

Book Proposal

Myriad City: New Orleans and the Writing of an American Place

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From its earliest days as a precarious settlement founded in the swampy furthest reaches of the French empire, New Orleans has been a place in constant dialogue with itself and with the various local, regional, national, and international contexts that have contributed to its development. As the city approaches its three-hundredth anniversary, having had three sometimes less-than-careful owners, it is still defined by its assumed and perhaps actual uniqueness. For whatever the validity of New Orleans' claims to singularity, it is perhaps its *plurality* which is its most constantly dynamic quality, the factor which most contributes to its asserted special status: its cultural identity is as unstable as its swampy foundations. Indeed, the very reasons variously put forth for the city's difference are frequently at odds with each other, and sometimes directly contradictory – all of which, of course, makes for a rich, beguiling dialogic realm, a place of transition, translation, and transfiguration. If the status of New Orleans as an "American" city is problematic in the United States' sense, then it is surely a fascinating paradigm of "America" when we think more openly, continentally and transatlantically. Following the intellectual principles of the *American Tropics* project, this book will look at various forms of writing from and about New Orleans that illustrate and contribute to its particular identity, and its role as a nodal point in the wider "plantation America."

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Introduction

Following a brief account of New Orleans' history and changing political and cultural identities, charting its fluctuating significance in the wider region, this Introduction will discuss the variety of writing that has emerged both from the city and regarding it from "outside," which will be the focus of the study as a whole.

Chapter 1: Travellers' and Residents' Narratives, c.1718-1803

New Orleans was founded in 1718 by the French-Canadians Bienville and Iberville as an outpost in France's expanding colonial holdings in the Caribbean, before passing into Spanish administration in 1762. All the while, it was subject to the attentions of other powers, including the British and, eventually and increasingly, the United States. This chapter will examine narrative constructions of the city by figures sent to and resident in the city during these foundational decades. How is the site, the early settlement, and the growing city conceived in the contexts of the wider region, and how do these perceptions change as the century progresses and power shifts? Much of this discussion will focus on material, some published, some not, archived in New Orleans.

Chapter 2: Diaries, Memoirs, Journals by New Orleanians, c.1803-1861

The second chapter will continue the discussion of letters, journals and memoirs into the post-Louisiana Purchase (1803) period, up to the U.S. Civil War (1861-5), here focussing on accounts by New Orleanians, from 'within' the city, as such. These six decades saw a gradual shift of dominance from the ambiguously-defined Creole population of the city, with their varying

allegiances to colonial powers elsewhere in the Caribbean, to the rapidly increasing numbers of 'American' newcomers. New Orleanian writing from this period testifies to the complexity of the situation and, often, the deep anxiety and tension that attends it. Fundamental to this material are questions of what is understood by key terms such as "New Orleanian," "Louisianian," "Creole" and "American"; many "Creole" "New Orleanians," for example, are exiles from Cuba, Haiti/San Domingue, and Jamaica, and this has crucial effects on their attitudes to their adopted home. Furthermore, a significant number of these writers travel widely away from the city, and consider it in relation to other places throughout the American Tropics, as well as bringing New Orleanian perspectives to their itineraries. Again, a good amount of this discussion will be of little-discussed texts archived in the city.

Chapter 3: George Washington Cable and New Orleans, c.1803-1888

George Washington Cable's work is full of stories being told and retold, of stories not being told, and of stories effectively telling other stories, and as such a neatly bounded historical New Orleans steadfastly refuses to cohere. Cable himself was eventually effectively drummed out of his native city by Creole hostility to his writing, but such critique or parody—or indeed stereotype—of Creole life as he offers is actually only one facet among many in his work. The administration and citizens of the United States—explicitly in the period following the Louisiana Purchase, and implicitly during the time of writing during Reconstruction and immediately after—also come in for sharp analysis, and there is ample representation of various colonial influences in the wider Caribbean region: French, Spanish, British, as well as people from these colonies themselves. Indeed, although Cable's ostensible focus in his most celebrated books is almost entirely on the period following the city's coming under U.S. ownership in 1803, he really looks both forward to its role and status in the sectional crisis to come later in the century, and back to the network of influences that have shaped it. Focussing mainly on the story collections *Old Creole Days* (1879, 1881) and *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1888), and the novel *The Grandissimes* (1880), this chapter will reassess this major New Orleans writer from the literary-geographical, place-oriented perspective of the American Tropics project.

Chapter 4: Travels to a Southern City--Diaries, Memoirs, Journals by U.S. Visitors and Temporary Residents, c.1803-1900

In Chapters 4 and 5, the themes arising from the previous chapters on writing emerging from "within" New Orleans will be contrasted with perspectives from "outsiders" travelling through, and in some cases settling in the city during the nineteenth century. New Orleans was (and is) a popular stop for U.S. travellers exploring the country and sometimes beyond, often arriving from the north via the Mississippi River, and it is useful to gain these 'American' perspectives on the city in the decades following its becoming part of the United States. There is much discussion of asserted continuing difference and otherness, and projection of "foreignness" upon its inhabitants; at the same time, the city's importance to the future and prosperity of the U.S.A., and of the South in particular, is frequently noted, leading to often contradictory, sometimes deeply ambivalent accounts. Writing by Mark Twain, considering the city chiefly as a "Southern" city of the United States, and Lafcadio Hearn (serving as a link to the following chapter), discussing it more in terms of its wider significance in the Americas overall, will figure prominently here, as will lesser-known material archived in New Orleans.

Chapter 5: Travels to a Northern City--Diaries, Memoirs, Journals by Visitors and Temporary Residents from the Wider Region, c. 1791-1900

This will continue the discussion from Chapter 4, but now concentrating on impressions of the city from writers coming from elsewhere in the wider region, notably including Jose Martí, as well as European travellers, typically arriving in New Orleans by coming up the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico. These narratives often figure New Orleans more readily as a

“Caribbean” place, but rather in terms of comparable experience and familiarity than of the extreme difference asserted by many U.S. writers. Much is made here of practical as well as cultural links between New Orleans and places to its south: its trade relations with Havana, for instance, are a key element in its wealth and continually shifting identity through this period.

Chapter 6: Sent to New Orleans – Writing by Slaves and Soldiers, c.1718-1865

In the main, the texts discussed in previous chapters were written by people either in New Orleans more or less through choice, people long resident in the city, or new arrivals attempting to establish a new life there, to adopt it as a home whether by choice or through exile. But many temporary (and some less temporary) New Orleanians found themselves there through no volition of their own. The city’s role as a major slave-trading port results in it featuring in many slave narratives, and its idiosyncracies unsurprisingly have rather more negative connotations in these accounts. Slaves passed through New Orleans from both north and south, and their narratives are vital to our understanding of it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of a very different nature, but also lacking in overt ‘choice,’ are the diaries of occupying Union soldiers ostensibly fighting, in part at least, to end slavery in the U.S. Civil War. This chapter will discuss constructions of New Orleans by these variously reluctant, or involuntary visitors.

Chapter 7: The Island--W. Adolphe Roberts’s New Orleans Trilogy, c.1791-1878 (and 1948)

The Jamaican historian, poet, and journalist W. Adolphe Roberts was also the writer of several novels, including a trilogy set in New Orleans: *Royal Street* (1944), *Brave Mardi Gras* (1946), and *Creole Dusk* (1948). These books are ostensibly set in the 1840s, ‘60s and ‘80s respectively, though taken together they also look backward and forward to present a grand historical account of nineteenth-century Creole fortunes in the city and beyond. The declining fortunes of New Orleans’ Creole population are charted mostly through the experiences of two connected families, the Oliviers and the Lamottes, descendants of exiled plantation patriarchs fleeing the revolution in San Domingue. Throughout the trilogy, New Orleans is carefully, complexly sited as a nexus of influences from both south and north, its people involved to shifting degrees in affairs throughout the Caribbean and North America. In the first volume, *Royal Street*, in particular, New Orleanian Creoles are depicted as people still rooted in their Francophone Caribbean identities. The hero, Victor Olivier, is a dashing swordsman and member of a group dedicated to maintaining the cultural dominance of Creoles in New Orleans in the face of ever-increasing “American” ascendancy. This group furthermore begins to work towards the expansion of Louisiana through the French-speaking Caribbean, and an eventual breaking-away from the United States. Victor travels to Haiti and Santo Domingo as an unofficial representative of New Orleans, and engages in the conflict ravaging the island. Though his trip is politically unsuccessful, the personal, historical, and cultural dialogues between two key sites of conflict in the wider Caribbean region are forcefully drawn. The succeeding two volumes of Roberts’ trilogy chart the gradual, sometimes reluctant assimilation of New Orleans into the U.S. South, and the United States generally, depicting its “Southernisation” and occupation during the Civil War, and the corruption of post-Reconstruction state politics, while still being ravaged by the same yellow fever that blights many places to its south. This will be the first in-depth treatment of Roberts’ trilogy, and will seek to bring this long-neglected work to greater attention, as well as to note parallels with Roberts’ own involvement in the struggle for Jamaican independence at the time of writing.

Chapter 8: The City Foreign and Paradoxical: William Faulkner and New Orleans, c.1791-1938

From a neglected New Orleans writer to one of the most canonical, though William Faulkner’s fiction is primarily associated with his apocryphal Yoknapatawpha County, the principal setting for all but five of his novels and many of his short stories. However, the intricate construction of this rural, troubled, northern Mississippi world is balanced by engagement with similarly complex others, most intriguingly New Orleans. Faulkner lived in New Orleans for

six months in 1925, returning for part of 1926, writing his first novel and numerous sketches there, and participating in its thriving literary and artistic scene. Though only one of his novels explicitly has the city as its main setting—his second, the comparatively minor *Mosquitoes* (1927)—the developing writer also wrote a number of short pieces later collected as *New Orleans Sketches*; and perhaps most importantly the city plays a vital role in work of Faulkner's mature career: *Pylon* (1934), *The Wild Palms* (1939), *A Fable* (1954) and, crucially, his modernist masterpiece *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), where complex relations are charted between Mississippi, New Orleans, and Haiti. In varying ways, Faulkner registers and explores the cultural tensions at work in the city and in its reception, at once interrogating its actual or presumed otherness and using it to posit the need to consider the U.S. South in transregional, hemispheric senses. This chapter will examine the varying New Orleanian texts that appear in Faulkner's work, with a view towards suggesting this place as key to his literary experiments and risks, in terms both of form and content. If, to use the famous description offered in *Absalom, Absalom!*, New Orleans is "that city foreign and paradoxical," then so might Faulkner's own place in American letters also be considered. The place and the writing constitute polyphonic, shifting, highly complex cultural fields, and reading them together will vividly inform our understanding of each.

Chapter 9: New Orleanian Narratives of Diaspora and Disaster, c.1718-2009

The horrors unleashed by Hurricane Katrina and her political partners-in-crime in 2005 and since have reminded the world of the city's fragility, as well as the particular circumstances of its geography and climate. Accompanying the terrible images of bloated corpses and the thousands trapped in an apparently abandoned city were numerous descriptions of the terrible sounds and smells of the disaster, the stench of death and neglect exacerbated by the extreme heat and stagnating, polluted floodwaters. But this is far from the first New Orleanian disaster to manifest itself through the senses in this way. The series of yellow fever outbreaks through the nineteenth century were also the result, in part, of the city's geographical position, its unforgiving climate, and the policies of interested parties; the fever's awful death toll was likewise accompanied by a grotesque array of sights, sounds, and smells. These horrors are chronicled in contemporary accounts, through W. Adolphe Roberts's final New Orleans novel, *Creole Dusk* (1948), and on into Josh Russell's 1998 novel *Yellow Jack*. If yellow fever was a terror that pursued the many emigrés to New Orleans, and served as an awful binding element to the places elsewhere in the region that they had left, then the region's hurricanes likewise scour the wider Caribbean, creating new displacement in their wake. And if the displaced once greatly increased the city's population, there is now a Katrina diaspora, with many New Orleanians – and their stories – now dispersed widely across the United States. This final chapter will conclude with a discussion of some of the many Katrina narratives that form the most recent literary element in New Orleans' complex identity.

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June 2002 – Ph.D in Literature, University of Essex

June 1997 – B.A. (Hons), Class I, in English and U.S. Literature, University of Essex

Teaching (at Essex): MA in Literature modules – African American Literature, Uses of American Isolation; Undergraduate modules - The Imagined South: Literary Identities in the U.S. South, Post-war(s) U.S. Fiction, New Orleans/New York: The Pursuit of Happiness, U.S. Literature Since 1850, Introduction to U.S. Literature

Awards and Grants:

2006 AHRC large research grant: *American Tropics: Towards a Literary Geography* (119179) as co-applicant with Professor Peter Hulme and Dr Maria Cristina Fumagalli

2008 British Academy Overseas Conference Grant

List of Publications

Authored book:

Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Book Chapters, Edited Collections, Essays in Edited Collections and in Academic Journals:

'City of Exiles: Unstable Narratives of New Orleans in George Washington Cable's *Old Creole Days*,' in Richard Gray and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (eds.), *Transatlantic Exchanges: The American South in Europe – Europe in the American South* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2007).

'Truly strange New Orleans: The unstable city in George Washington Cable's *Strange True Stories of Louisiana*,' in the *European Journal of American Culture*, vol.26.2, 2007.

'Reflections on Language and Narrative,' in Richard C. Moreland (ed.), *A Companion to William Faulkner* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

with Richard Gray (eds.), *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

'Interested Parties and Theorems to Prove: Readership in Faulkner's Snopes Trilogy,' in the *Southern Literary Journal*, vol.36.1, 2003.

'"Liable to be anything": The Creation of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*,' in the *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 37.1, 2003.

'Monuments and Footprints: The Mythology of Flem Snopes,' in *The Faulkner Journal*, vol. 17.1, 2001.

“‘That florid, swaggering gesture’: Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen as Southern Writer,’ in the *European Journal of American Culture*, vol. 20.2, 2001.

Forthcoming: ‘That City Foreign and Paradoxical: William Faulkner and the Texts of New Orleans,’ in Donald Kartiganer and Ann Abadie, eds., *Faulkner: The Returns of the Text – Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, 2008 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, probably 2010)

Other Activities

Co-editor of the American Literature section of the Wiley-Blackwell online journal *Literature Compass* (2008-); editorial assistant on *Journal of American Studies* (1998-2001); External Examiner on an M.A. by Dissertation on George Washington Cable (2008).