftly concealed racially coded messaging within a framework of benign pageantry, allowing elites to form a discursive association with subterranean populist groups while occupying the socio-economic apex of Missourian society — an insidious validation of white supremacy diffused from above. In doing so, they blurred the line between social order and subversion, embedding exclusionary ideologies in the guise of cultural celebration which would resonate just beneath the surface of public consciousness.

Strikingly, it would take until 1886 for the Society to transition from subtle insinuation to explicit racial rhetoric, marked by the introduction of a tableau entitled "American History." Building on procession themes of years past, the display continued to espouse the merits of Anglo-Protestant economic virtue, only this time deploying the ethnic other as a foil. This contrast served to justify colonial exploits and Anglo-Saxon dominance throughout North America, locating material wealth as the natural outcome of a manifest-destiny. The first float, simply titled "America," encapsulates the very spirit of America's "civilizing mission."[289] Here, "a group of red men in the foreground represented the infancy of the country."[290] Perched in the cloud above them sat "the goddess of progress," inevitable and all seeing.[291] The red men's "nude dress and primitive surroundings," added the reporter at the *Post-Dispatch*, "contrasted forcibly

[289] "The Pageant," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1886, 9.

[290] Ibid.

[291] Ibid.

with the symbols of civilization just a few feet above their heads."[292] Other floats paid tribute to various European explorers, from Columbus to de Soto. Just so, the procession's sixth float depicted Cortez's conquest over the Mexican King Montezuma. While the float depicted a regal Montezuma in rich purple fabrics, potentially counteracting notions of "primitive" and unproductive indigenous groups, the reporter at the *Post-Dispatch* was quick to frame Montezuma's wealth as "barbaric splendor," natural resources squandered on an economically backwards people.[293]

Following displays of pilgrims, puritans and founding fathers, the procession came to its sixteenth float, "King Cotton." At the front, "a glossy plantation darky belabored a mule attached to cotton cart," while at the rear, "a gang of negroes were busy picking the fleecy staple from the field."[294] The reporter makes no attempt to describe "King Cotton" or what type of costume the King may have worn, focusing instead on the servile acts of the racialized actors. Much like the ad for Carré's Plantation Cabins, the float exemplified white society's desire to see African Americans remain in a position of socio-economic subservience, fulfilling their prescribed role within the larger economy as a source of cheap labour. Accordingly, these displays provide a window into the mutually constitutive nature of white supremacist ideology and capitalist enterprise, a discursive co-construction of Anglo-American racial thought and free market ideology. Following the failure of reconstruction and Northern exodus from the American South, free people of colour who made their way to St. Louis were thus confronted with images of socio-economic stasis: Black workers continued to pick cotton in fields while a proto-Klansman waved to jeering crowds, surrounded by the "jewels and gold that lay in great heaps at his mighty

[292] "The Pageant," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1886, 9.

[293] Ibid.

[294] "Scenes of Splendor," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1886, 9.

feet."[295] Rather than offering new economic opportunities, entry into the "free" market merely reconstituted slavery under a liberal democratic framework, establishing a gentle yet more efficient means of racialized exploitation. As Robinson notes, "the emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor," a deft political maneuver which obscured from view the glaring incompatibilities of slavery and American constitutional law.[296] The procession's theme, "American History," only highlight the bizarre temporal warp at play: that under the guise of sweeping legal change came continuity, a sustained exploitation of racialized bodies refined by the development of the bureaucratic apparatus. Building on Michael Craton's assertion that "formal emancipation was little more than a hegemonic trick" resulting in wage slavery, Robinson adds:

> The list, of course, should not have ended with wage slavery. It[...]should also include peonage, sharecropping, tenant-farming, forced labor, penal labor, and modern peasantry.[297]

While the advent of the industrial economy and increasing Black mobility had allowed many to leave the farm, the result was no different, relegated to lowest possible positions within the urban economy or, as proliferating anti-Black legislation came into effect, condemned to penal servitude. Challenging Foucault's conceptualization of prisons as rehabilitative force producing "docile bodies," Davis contends that the "abolition of slavery […]corresponded to the authorization of slavery as punishment."[298] Emancipation coalesced with birth of penal servitude to "create an immense black presence within southern prisons," thus transforming the "character of punishment into a means of managing former slaves as opposed to addressing problems of

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[295] "Scenes of Splendor," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 06, 1886, 9.

[296] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 237.

[297] Ibid.

[298] Davis, "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" in *The Companion to African American Philosophy*, 363.

serious crime."[299] Hence, as emancipation stoked fears of Black financial mobility, the Veiled Prophet Society sought to create a self-assuaging logic of racial continuity, presenting "King Cotton" as the penultimate float in their chronology of American history, as if to propel depictions of Black acquiescence into the modern age. The final float, "the mineral and agricultural wealth of Missouri," not only brought about an awkward end to the American historical narrative, depicting natural resources in a static and atemporal manner, but also positioned African American field hands against a backdrop of inanimate natural resources.

Moreover, representations of Black field labourers were somewhat out of place amongst decidedly historic figures like Cortez and George Washington. As Robinson notes, Black field labourers were still a common sight in 1886, existing under predatory economic arrangements like sharecropping and tenant-farming. In fact, visual representations of Black sharecroppers would have been virtually indistinguishable from "historic" representations of slavery, so much so that it is difficult to determine which of the two the Veiled Prophet celebration intended to depict. It is even possible that, to contemporary audiences, the distinction was somewhat irrelevant, a vague legal amendment in the continuum of Black subservience. The amorphous contours of the display, depicting potentially free but perpetually exploited black bodies, encapsulates the open-ended liminality of the Black subject in post-emancipatory America, offering Anglo-American audiences the comfort of racial stasis amidst fears of rapid social change. The organization would continue to employe imagery of enslaved Africans within increasingly incongruous tableaux, discursively reinforcing this class-based racial order throughout the coming decades. In 1883, for instance, the Veiled Prophet Society presented a tableau entitled "Fairyland," reinterpreting a variety of fairy tales including Cinderella, Sleeping

[299] Davis, "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" in *The Companion to African American Philosophy*, 363.

Beauty, Jack and the Bean Stalk, and Mother Goose.[300] The procession program from this year notes that beside the throne of the Prophet stood "two Nubian slaves...waving fans made of Eastern feathers," while "ranged on seats below were grouped what seemed the subordinate officers of the conclave."[301] Again, images of subservient Blacks aimed to underscore irrelevant displays that positioned these figures in roles disturbingly akin to the positions they occupied in the real world. Such portrayals not only perpetuated a façade of elite spectacle but also contributed to the post-emancipatory economy that thrived on the commodification of racial subservience.

By 1890, the Veiled Prophet Society adopted another borrowed tradition from the Mystick Krewe of Comus, hiring Black men to carry hefty and oversized torches during night parades. Much to the amusement of the press:

> The organizers of the parade tried to direct the details of torch and red-light bearers to their respective stations. These men were chiefly negroes of the steamboat type, and their comprehension of the orders given was extremely vague. In consequence there was a general rush in each direction but the right one, and a pulling and hauling around of the unlucky torch men only served to make matter worse.[302]

Albeit less ideologically refined than some of the float displays, the practice of recruiting Black torchbearers created a compelling visual logic of race, exemplifying dominant modes of racial differentiation to a wide audience. As White notes in her study of torture and Mardi Gras, the participation of African men during the pre-Lenten festivities of the 18th century "was coerced and did not involve costuming."[303] Rather, "they appeared as themselves—as enslaved

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[300] "Through Flaming Streets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 03, 1883, 9.

[301] *Program of the Veiled Prophet Celebration*, 1883. From the Veiled Prophet Collection, St. Louis Public Library, St. Louis, MO.

[302] "Veiled Prophet," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 08, 1890, 9.

[303] Sophie White, "Massacre, Mardi Gras, and Torture in Early New Orleans," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 514.

Africans."[304] During later iterations of Mardi Gras, the deployment of Black torchbearers, then known as "flambeau carriers," was revived by the Krewe of Comus in 1857. The tradition carried on well into the late 19th century, only now, free people of colour were "hired to walk alongside (white) masked horsemen during night parades, the heavy torches causing them to bend over in the subservient manner required of this popular mock performance of servitude."[305] However, to reduce the subservience and labour of Black torchbearers to "mock performance" also obfuscates the depth of the display, that the very servitude once acquired by the threat of psychological and corporeal punishment could now be purchased from freed Black subjects for a meager sum. Relative to the constant policing and physical force demanded of individual owners to maintain dominance over enslaved subjects, the act of purchasing servility was not only more efficient, but again blurred the patent ethical quandaries inherent to chattel slavery.

Accordingly, the co-constitutive elements of racial thought and global capitalism which had previously transmuted African lives into a high-cost product now reduced the servitude of Black citizens into a low-cost commodity, better meeting the needs of capitalist enterprise and the growing state apparatus. The destitute material conditions imposed onto recently emancipated people of colour merely allowed bourgeois society to substitute physical force with all-encompassing financial leverage, the exploitation of a calculated deprivation and hunger. Saidiya Hartman eloquently describes this paradox as the double bind of freedom: "being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject."[306] As Black bodies were displayed "pulling and hauling around" cumbersome wooden torches, the

[304] White, "Massacre, Mardi Gras, and Torture in Early New Orleans," 514.

[305] Ibid.

[306] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.

face of sweeping legal change was once again exposed as streamlined continuity, "the texture of freedom[...]laden with the vestiges of slavery."[307]

Here, the eager scrambling of torchbearers sustained the supremacy of the White Anglo-Saxon, mirroring the spatial mastery and dominance of yesteryear's slave owner through new contractual methods. The writer at *Globe Democrat* described the six men as "Senegambian torchbearers" —even though they were almost certainly born on American soil—obscuring their status as citizens while reviving the specter of human property and the "imported African."[308] Hence, where "the slave [was once] the object in the ground that [made] possible the existence of the bourgeois subject," it was now the Black labourer "of the steamboat type" who, through contradistinction, shaped the growing contours of White male identity.[309] The palpable dynamics of this pseudo-performance espoused a nascent doctrine of racial differentiation, a new form of corrective training which inculcated both inter-racial and intra-racial modes of behavior. Audiences were fed images of acquiescent and segregated Black labourers, well removed from the elevated platforms which ferried masked whites dispensing orders from above. Inclusion of the Black subject was, just as it would be in white society, only made possible via the fulfillment of demeaning, poorly remunerated labour—the financial appendage of the white bourgeoisie. Torchbearers expressed no subjectivities through voice or movement, nor were they costumed in a meaningful way. In fact, to infer that Black torchbearers engaged in any kind of performance whatsoever underlines how the "performance" and the acts which the performance required them to execute were one and the same: a theatrical tautology whereby the performance of labour,

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[307] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 117.

[308] "Veiled Prophet," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 08, 1890, 9.

[309] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 62; "Veiled Prophet," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 08, 1890, 9.

was, first and foremost, menial and degrading labour. If, for example, the Veiled Prophet Society had hired well-renumerated Black actors to feign subservience and mimic the hauling of hefty torches, the means of racial differentiation would lose all potency. It was the truth of the "performance" which gave it power, the explicit and demonstrated mastery over Black bodies as attained through an uneven and coercive financial exchange.

Moreover, the display generated a hegemonic mode of idealized white behavior which could be contrasted against other, more deviant modes of "whiteness" which did not adhere to the Anglo-Saxon ideal. This intra-racial distinction would likely have been a key concern for Veiled Prophet members, seeking to homogenize a radicalized labour force of both domestic and foreign-born white workers by bringing them into the fold of "whiteness." The procession thus serves as a window into a key moment in history, illustrating the shifting contours of whiteness and the expansive deployment of racism to harness human labour more efficiently. As Northern industrialist refined the deployment of racial thought, "permutations of the instrument appeared endless: Black against white; Anglo-Saxon against southern and eastern European; domestic against immigrant; proletariat against share-cropper; white American against Asian, Black, Latin American, and so on."[310] And where the dominant racial doctrine had previously inferred upon certain European ethnic group the status of "non-white," it now welcomed them as a part of a calculated inclusion, dividing the labour force into stark antagonistic camps.[311] Accordingly, this internal stratification of the working class into an increasingly Black-White binary, deployed

[310] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 241.

[311] According to Johnson, debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) included an extensive discussion on whether non-naturalized German immigrants would be permitted to vote in Kansas. For readers of Boernstein's *Anzeiger des Westens*, it was an accepted truth that American slaveholders "viewed German workers as men in need of masters," as "white n—s." Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 124.

through the visual language of carnival, introduced bi-lateral racial distinctions and emulative behaviors to reinstate a racial order which had been muddled through the shared toil of a multi-racial workforce. This is evident in the Veiled Prophet's panorama of "American History," incorporating a wide variety of Nordic, Spanish and Italian explorers into the historical meta-narrative of Anglo-Saxon superiority which stood in stark contrast to the vague and essentializing depictions of ethnic others. From this vantage point, it is possible view how the Veiled Prophet Society sought to naturalize extreme economic inequality by altering the scale and nature of stratification in its relation to shifting racial constructs, incentivizing working-class Europeans with a seat at the table, as if to suggest that—in the words of Cedric J. Robinson—perhaps they "too would be 'white' someday."[312]

[312] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 108.

Conclusion

Due to the restrictive nature of the colonial archive, the immediate reactions, subjectivities and thoughts of those targeted by the emergence of the Veiled Prophet Society remain forever muted, constrained by the vested interests of print media tycoons and capitalist enterprise. The endless scouring of documents, clippings and chronicles undertaken to complete this project uncovered only a single indictment of the Veiled Prophet Society prior to 1900, and even then, the exact sentiment of the expression remains unclear. On October 8th, 1878, St. Louis resident Mike Clearly was arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct when he "flourished his revolver and threatened to shoot a hole through the Veiled Prophet."[313] Sadly, the article makes no mention of motive or why the assailant may have been compelled to threaten the great mogul. Had he participated in the general strike of 1877 and harboured feelings of resentment? Or was he, in an inebriated state, driven to flaunt his pistol and threaten the Veiled Prophet simply because he could?

Regardless, the archive's noted absence of any genuine or unfiltered reactions to the Veiled Prophet's meteoric rise elucidates how elites manufactured consent for the city's newest tradition. Following the first ever procession of the Veiled Prophet in 1878, a writer at the *Globe-Democrat* proclaimed that:

> The grand reception and ball, in the vast hall of the merchant's exchange, was the grandest social event to ever take place in St. Louis. Nothing short of reportorial exuberance of fancy can do justice to the dazzling beauty that shone there in all the glory of rich raiment and flashing jewels. Such an event is a great thing in the history of this city. It fosters a strong public spirit and attracts attention from the outside. The gentlemen who planned and managed the entertainment of last evening are entitled to a hearty thanks for the good that they have done and the pleasure they have

[313] "First District Police Court," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 9, 1878, 8.

> given, and as the Globe-Democrat is the recognized organ of the court of public opinion, it takes pleasure in pronouncing this favorable judgment on behalf of the whole city.[314]

As the *Globe-Democrat* crowned itself the "organ of the court of public opinion," elites thus signaled their intent to silence any possibility of censure or criticism.[315] Not only were residents expected to gaze out at the vast riches and jewels of the Veiled Prophet with child-like awe, but they were also expected to thank them for the privilege. This manufactured approval was inextricably bound to the burgeoning doctrines of trickle-down and neoliberal economic policy, promoting visions of societal well-being that privileged gross economic output over social welfare. In doing so, the Veiled Prophet Society sought to solidify industrial elites as indispensable pillars within the modern economic structure, reinforcing their role not only as wealth generators but as the very arbiters of social and economic stability.

To this extent, the Veiled Prophet Society can be difficult to locate within the existing schema of 19th century populist movements. At one level, they appropriated and redeployed populist techniques pioneered by domestic terrorist groups like the White Caps and the Ku Klux Klan, transmuting the carnivalesque blueprint for collective action to disseminate ideological currents and curb black financial mobility. At another level, the Veiled Prophet Society's elite member base stands in stark contrast to Berlet and Lyon's definition of populist movements and the "outsider elites" who, appealing to popular discontent, vie for power against political and economic rivals. Rather, they constituted the absolute apex of Missourian Society untied under a single banner. However, Berlet and Lyon's critique of the "centrist/extremist model" may offer another explanation. They contend that the tendency to view populist agitation as being rooted in the "fringe right-wing" obscures the "rational choices and partially legitimate grievances that

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[314] "The Veiled Prophets," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (MO, St. Louis), Oct. 9,1878, 4.

[315] Ibid.

help to fuel right-wing populist movements," concealing "the fact that right-wing bigotry and scapegoating are firmly rooted in the mainstream social and political order."[316] These "direct linkages—ideological, organizational, and economic—between right-wing and mainstream political forces" thus permits for a more liminal understanding of right-wing populism, unveiling a latent symbiosis between extremism and hegemonic institutions.[317] The formation of the Veiled Prophet Society thus serves as a critical point of entry for understanding the development of "top-down populism," whereby the political apparatus of mainstream elites actively fosters and orchestrates extremist backlash, deftly manipulating public anxieties for economic advantage. This study further adduces that mainstream political power, rather than operating as an oppositional force to extremism, can also integrate it within its apparatus, ensuring the reproduction of hegemonic structures. By blurring the boundaries between elite governance and reactionary populism, the Veiled Prophet Society encapsulates a regime of social control that transforms popular movements into a tool for consolidating the ruling class's position, creating a seamless fusion of productive power and state repression.

Assessing the efficacy of the Veiled Prophet Society's ideological messaging proves equally complex. For example, records from the United-States department of labour indicate that labour disputes in the state of Missouri steadily rose following the great strike of 1877, peaking in 1917 and sustaining well into the 1930s.[318] Moreover, more than 200,00 workers would soon strike against the Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific railway lines in 1886, marking yet another

[316] Berlet and Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, 14.

[317] Ibid.

[318] Florence Peterson, *Strikes in the United States 1880-1936* (Washington, D.C., United-States Bureau of Labor, 1938): Bulletin no. 651, 27, 31, 37.

crucial labour disruption in 19th century St. Louis.[319] Although swiftly dismantled by state violence and the deployment of Pinkerton agents, the 1886 strike illustrates how organized labor was alive and well during the early years of the Veiled Prophet Society.[320] From this perspective, one could argue that the organization largely failed to generate any lasting impact, a fruitless and vain attempt at stifling labour movements which would only increase throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, a more comprehensive study into the shifting racial composition of labour movements in the immediate aftermath of the St. Louis Commune would be required to fully gauge its effects.

For example, in May of 1900, 3325 streetcar workers went on strike fighting for acknowledgement of their union, the return of fired organizers, and a ten-hour workday. While this would be the biggest challenge to the city's financial and political elite since the St. Louis Commune, it was not, as Walter Johnson contends, a challenge to the prevailing racial order. By this time, "all of the streetcar workers were white, and thus their strike might be seen as a demand for inclusion in the spoils of white supremacy and empire as much as a genuine challenge to their accumulation."[321] Hence, one might argue that the organization's racial messaging, both implicit and explicit, proved effective in fracturing labor solidarity, luring white workers into the orbit of industrial elites by offering them socio-economic inclusion. In the words of Robinson, "the myth of white solidarity came to dominate American sensibility," promoting ideas of a unified White identity to distract from the larger reality of class exploitation and uphold racial hierarchies.[322] While Kruger and Roediger both identify the St. Louis

[319] Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2021), 271.

[320] Ibid.

[321] Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 177.

[322] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 115.

Commune as a singular and genuine moment of cross-racial unification, a didactic kernel of hope worthy of retrieving from America's long and bloodied past, the rather swift betrayal of white workers followed by the city's rapid descent into lynchings, redlining and widespread racial segregation in the early 20th century, all suggest that solidarity between Black and white workers may have only ever been skin-deep: an alliance of convenience brought on by a shared economic deprivation. When the Aluminum Ore facility in East St. Louis replaced striking workers with Black labourers in 1917, racial tensions slowly escalated before eventually spilling out onto the streets on July 2nd. The white mob, well over 1000 strong, confronted Black workers on their way home from a shift in the center of downtown, resulting in an orgiastic explosion of white violence. Black residents were indiscriminately beaten, shot, and lynched in plain sight as "white men, egged on by the crowd, [took] turns throwing paving stones at a Black man sitting stunned in the middle of the street."[323] The next day, a *Globe-Democrat* correspondent watched white residents casually stroll through the wreckage and concluded, "it felt like Mardi Gras."[324]

However, I also believe that a comprehensive study of the Veiled Prophet Society and its particular brand of appropriated folk-theater denaturalizes notions of innate racial antipathy, demonstrating how the "new procession" both constructed and disseminated racial categories in direct relation to the emerging market economy. This discursive construction of a unified White identity "displaced the past and mystified the relations of the day," obscuring the complex racial entanglement of St. Louis Commune.[325] The Veiled Prophet society would continue to employ these tactics for decades, engineering racial divides and serving the interests of financial elites, including the "Big Cinch"—a coalition of old and new wealth that emerged in St. Louis during

[323] Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United-States*, 242.

[324] Ibid.

[325] Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 113.

the 1910s. This new generation of elites included St. Louis Mayor, Rolla Wells, Missouri Governor and Erstwhile Bridge entrepreneur, David R. Francis, as well as United States Secretary of Commerce and Labor, Charles Nagel. All three lived in the same square mile in St. Louis' Central West End, and all three were members of the Veiled Prophet Society. In his autobiography, *Episodes of my Life*, Rolla Wells paid tribute to the organization, praising both its discursive and clandestine ways:

> None but good fellows belong to this order. They expect no reward nor word of praise. Its secrecy is its success and charm. Hail, Grand Oracle! We unite in making our obeisance, and it is our prayer that you may continue to gladden the hearts of the children and grandchildren of the future as you have the children and grandchildren of the past.[326]

Just as Well's prayed, the panoptic secrecy and racial messaging of the Veiled Prophet Society would go on unchallenged for several generations. Indeed, public objection to the Veiled Prophet Society did not emerge until the rise of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, uncovering a historical silence that had long shielded the organization from critical scrutiny. While Spencer argues that the celebration had at this time taken on a more social role, focusing on debutante balls and facilitating marital and economic alliances between the wealthiest families in St. Louis, activists rightfully protested the organization's blatant racial exclusion.[327] In 1965, the civil rights group ACTION (Action Committee to Improve Opportunities for Negroes) staged demonstrations against the Veiled Prophet Society, highlighting the widening economic disparity between Black and white residents. While the organization was perhaps no longer as powerful as in its heyday, it had nevertheless come to symbolize the exclusionary socio-economic practices that entrenched racial segregation and disenfranchised Black citizens in St. Louis. Thus, where Black New Orleanians once parodied the racist float themes of Comus and Rex through the

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[326] Rola Wells, *Episodes of my Life* (St. Louis: Private Press, 1933), 487.

[327] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 102-103.

creation of a "Black carnival," ACTION began parading as the "Black Veiled Prophet," satirizing the organization with devasting effect.[328]

Figure 8 - Percy Green of ACTION introduced St. Louis to the "black veiled prophet" and his queen at Kiel Auditorium, where the annual Veiled Prophet Ball was taking place inside, October 3rd, 1963. Image originally published in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, accessed via *The Southern*, [Oct. 03, 2020], https://thesouthern.com/oct-3-1969-veiled-prophet-ball-becomes-a-scene-of-racial-protest/article_cbbbcf5b-1c80-557b-a6d6-080ca75daf57.html

Major media outlets which previously supported the Veiled Prophet organization were compelled to refer to the once great mogul as the "White Veiled Prophet" for sake of clarity, a deft semantic maneuver which only drew more attention to the group's blatant exclusion of non-white citizens. While the Veiled Prophet Society was eventually forced to clean up its image and open membership to minorities by the early 1980s, this study stands as a necessary insight into the transmutation of folk forms which, even now, persist as a well-maintained ideological vehicle employed by major corporations across America. Accordingly, a retrospective analysis

[328] Spencer, *The Saint-Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade 1877-1995*, 121-125.

following the transformation from folk theater to the pseudo-corporate disseminations of the Veiled-Prophet society represents an important undertaking, unmasking the latent forms of indoctrination which, for generations, reified racial boundaries in service of capital.

The lasting influence of the Veiled Prophet Society, transmuting carnivalesque folk forms into a proto-corporate mechanism for social control, provides a critical point of entry for interrogating the resurgence of right-wing populism in contemporary America, specifically, the rise of strongman figures like Donald J. Trump and the proliferation right-wing militant groups. This expansive web, connecting high and low elements of society, underscores the longstanding ties between elite strategy and populist rhetoric, a well-curated yet parasitic relationship adept at aligning popular discontent with the fiscal ambition of property. Obscured by the pomp of ceremony and civic virtue, the exclusionary expressions of financial elites continue to provide a convenient and pre-determined outlet for disgruntled workers facing renewed levels of financial strain. The very fears and anxieties generated by sharp commercial gains are thus redirected onto existing socio-economic tensions, reifying antagonistic boundaries in the service of capital. As of recently, the racial scope of right-wing populist groups has widened to encompass the prevalence of gender-based issues, locating trans groups and women's reproductive rights as a surrogate target for collective disaffection. As if by act of alchemy, the shifting socio-economic horizons of a society in flux are now understood within a strict matrix of racial, gender or social-based disruptions, stripped of any material considerations or economic underpinnings. This interweaving of mainstream political forces with right-wing populism, as noted by Berlet and Lyon, also underscores how right-wing populistt movements are thus not confined to the "fringe right," but are instead inextricably linked to the dominant institutions which sustain them. Moreover, the contemporary milieu marks a noted shift in the modes of outreach employed by

elites, moving from print media and processional forms to increasingly sophisticated media-based strategies which exploit broadcast television and algorithm-driven technologies. Relying on disinformation, "outrage bait," and the tactical amplification of divisive content, these modern mechanisms expose the increasingly insidious nature of elite, partisan manipulation. Likewise, the resurgence of right-wing populist groups, such as the Proud Boys or the Patriot Front, embody the panoptic ethos pioneered by groups like the Ku Klux Klan and Veiled Prophet Society. Emboldened by the thinly veiled or implied support of so-called "outsider-elites," these groups continue to assert cabalistic and imaginative forms coercion, existing within shadowy cell networks which blend overt and covert forms of influence. While street-level intimidation generates fear and exacerbates social divides among the working poor, masked demonstrations continue to impose an explicit visibility on the general public, naked before an increasingly militarized force.

In this light, the Veiled Prophet Society serves as a microcosm for understanding the broader dynamics of contemporary right-wing populism, illustrating how seemingly benign cultural forms and emerging technologies are co-opted to sustain and legitimize exclusionary power structures. These mechanisms of exclusion, rather than constituting relics of a bygone era, are perpetually repackaged and redeployed in ways that resonate with the anxieties and realities of the present political landscape. Thus, the history of the Veiled Prophet Society not only contextualizes the resurgence of right-wing populism but also serves as a cautionary tale of how populism, once a vehicle for genuine popular discontent, can be weaponized and directed by elites to fortify socio-economic hegemony and perpetuate systemic inequalities.

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