

Humanizing the Landscape

*The instant the [sun] sets,
animation begins to rise,
the public walks are crowded,
the inhabitants promenade on the Levee...
the billiard rooms resound,
music strikes up,
and life and activity
resume their joyous career...*

— Thomas Apple, 1806

Bienville's Dilemma
A Historical Geography of New Orleans
by Richard Campanella

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Sagamité: Geography of a Food— or Geography of a Word?

*Explaining a curiously ubiquitous indigenous
food of eighteenth-century North America*

Wrote historical anthropologist Shannon Lee Dawdy, “archaeological [evidence] indicates that the charter generation in New Orleans attempted to replicate the diet they knew in France,” but as time wore on and ties to the motherland loosened, local diets “turned more towards wild, native resources.... becoming more *sauvage* through a process of creolization.”³⁹⁰

Marie Madeleine Hachard, a young postulant from Rouen, who arrived with the Ursuline Nuns in 1727, left behind evidence that sheds light on Dawdy’s observation. In a series of remarkable letters to her father, Hachard recorded detailed accounts of (among other things) early New Orleans food culture, a topic of particular interest for a city that would gain worldwide fame for its culinary contributions.

“Bread costs ten cents a pound,” wrote Hachard, “and is made of indian corn meal; eggs from forty-five to fifty cents a dozen; milk fourteen cents a gallon.” She continued:

We eat meat, fish, peas, and wild beans and many kinds of fruit and vegetables, such as pineapple which is the most excellent of all the fruits; watermelon, sweet potatoes; pippins which are much the same as the russets... of France; figs, bananas, pecans, cashewnuts, which, as soon as eaten, seize the throat; pumpkins and a thousand other things....

[W]e live on wild beef, deer swans, geese and wild turkeys, hares, hens, ducks, geals, pheasants, partridges, quails and other fowl and game of different kinds. The rivers are teeming with enormous fish, especially turbot, [brill] flounder] which is an excellent fish, ray, barr [probably catfish] and many other fishes unknown in France. They make much use of chocolate with milk and coffee [mocha, café au lait]. A part of this country has given us a good provision of it. We drink it every day. During Lent, meat is allowed three times a week, and, during the year, meat is allowed on Saturdays in the Island of St. Domingo. We accustom ourselves wonderfully well to the wild food of this country. We eat bread which is half rice and half flour. There is here a wild grape larger than the French grape, but it is not in clusters. It is served in a dish like plums. What is eaten most and is most common is rice cooked with milk....³⁹¹

During Lent, we eat meat four days a week, with the Church’s permission; and outside of this season we abstain only on Fridays. We drink beer. Our most ordinary food is rice cooked with milk, wild beans, meat and fish....

Butchers kill only twice a week, for it is hard to keep the meat fresh. Hunting lasts all winter, which commences in October. It is made at ten leagues from the city. Wild oen [pison] are caught in large numbers.... We pay three cents a pound for that meat, and the same price for venison, which is better than the beef or mutton which you eat in Rouen. Wild ducks are very cheap. Teals, geese, waterhens, and other fowl and game are also very common.... There are oysters and carp of prodigious size which are delicious.... We also eat watermelons and muskmelons, [and] sweet potatoes[,] cooked in hot ashes as you cook chestnuts.... [P]eaches and figs, which are in abundance... are sent to us in so great a quantity from the habitations, that we make preserves and blackberry jelly....³⁹²

Some of these rustic edibles remain rudimentary to Louisiana foodways today, particularly oysters, catfish, and *café au lait*. One dish in particular dates from pre-historic times and, at least by one description, endures on local breakfast tables to this day. It is called *sagamité*.

Early French explorers reported this native food with remarkable frequency, though they described it with equally remarkable inconsistency. Core of Iberville's crew explained *sagamité* as "nothing more than the groats of Indian corn mixed with water and lard to season it, then baked." Pénicaut, Iberville's carpenter, described it as "soup" made from "a kind of oats" produced by native cane groats, also used to make bread, but later characterized it as "a boiled dish made of corn and beans. Le Page du Pratz described "Sagamity" as a "maize-gruel"—"a mingling, with no sarsaparilla"—"which to my taste surpassed the best dish in France." He noted that Indians ate it "as we eat soup, with a spoon made of a buffalo's horn."³⁹³

In fact, missionaries and settlers in New France recorded *sagamité* as early as 1615.³⁹⁴ Jesuit Father Paul Le Jeune, speaking of the Lower Algonquin peoples, left behind a detailed description of the food in his *Relations of 1632*:

I shall say here that the Savages are very fond of *sagamité*. The word 'Sagamite' in their language really means water, or warm meal. Now they have extended its meaning to signify all sorts of soups, broths, and similar things. [It] is made of cornmeal; if they are short of that, we sometimes give them some of our French flour, which, being boiled with water, makes simple paste. They do not fail to eat it with appetite, especially when we place in it a little 'pimi,' that is to say, oil, for that is their sugar. They use it with their strawberries and raspberries....

Reuben Gold Thwaites, who edited the Jesuit Relations in the 1950s, explained further that the word *sagamité* derived from *sôgmôipi* ("the repast of chiefs") and referred to hominy corn "usually pounded into meal...boiled in water, with the addition of meat, fish, or oil," if available. Sometimes, "beans, peas, pumpkins" and other seasonal vegetables "were boiled with the corn, especially when the latter was still green: a survival of this usage remains in our modern 'succotash'...."³⁹⁵

Sagamité appears repeatedly in frontier journals, particularly from French Canada, the Great Lakes, and the Mississippi Valley, and rarely do the descriptions concur. Henri Joutel's 1714 account of La Salle's disastrous 1684 expedition recorded

that the food was made by “pounding the *Indian Corn* and Baking the Meal, or making the Pottage of the said Meal, by [the natives] call’d *Sagamite* ... their Sort of Hasty-Pudding.”³⁹⁶ Folklorist Margaret Sargent reported that the Huron Indians made *sagamité* to celebrate special events or welcome distinguished guests, and described it as “a stew of green corn, beans, and animal brains.”³⁹⁷ Jesuit Father du Poisson, traveling the lower Mississippi in 1727, described a French and an Indian variation of the ubiquitous dish:

The most ordinary food of this country[, especially for travelers—is *gru*. Corn is pounded to remove the outer skin, and then is boiled a long time in water, but the Frenchmen sometimes season it with oil; and this is *gru*. The Savages, pounding the corn very fine, sometime cook it with tallow [rendered animal fat], and more often only with water; this is *sagamité*. However, the *gru* answers for bread; a spoonful of *gru* and a mouthful of meat go together.³⁹⁸

Another Jesuit, Father Pierre Laure, writing from Quebec in 1730, clarified that the word *sagamité* “never had the signification given to it through a misdescription of its [meaning]; for it means nothing but ‘the water’—or ‘the broth—is hot, *achi sagamitéou*...” He then described how Indians in that region saved animal fat to season their *sagamité*. This description, like others from northern climes, views *sagamité*’s form as a broth, rather than the corn ingredient, as its defining characteristic.³⁹⁹

The dish—and the word—remained part of eastern Canada’s culture at least into the late nineteenth century. Wrote Johann Georg Kohl in his 1861 *Travels in Canada*,

I found that the old Indian national dish called *Sagamité*, so often mentioned in the earliest reports of the Jesuits, is a favourite among the Canadian peasants. What the word means I have in vain inquired, but the dish consists of maize boiled in milk [or] water. [S]ince, formed for a hundred years the daily bread of so many poor missionaries in the wilderness, there is a kind of historical interest attached to it. It is often met with at the tables of respectable citizens in Montreal and Quebec.⁴⁰⁰

Sagamité was far less known in the American South, but not entirely lost to history. As the region prepared for war in 1861, a Georgia newspaper recommended the food as nourishment for “our boys ... before going on the march:”

Sagamite—Portable Food for Scouts—The old historians and travellers, and Indian fighters, tell us of a admirable and easily portable food, which the Red men carried with them in their pouches.... It was a combination of Indian meal and brown sugar, three parts of the former to one of the latter, browned, together over the fire. This food, in small quantities, not only sufficed to arrest hunger, but to allay thirst. This is the famous *sagamite* of the Red men....⁴⁰¹

Sagamité made it to the pages of Louisiana literature in the late nineteenth century. George Washington Cable referred to it fleetingly in his 1879 novel *The Grandissim-*

es, in which colonists “sat down to bear’s meat, sagamite and beans” during a fictional 1699 encounter with Louisiana Indians.⁴⁰² His literary rival, narrative historian Grace King, interpreted “sagamity” as “hominy cooked with grease and pieces of meat or fish,” and speculated that it represented “the original of the Creole Jambalaya, in which rice has since been most commonly substituted for corn.”⁴⁰³ Indeed, at least one historical source—from Louisiana in 1744—blurred the line between the two starchy ingredients: “The Slaves,” he reported, “are fed with Rice or with Mahis [maize] husked and boiled, which is called *Sagamité*.”⁴⁰⁴

Sagamité resembles a wide range of modern New World corn dishes, including New England’s succotash and hasty pudding, the South’s cornbread and hush puppies, Louisiana’s *macaque-choucroute*, Mexico’s *tamale* and corn soup *pozole*, and Meso-America’s sweet drink *atole*.⁴⁰⁵ Why, then, does this insinuate that all, or even any, originate from *sagamité*? There are, after all, only so many ways to render corn edible, and disparate cultures are likely to develop those ways independently.

But are disparate cultures likely to name them all the same way? How did this indigenous word gain such an expansive geography? Did natives throughout eastern North America use *sagamité* to describe a wide range of corn-based concoctions, implying extensive social and economic interaction among distant tribes?

Or, on the other hand, did Europeans learn the word from indigenous sources in one region and apply it liberally to similar foods in other regions as they diffused, describing them all as *sagamité* in their journals. After all, it was mostly the French, not the Indians, who left behind the documents we read today.

The latter hypothesis is more likely the case. The diverse meaning and range of *sagamité* suggests that Frenchmen and other Europeans learned it from Indians early on and recorded it in their journals, which in turn were read by other Frenchmen, who thence applied it loosely to similar foods and passed the term on to the next generation, then the next, and so on. The result: one word with many meanings in various places. Jesuit Paul Le Jeune and Pierre Laure seemed to allude to this transformation of definition in their previously cited explanations from 1633 and 1630.

Following Janet C. Gilmore, whose research I came across after I developed the above hypothesis, studied *sagamité* in the Great Lakes region and arrived independently at a similar conclusion. Characterizing *sagamité* as “a boiled, one-pot meal, with flexible ingredients [which] can be made very simply as basic, everyday fare [or] dressed up to be a feast food,” Gilmore concluded,

French missionaries and explorers . . . applied a Native American-based designation, “sagamité,” to a family of indigenous concoctions that had a much more varied range of terminology, processes, and conceptual relationships within and across [Native] peoples, legitimating the native cuisine while simultaneously homogenizing and reducing it to a single concept.⁴⁰⁶

If this explanation is accurate, the story of *sagamité* is not so much the geography of a food, but the geography of a word. Its spatial diffusion mimics the spread of France’s other Old World cultural traits in the New World, including language, religion, law, economics, architecture, surveying systems, place names, and other food ways.⁴⁰⁷

Some of those traits have disappeared; others thrive to varying degrees, in places like Quebec and New Orleans. Take, for example, one description of *sagamité* that bears a striking resemblance to a modern Southern dish, with a minimum of interpretative liberty. It comes, not surprisingly, from our articulate young informant of circa-1727 New Orleans, Marie Madeleine Hachard. “The people of Louisiana,” she wrote, “find very good a food called ‘sagamité,’ which is made of Indian corn crushed in a mortar, then boiled in water, and eaten with butter or cream.”⁴⁰⁸

Butter and cream are ground Indian corn, a blending of that which was transported from France with that which was derived locally, unified in a single dish that is consumed regularly throughout New Orleans today. *Sagamité*, according to this description, is *crips*.



The French Market and the Historical Geography of Food Retail

How New Orleansians made groceries since Spanish colonial times

The wholesaling and retailing of foodstuffs in colonial times occurred in an ad hoc manner, mostly on the levees and in the streets. Spanish administrators in the 1770s grew concerned about the difficulties of inspecting and regulating foods in such a decentralized way and in 1780, erected the city's first public market: a sixty-by-twenty-two-foot wooden pavilion used mostly for meat. It was replaced by a sturdier, covered structure in 1783, also dominated by butchers.⁴⁰⁹

Distribution of other foodstuffs occurred at two levels. Hunters and farmers brought in “salt meats of all grades, oil, sugar and pork and... rice, corn, peas, beans... chickens and turkeys”⁴¹⁰ and other fresh game and produce to the riverfront levee, where they were permitted to retail directly to the public for a period of three hours. Afterwards, under the watchful eye of Spanish authorities, they were restricted to wholesale to a ragtag throng of independent vendors, who then roamed the streets to sell to housekeepers. “Making groceries” in 1780s-New Orleans meant either arriving at the right time on the levee, or tracking down the right peddler in the street. The system benefited neither the buyer, who had to seek out vendors of the desired foods; the vendor, who had to lug perishables exposed to the elements; nor the Spanish city government (*Cabildo*), which sacrificed a potential revenue stream and hindered its ability to inspect for quality and regulate for price. A second market was needed. On September 10, 1784,

the Cabildo decided to construct a market large enough to accommodate all the daily food supplies... in order to have all the retailers in one place, as

their number has increased.... This public market will be large enough to receive the merchandise and accommodate the peddlers and will protect them from the bad weather and excessive heat which spoils the provisions, as well as from the heavy rains and extreme cold weather that damages and alters their quality, and this public market should be centrally located.⁴¹¹

Announcements posted to advise the peddlers of the new rules provide insight into New Orleans food culture of the 1780s. Peddlers of “fresh beef, fresh pork, salted meat and sausages... mutton, venison..., rice, fresh and dry vegetables, will [sell] of all kinds and fresh fish” were instructed to arrive to the market on a fixed day where they would be assigned a stall for “a small fee.” Fishermen, who traditionally sold their catch “in the plaza [and] in the heat of the sun,” on street corners, often caused a public nuisance when they dumped “blood, gills and other waste” in front of people’s houses. They, too, were ordered “to a designated place” in the market, where they could only sell their fish by the pound (unless it was a rare fish, marketed on by the cut).

Hunters, for their part, sometimes offered spoiled meat in the hope of squeezing the last *centavone* out their rapidly depreciating offering. “This abuse being bad for the public health,” authorities threw the meat into the river “in [the hunter’s] presence” and slapped a fine on the offender. Penalties for vendors selling outside the market were more severe: “8 days in jail and a discretionary fine” for free people, and “flogging if they are slaves” selling for their own gain. Only those slaves affiliated with local market gardens (truck farms) had the freedom to vend either in the streets or in the market.⁴¹²

As in any economy, various sectors competed aggressively and petitioned authorities to intervene on their behalf. Store merchants condemned street peddlers and asked the Cabildo to prohibit their activity. Both merchants and peddlers lost retail business to the wholesalers on the levee. City inspectors and tax collectors wrangled with all sectors: certain members of the Cabildo, for example, resisted the construction of a dedicated fish market on grounds of cost and efficiency. Spanish officials in general meddled rashly in setting prices, taxing, and stipulating providers, particularly for beef and flour, the subjects of ongoing controversies in the Cabildo’s deliberations.⁴¹³ Not willing to let the free market allocate resources and set prices on its own, the Cabildo, in one case, raised the price of bear fat—not because of the scarcity of bears, but the gunpowder and ammunition needed to kill them.

Peddlers continued to play a role in the retail economy for years to come: Benjamin Latrobe reported in 1819 that “in every street during the whole day [enslaved] black women are met, carrying baskets upon their heads calling at the doors of houses.”⁴¹⁵ Most working-class citizens, however, availed themselves to the convenient new centralized public market system for their retail needs, making it a resounding success. When the market structures were destroyed by the Good Friday fire of 1788, the city government replaced them during 1790-92 with an open-air market and soon remodeled it into an enclosed stall market where St. Ann Street meets the levee. Tradition holds this milestone (specifically 1791) as the foundation of the French Market, although antecedent entities date back to 1780.

The market grew in 1799 to accommodate the controversial fish market,

and shortly thereafter for the display of veal, pork, and lamb. Colloquially called the “French Market” or “Creole Market” (because uptown Anglo-Americans and visitors dubbed everything in the old city as “French” or “Creole” regardless of its true ethnic affiliation), New Orleans’ first municipal market expanded periodically over the next 140 years. The original meat market at St. Ann was destroyed by a hurricane in 1812 and replaced by an extant pillared Roman-style arcade; a vegetable market arose at the St. Philip intersection in the 1820s, followed by a fish and wild game market (1840), a fruit market, and a bazaar market (1870) for dry goods. Finally, in the 1930s, Gallatin Street was cleared away for the open shed that now hosts the French Market flea market stall. The entire municipal market system also expanded, starting in 1836–38 with the St. Mary, Poydras, and Washington markets in adjacent faubourgs, and continuing with the Tremé, the Dryades, and a dozens of others into the early twentieth century.⁴¹⁶

The French Market gained widespread fame in the antebellum era thanks to the steady stream of visitors who wrote about the spectacle upon setting foot on the levee. Most wandered—with varying degrees of eloquence—on the market’s incredible ethnic diversity (“all nations under the sun have here vomited forth their specimens of human cattle”⁴¹⁷), or on the dizzying linguistic soundscape (“...a confusion of languages various as at Babel...”). A visitor from Edinburgh in 1828 noted that “the fishermen were talking Spanish,” possibly Isleños from St. Bernard Parish, “while amongst the rest of the crowd there was a pretty equal distribution of French and English.” His inventory of foods for sale during his late April visit in part inspired the idea of the city’s food culture at the time:

...cabbages, peas, beet-roots, artichokes, French beans, radishes, and a great variety of spotted seeds, and caravans (sic type of bean); —potatoes both of the sweet and Irish kind;—tomatoes, rice, Indian corn, ginger, blackberries, roses and violets, oranges, bananas, apples;—fowls tied in threes by the leg, quails, gingerbread, beer in bottles, and salt fish.

[At] every second or third place at one or more black women, chattering in French, selling coffee and chocolate [sic] smoking dishes of rice, white as snow, which I observed the country people eating with great relish, along with a very nice mess of stuff which I took to be curry.... But I found it was called gumbo, a sort of gelatinous vegetable soup, of which... I learnt afterwards to understand the value.⁴¹⁸

Some noted not only the languages, ethnicities, and foodstuffs of the French Market, but also the pretty girls. This lyrical description dates from 1852:

Sunday morning in the Creole Market...We dash into the crowd, like a bold swimmer, desperate to make our way; but ho! our steps arrested by a blue-eyed lassie, fresh and innocent from the vineyards of the Danube or the Rhyne, whose offered cup of smoking “Mocha” tempers the appetite, and we pause to sip the fragrant beverage...

Lo! On our right stands a burly butcher, red to the elbows.... In the middle of the market.... fight our way gallantly [through] the well-filled baskets,

overrunning with meats and vegetables that soil our vestments....

[F]ish that swam in waters long dried up are offered on the altars of Epicurus; and birds of strange feather, the date of whose demise is wrapt in the mystery of forgotten times. There are eels from Lake Borgne, croakers and crabs from Pointe à la Paille, red fish from the briny surf, and ... shad preserved in ice, imported from the far East. There is picking for the larder of the very best, and if you choose not guardedly, of the worse, too.⁴¹⁹

Swedish traveler Henrikka Bremer, who toured the market in January 1851, found it “in full bloom on Sunday morning each week,” reflecting, she observed, the difference between French and Anglo observance of the Sabbath. “The French Market is one of the most lively and picturesque scenes of New Orleans,” wrote Bremer.

One feels as if transported at once to a great Paris *marché* [except] that one here meets with various races of people, hears many different languages spoken, and sees the productions of various zones. Here are English, Irish, Germans, French, Spanish, Mexicans. Here are negroes and Indians. Most [who sell] are black Creoles, or natives, who have the French animation and gaiety, who speak French fluently....

On the outskirts of the market you found Indians [] wrapped in their blankets, with their serious, uniform, stiff countenances, and downcast eyes.... [O]utside the market-place, Indian boys were shooting with bow and arrows to induce young white gentlemen to purchase their wares. These red boys were adorned with...brilliant ribbons round their brows, and with feathers....

I wandered among the stalls, which were piled up with game and fruit, and flowers, bread and confectionery, grain and vegetables, and innumerable good things all nicely arranged.... The fruit-stalls were really a magnificent sight; they were gorgeous with the splendid fruits of every zone, among which were many tropical ones quite new to me. Between two and three thousand persons, partly purchasers and partly sellers, were here in movement, but through all there prevailed so much good order and so much sunny, amiable vivacity, that one could not help being heartily amused. People breakfasted, and talked, and laughed just as in the markets at Paris...⁴²⁰

Wrote a local journalist upon visiting the market in 1859,

About midnight the markets begin to show signs of life; the coffee tables are decorated with their array of cups of steaming Mocha, and visited by many for business or amusement....

[T]he dull sound of cart wheels is heard, and the butchers and vegetable vendors bring their quota of the daily food of New Orleans. The noise of the hammer and the cleaver is heard, as beefsteaks, chops and ribs are separated and hung up temptingly, while pyramids of vegetables, mountains of game, and cart loads of fish are spread out upon the stalls....

Daylight appears, and the crowd of visitors keeps increasing; servants with

their baskets, gentlemen enjoying an early smoke... fine ladies out for an early walk; and good housewives who do their own marketing. The dense crowd [keeps] moving in a double human stream [through] peddlers and dealers of every imaginable kind. Here the Italian, with his basket of eggs, there the Yankee, with a table covered with cakes of soap, trinkets and nick nacks, squatting on this side, the Indian squaw looks calm and indifferent, with the bunches of sassafras roots, aromatic plants from the forest, and the small bag of *to nbo* powder.... [A] little further the plantation negro will offer you honey, palmetto brooms and young chickens[,] rabbits, Guinea pigs and chickens, Shanghai or Bantam fowl. The Frenchmen solicits your attention to his cheap, fine goods, while you are started by the hoarse voice of the Spanish oystermen, crying "salt oysters!"⁴²¹

Nathaniel H. Bishop, who canoed alone down the Mississippi to New Orleans around 1875, described the market's "strange motley group" with the standard cadence of flowery exoticism and ethnic stereotyping:

We see the Sicilian fruit-seller with his native dialect, the brisk French madame with her dainty stall; the mild-eyed Louisiana Indian woman with her sack of gumbo spread out before her; the fish-dealer with [his] odd patois; the dark-haired creole lady with her servant gliding here and there; the old Spanish gentleman with the blood of Castile tingling in his veins; the graceful French dame in her becoming toilet; the Hebrew woman with her dark eyes and rich olive complexion; the pure Anglo-Saxon type, ever distinguishable from all others; and, swarming among them all, the irresistible negro, —him you find in every size, shape, and shade, from the tiny yellow picaninny to his rotund and inky grandmother, from the lazy wretch and darky... to the dignified colored policeman....⁴²²

New Orleans's municipal market system enjoyed its heyday in the late nineteenth century. What thwarted its domination in the latter years were the increasingly ubiquitous corner grocery stores, many of which were established by Italians and other immigrants who got their start in the French Market. Their intentionally dispersed geography gave the corner grocers a major competitive advantage over centralized markets: convenience. The city fought back with a 1901 law that prohibited groceries to open within nine blocks of a municipal market, and in 1911, the system expanded to its thirty-fourth unit (double the number from 1896). New Orleans at the time boasted the fifth highest per-capita number of public markets among major American cities, and quite possibly the highest absolute number as well.⁴²³

Municipal markets, never heless, became increasingly ill-suited for twentieth-century city life. Nearby corner grocery stores continued to draw consumers away from the drafty halls of the picturesque old stall markets. Then, automobiles, supermarkets, franchises, suburbanization, and finally nationalized and globalized food production and distribution redefined utterly the geography of food retail. Within a few decades, progress rendered the market system—and to some degrees its old nemesis, the corner grocery—obsolete. Most markets closed by the late 1950s, their structures either demolished or retrofitted for other uses. Yet their geography survives: a number of mod-

ern-day commercial clusters, along corridors such as Magazine, Prytania, Decatur, and Claiborne, reveal the old market locations.

After the demise of markets and corner stores, local retail chains (namely Schwegmann's), plus increasing numbers of regional and national chains (such as Winn-Dixie and later Sav-a-Center), came to dominate the New Orleans food market. By century's end, Schwegmann's closed and Winn-Dixie, Sav-a-Center, and finally Wal-Mart garnered the lion's share of the market. While some single-location independents and small local chains (Langenstein's, Ferrara's, Zupardo's, among others) still dotted the cityscape, most New Orleanians spend most of their food dollars at national big-box chains. The rapid transformation reflected the shift in the city's business sector from locally owned companies to regional and global firms. That trend reversed somewhat two years after Hurricane Katrina, when the unstable postdiluvian business environment uprooted the national Sav-a-Center chain out of the region. In its place came Thibodaux-based Krogers, which to the delight of many New Orleanians, brought back many traditional local food specialties to the city's supermarket shelves.

The same cannot be said of the French Market, which essentially operates today as a "festival marketplace," catering to visitors' want of souvenirs rather than residents' need for food. Many local historians, unable to see past the trinkets and the head-draped tourists, generally disdain the place, lamenting the passing of the "real" market of decades ago. They are missing something. At least in the Flea Market and Fruit and Vegetable portions of the complex, stall-based vendors still create an open marketplace ambience which loosely matches the descriptions recorded in historical journals. More significantly, the vendors—most of them immigrants, continue the French Market's ancient legacy as a place of extraordinary ethnic diversity, where working-class newcomers can launch their own businesses and determine their own destiny. The market itself survives as the sole vestige of the old Spanish public market system, tracing a direct lineage to the Cabildo del Realions of over two centuries ago.

Reflected one observer of the French Market in 1859,

There is something there not to be found elsewhere, and to our mind, the study of the living panorama [at] the old market would give the observer a correct idea of the combined elements that make New Orleans the most incomprehensible city in the States.⁴²⁴

“Concerns Akin Assemble Together”

Business districts and commercial clusters in New Orleans

Firms often cluster with their competitors to tap the infrastructure, resources, labor pool, services, and customer base upon which all in the industry depend. New

Orleans, the South's premier city for over a century, boasted an intricate network of industry districts. Examples from the early nineteenth century include a "banking district" at the intersection of Royal and Conti streets and a cluster of publishers along upper Chartres Street. Many more districts formed in the bustling late antebellum years. Reported *The Daily Picayune* in 1859:

Carondelet Street was devoted entirely to cotton and shipping; Canal [hosted] the dry goods trade, Chartres was expected to retain the variety trade; St. Charles, with its various places of amusement, could retain only certain classes of offices, besides coffee saloons and cigar stores; Magazine had a near monopoly on the wholesale boot and shoe and a goodly part of the wholesale dry goods trade; from Tchoupitoulas to the levee, Canal to Lafayette, Western produce reigned; Poydras claimed as a specialty bagging and rope.⁴²⁵

In the 1870s-1900s, "exchanges" formed in certain commodity-based industries, serving as central meeting places for information-sharing, negotiation, investing, trading, marketing, and socializing. Exchanges typically took the form of an elaborate building sited in the heart of the respective industry's district, becoming a sort of "capital" for the business community. Cotton firms formed a centralized Cotton Exchange at Carondelet and Gravier in 1871; produce merchants followed with their Produce Exchange on Magazine Street in 1880 (which later evolved into the Board of Trade). Sugar merchants launched the Louisiana Sugar Exchange in 1883 on the French Quarter levee's "sugar district," and expanded it to include rice in 1889. A Stock Exchange formed among the brokers of Gravier Street in 1906, making that area New Orleans' answer to Wall Street.⁴²⁶ Other exchanges—the Mechanics, Dealers, and Lumbermen's Exchange; the Mexican and South American Exchange; the Auctioneers' Exchange, and the Fruit Exchange, to name a few—both reflected and reinforced the geographical concentration of competing firms. A 1904 streetcar map listed the districts that flourished during the city's turn-of-the-century economic boom:

PRINCIPAL SHOPPING DISTRICT. Canal Street, at Bourbon and Dauphine Streets.

GENERAL OFFICE DISTRICT. Carondelet and Common Streets.

SHIPPING DISTRICT. Canal Street, at Canal Street Ferry Landing.

WHOLESALE COTTON DISTRICT. Carondelet and Gravier Streets.

WHOLESALE GROCERY DISTRICT. Poydras and Tchoupitoulas Streets.

WHOLESALE SUGAR AND RICE DISTRICT. North Peters and Customhouse Streets.

NEWSPAPER DISTRICT. Camp Street, between Gravier and Poydras Streets.

HOTEL DISTRICT. St. Charles and Common Streets.

THEATRE DISTRICT. Canal and Baronne Streets and St. Charles Street.⁴²⁷

In these districts are represented three major Louisiana crops—cotton, sugar, and rice—and New Orleans' two long-standing major industries: shipping and tour-

ism, represented by the hotel district. The remaining districts reflect New Orleans' role as a local and regional hub for business, retail, journalism, and the arts.

A publication by George W. Engelhardt in the same year described Canal Street as the "retail quarter," Tchoupitoulas as the "wholesale grocery district," and Camp Street as the "financial, jobbing, and newspaper street." His identification of the Cotton Exchange at Carondelet and Gravier as the hub of the "money quarter of the city" reflected the importance of cotton to the city's economy. Between this fiscal precinct and the Mississippi River was what Engelhardt called "the wholesale business of the city," meaning its warehousing, manufacturing, and shipping district. wrote Engelhardt:

The produce and fruit trade...has a street or two of its own; lumber...takes to the basins...terminating the [Old Basin and New Basin] Canals; and in general it is to be said that here, as in the greater cities everywhere, *concerns akin assemble together*. Thus the grocery and provision lines, the import coffee trade, the iron works, the printing and publishing houses, the horse and mule markets have each their own special locality somewhere in about this particular quarter of trade.¹²⁸

Perhaps the most renowned "industry" cluster of historic New Orleans—Storyville, the red-light district bounded by Basin, St. Louis, Robertson, and Iberville/Canal—formed by default when alderman Sidney Story had prostitution banned (1897) from the rest of the city. By the early 1900s, nearly every structure within those eighteen blocks served some aspect of the sex industry, from baby cribs to lively saloons to gaudy "sporting houses." Storyville declined in the mid-1910s and closed by order of the Navy Department in 1917; most of its structures were demolished around 1940 for the Iberville Housing Project.

Prostitution was not the only trade clustered by law. Another less famous but far more significant case involved historic New Orleans' most disdained urban nuisance: the animal slaughtering industry. Livestock landing and slaughtering were once restricted to "Slaughterhouse Point" in Iberville, but convenience led the industry to relocate to the city's side of the river. Available wharves, cheap land for stockyards, plentiful immigrant labor, and adjacency to the rapidly growing upper half of the metropolis (which mined most livestock shipments in the mid-1800s to the banks of Lafayette and Jefferson cities immediately upriver from New Orleans—and its drinking water source). There the animals awaited purchase by the city's hundred-plus butchers, most of who hailed from the Gascony region of France and operated shops citywide. The "Gascon butchers" had the right to slaughter on their own premises, which minimized their costs and inconveniences while empowering them to time the killing according to market demand. Largely unregulated and lacking municipal garbage disposal, many butchers dumped blood, entrails, excrement, carcasses, and other offal in the nearby backswamp, or adjacent lots, or worse, into the river at points above the drinking-water intakes. Nearly every neighborhood suffered malodorous and unsanitary conditions on account of the butchers' dispersed geography. Citizens, following the lead of numerous other cities, petitioned the state to relocate, concentrate, and regulate New Orleans'

abattoirs.

The biracial Reconstruction-era state legislature complied in 1869 with “An Act to Protect the Health of the City of New Orleans, to Locate the Stock-Landings and Slaughter-Houses, and to Incorporate the Crescent City Live-stock Landing and Slaughter-house Company.”⁴²⁹ The law called for centralizing slaughtering activity across the river and granting a monopoly to one group to carry out this trade. Many citizens applauded the new law, and some invested in the publicly traded stock. A makeshift livestock-landing and slaughterhouse complex arose quickly once land was acquired in Algiers.⁴³⁰

Others, however, were outraged, principally the Gascon butchers. Angering them were those who philosophically opposed monopolies, suspected corruption, or simply resisted all actions of the Reconstruction state legislature for political, racial, or anti-Northern reasons. The butchers filed nearly 300 lawsuits, some of which arrived to the docket of the U.S. Supreme Court. Their argument rested on the recently ratified Fourteenth Amendment, which (the butchers’ ex-Confederate lawyer ironically contended) ensured broad federal protection against state infringement on basic rights such as practicing one’s trade. In the meanwhile, they formed their own association to rival the monopoly, and built an eat-in bank facility along the lower parish line, immediately below Jackson Barracks. The monopoly eventually acquired his new facility, and when workers “were given a choice between the company’s fairly makeshift original abattoir [in Algiers] and larger, better-equipped one located on the same side of the river as the city, the vast majority quickly abandoned the west bank facility.”⁴³¹

In 1873, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the monopoly. Justices in the slim majority limited their interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment to protecting the rights of newly freed slaves only, while expressly avoiding altering the postbellum balance of power between the federal government and the states. They also sanctioned certain levels of state police power in the interest of public health. The decision in the so-called *Slaughter-house Cases* has since been viewed by historians as among the most controversial and influential in the Court’s history, contested by both liberal and conservative legal scholars.

Locally, the *Slaughter-house Case* resulted in the concentration of *abattoirs* below the city proper, namely the furthest corner of the Ninth Ward, now present-day Arabi. This locale kept the smelly, noisy, messy operation downriver from the city’s water source, sufficiently far from the population to minimize offensive odors yet close enough to supply meat markets and consumers, and positioned on the more convenient east bank of the river. Countless animals were slaughtered in this *de jure* industry district into the early twentieth century, when growth pressured to the area’s urbanization. Relocated again, the city’s last abattoir closed in 1963. Vestiges of the old slaughterhouse and its ancillary functions can still be found in the present-day Arabi and Lower Ninth Ward cityscapes, while ramifications of the famous Supreme Court case abound in the American legal landscape.⁴³²

During the Depression, at a time when industry district formation began to weaken, Works Progress Administration writers observed some old and some new concentrations:

Most of the fur dealers are still to be found along North Peters and Decatur Sts. Royal St. has become one of antique shops.... Coffee roasters and packers are... along Magazine and Tchoupitoulas Streets from Canal to Howard Ave. Farther uptown, Poydras St. from Camp to the river is the wholesale fruit, produce, and poultry center, while the principal meat packers are found near Magazine and Julia Sts. The section between Camp St. and the river, and Canal St. and Jackson Ave., contains most of the wholesale jobbing houses and many of the manufacturing plants. Carondelet St. has always been the street of the cotton brokers and bankers.⁴³³

The circa-1960s middle-class exodus and ensuing decline of downtown bear some blame for the disappearance of New Orleans' historical industry districts. Weightier factors include national and global technological changes in the various industries and the flow of finances and data therein, which often eliminated the need for players to cluster spatially. In other cases, the industry leader relocated while its competitors folded. "Newspaper Row," which formed on Camp Street near Natchez Alley in the 1850s, declined once the *Times-Picayune* moved to Lafayette Square in the 1920s and its competitors went out of business. The French Quarter levee's Sugar District declined once the premier sugar processing facility moved to St. Bernard Parish in 1912. The Cotton District disappeared by the early 1960s after federal involvement in cotton pricing rendered the Cotton Exchange obsolete.

Yet some old clusters survive, and some new ones have formed. Bourbon Street gained worldwide fame as nightclub and bar district around World War II, a reputation that grows deeper with every subsequent generation. The recently "discovered" Warehouse District is, despite its name, today more of a hotel, restaurant, and convention services zone than one of warehousing. An arts and museum district formed in the early 2000s in the vicinity of Julia, Camp, and Andrew Higgins Drive, anchored by the highly successful and ever-expanding National World War II (D-Day) Museum, the up-and-coming Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and the stalwart Civil War Museum at Confederate Memorial Hall. Royal and Chartres street still comprise the antiques district in the French Quarter, as they have for over a century, while Magazine Street plays that role uptown. The city's medical district on lower Tulane Avenue, traceable to the siting of Charity Hospital there in 1833, busied until recently with the clinical, educational, and research activities of Tulane University Medical School, Charity Hospital, University Hospital, Veteran's Administration, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, Delgado Community College and other entities. A few blocks away, the Orpheum, Saenger, Joy, and State Palace made the Canal/Basin intersection the city's theater and entertainment district.

Katrina-related flood damage darkened the theater district and led to the closing of the historical Charity Hospital nucleus of the medical district. With most other old districts now defunct, one is tempted to consider the business-clustering trait to be a thing of the past.

Not quite. In 2003, an effort to recognize and promote a "Greater New Orleans Biosciences Economic Development District" gained momentum, aiming to ex-

exploit the Tulane Avenue medical cluster to foster a new biomedical research industry. Hurricane Katrina temporarily derailed that effort, but it spawned another: The state legislature's call for the geographical consolidation of civil and criminal courts in 2006 inspired a one-billion-dollar "Justice Facilities Master Plan" for the area bounded by Tulane, Braganza, I-10, and Jefferson Davis Parkway. Viewed by supporters as a rational way to unify co-dependent functions and share resources, the clustering plan is bitterly opposed by CBD-based law firms and those who depend on them.

It remains to be seen if New Orleans intentionally develops a new biomedical or legal district. Yet at a smaller level, spontaneous business clustering thrives. wrote a *Tirius Picayune* journalist two years after Katrina,

Call it the gas station phenomenon: the capitalist oddity in which businesses decide to cluster along the same block or intersection as their competition rather than spread out across the city to capture different streams of customers. Take the two gelato shops in the 3000 block of Magazine Street. And the grocery stores along Tchoupitoulas Street.

Now two of the city's largest private hospitals have announced plans to open imaging centers directly across the street from each other at the intersection of Napoleon and Claiborne avenues.⁴³⁴

Indeed, "concerns akin" continue to "assemble together."

Passing Judgment on New Orleans Society

A city's striking ability to inspire passionate reaction

An anonymous "Officer at New Orleans," writing in 1744, found little in French colonial New Orleans society to admire. That his letter circulated in London on the eve of an English war with France may explain its caustic tone (and perhaps compromise its objectivity). "The French live sociably enough," he allowed,

but the officers are too free with the towns people; and the towns people that are rich are too proud and lofty. Their inferiors hardly dare to speak to them.... [A]n upstart fellow thinks that others are not worthy to look at him. Every one studies his own profit; the poor labor for a week and squander in one day all they have earned in six[;] the rich spend their time in seeing their slaves work to improve their lands, and get money which they spend in plays, balls, and feasts.⁴³⁵

New Orleanians' favorite "pastime," he continued "is women," and of the 500 or so he estimated in the city, "I don't believe without exaggeration that there are ten

of them of a blameless character....” Men fared little better in the officer’s eyes: “the rich man knows how to procure himself justice of the poor....” Those lacking money nevertheless “are seldom without wine in their cellars; the tradesmen is seldom a week without drinking it beyond moderation; but that is nothing in comparison with the soldier.”

No wonder New Orleans society failed to impress. “The country,” explained the officer, “was at first settled by lewd, good-for-nothing people sent from France, including those with no fathers, taken ... out of the hospitals at Paris and L’Orient.” The ne’er-do-wells apparently passed on their vulgar genes to the present [1740s] generation. “A child of six years of age knows more here of raking and swearing than a young man of 25 in France; and an insolent boy of 12 or 13 years of age will boldly insult and strike an old man.”⁴³⁶

The officer’s critique of French soldiers’ indulgences offers a glimpse into the street culture and economics of the circa-1740s city:

Liquors are a pistole a bottle; brandy, three livres fifteen sols; rum and wine, fifty sols; bread, twelve sols a pound; butcher’s meat, six sols; a suckling pig, 100 sols; a turkey, three or four livres; a goose, fifty sols; a duck, twenty-five, a veal, twelve; a small salad, thirty; and if one will pass a quarter of an hour with a female, white, red, or black, or tawny, you must reckon upon a bill of fifty sols.⁴³⁷

With a *pistole* worth around two dollars, a *livre* about twenty cents, and a *sol* one-twentieth of a *livre*, a dinner of brandy, bread, and veal followed by fifteen minutes with a prostitute cost \$1.87 in French colonial New Orleans.

Though little is known of this anonymous officer and the accuracy of his descriptions, a reader is struck by the number of modern-day New Orleans stereotypes he invoked: a haughty elite, loose morals, balls and revelry, drinking and prostitution, all amid tensions of race and class. The letter was not published in France and did not come to the attention of historians until 1887.

Nearly a half-century after the anonymous officer’s missive, Chevalier Guy de Soniat du Fossat, who first arrived in New Orleans as a French officer in 1751, penned a “Synopsis of the History of Louisiana, from the Founding of the Colony to End of the Year 1791,” which his descendant, Charles T. Soniat, translated in 1903. Though mostly a light history and description, the pamphlet contains interesting perspectives informed by Soniat’s personal experiences in the colonial city. “After having spoken of Louisiana and of its soil, we ought to say something of the Creoles who inhabit it,” he begins.

Creoles are defined to be “the children of Europeans born in the colony.” They, in general, measure about five feet six inches in height; they are all

well shaped, and of agreeable figure; they are lively, alert and agile, and notwithstanding the great heat of the climate, are laborious. They are born with ambition, and a honest self esteem. They are endowed with a natural disposition for all sciences, arts and exercises that amuse society. They excel in dancing, fencing, hunting, and in horsemanship. Nature has favored them with a penetrating and active mind, and they are capable of being easily instructed. The lack of teachers renders their education somewhat incomplete, and it must be said, in all justice, that ... they possess ... politeness, bravery, and benevolence. They are good fathers, good friends, and good kinsmen.

The women, besides having the qualities above enumerated are agreeable in figure and seldom deformed. They make good mothers, and are devoted to their husbands and their children; and in their marital relations seldom are they unfaithful.

[T]he stranger arriving in this wild and savage country will be surprised to see in this capital, as exist in all countries of Europe brilliant assemblies where politeness, amiability, and gaiety reign supreme.³⁸

Soniat, while himself not Creole (on account of his French birth), fathered the quintessential old-line aristocratic white Creole family, so it is plausible that his rather flattering and romanticized “Portrait of the Creole” reflects this personal circumstance. The popular usage and understanding of the term Creole would transform throughout the next two centuries, at first abandoning the children-of-Europeans-born-in-the-colony definition in favor of a native-to-Louisiana meaning, and later either including or adamantly excluding those with African blood (depending on who was doing the defining). One aspect of Soniat’s Creole portrait which thrives in the popular imagination today is that of the likable and chivalrous *bon vivant*—the Creole as a cultured, fascinating, slightly mysterious, and ultimately unknowable specimen of humanity. Quite unlike the anonymous officer of 1744, Soniat extended those generous characterizations to New Orleans itself—“where politeness, amiability, and gaiety reign supreme.”

Spanish officer Francisco Boulogny, who resided in Louisiana from 1769 to 1775 and subsequently wrote an influential *Memoire* for the Crown, shared Soniat’s favorable views of local society. Indulging in hyperbole, he painted a rosy picture of the colony for his superiors:

Without a doubt this province, the most favorable to population in the world, the salubriousness of its climate, the amenity and fertility of its fields, the abundance and shadiness of its forests, and the ease of canal construction to penetrate its hilly lands, makes this country an earthly paradise.

He then projected the healthy physical environment upon the occupying society:

The women are all fertile and there is no marriage which does not have

abundant children. The creoles are of a healthy temperament and capable of the hardest exercise. . . . Their industry and application are no less since it is rare for a head of family not to have the best books [on] agriculture and the exploitation of the woods. There are few houses whose furniture has not been made by the owner's own hands. Very well off men do not disdain to spend entire days at the foot of a plow, in the mill, in carpentry, or in a blacksmith shop. It can be truthfully said that the population base there today is the most favorable for indefinite development, as much for industry as for population and commerce.

Boulogny viewed Louisiana women not only as fruitful, but savvy Darwinians:

The women themselves, in their classes, distinguish and praise the most intelligent and diligent men, a policy strong enough for that country to be able to reach the greatest perfection.

Boulogny read chivalry into Creole gender relations, a theme shared by many future interpreters of Creole culture:

[Creole men] quickly leave the plow... to offer their hand to a lady and assist her across the furrows they have made. The elegance of their ways and the propriety with which they reason [inspires] admiration among strangers.⁴³

Boulogny was no less upbeat on race relations and human bondage: "The Negro slaves have only the name slave since in reality they are as happy as the day workers of Europe..." Their contentment, he suggested, derived from benevolent masters providing them a barrel of corn, a parcel for gardening, another parcel for raising animals, and a cabin "like those they make here in Spain." They all live healthy and robust to such a point that some [visitors] have been astonished on seeing them so agile, radiant, and strong.⁴⁴

Poverty might have existed in Boulogny's New Orleans, but did not show itself. "Not a single poor person is seen asking for alms in all [Louisiana]." Visiting sailors who attempted begging from local housewives got a lecture on laziness instead of a handout. Concluded Boulogny,

The present population of Louisiana is the most favorable to provide an indefinite development and [a bulwark against] its neighbors, however strong and forceful they might be.⁴¹

Boulogny's New Orleans, much like Sonnet's, was robust, fruitful, industrious, content, genial, and indomitable.



Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, a Saint-Domingue planter who fled the slave insurrection for Louisiana and settled in New Orleans for two and a half years, scribed in 1802 an acerbic life volume about his adopted home. It was translated to English

by an American, John Davis (who infused his own agenda into the text), and published four years later under the title *Travels in Louisiana and The Floridas in the Year 1802, Giving a Correct Picture of Those Countries*.

Embittered by his losses and eager to rebuild them in Louisiana, Berquin disdained the condition of Spanish-governed New Orleans and directed special contempt at its Creole population. He viewed a return of French dominion, coupled with new American investment (an angle advanced by translator Davis), as Louisiana's salvation. This hidden agenda deeply colored Berquin's "correct picture" of the colony—and of Creole society.

Berquin reported certain traits of Creole women—for frivolity, vanity, sexual prowess, and *joie de vivre*—that occur regularly in later literature:

The female Creoles being in general without education, can possess no taste for reading, music or drawing; but they are passionately fond of dancing[,] passing whole nights in succession in this exercise.

The ladies of New-Orleans dress themselves with taste, [while] the women in the country... are less pompous [but] love [their apparel] equally well. Their little hearts beat with tumult at the sight of a new dress. Their waists are every day getting short, their arms more naked, and their bosoms more bare.⁴⁴²

Vanity is a passion... found wherever there are human beings. But I know no part of the globe where it is so prominent a feature of the moral character as in Louisiana....⁴⁴³

[Creole women] are very prolific, bear early and long. They are seldom married seven years without having half a dozen children.... It is a very common thing for the mother and daughter to be big at the same time; sometimes the grand-daughter... makes a trio of big bellies.⁴⁴⁴

Many themes in Berquin's progressively more vitriolic narrative persist today as deeply embedded citywide stigmas—of lavish living amidst poverty, of corruption, of moral decadence.

Luxury... has made great progress through the colony. Every thing in the town is tingured with ostentation. An air of expense distinguishes the apparel, vehicles, furniture of the inhabitants. Simplicity has taken flight, parade has usurped its place. This luxury is dangerous in a rich nation, but to regions ever doomed to mediocrity it is a mortal poison.⁴⁴⁵

"Luxury and corruption go hand in hand," he lectured his readers. "This is strongly exemplified at New-Orleans by the number of white infants, the fruit of illicit commerce, exposed nightly in the streets, a maternal sacrifice to false honour." He viewed New Orleanians not only as morally lax, but also loquacious, mendacious, narcissistic, and cruel:

Falsehood has attained to such a height, that no one lies here for the plea-

sure of lying. No people in the world have such a tendency to hyperbolic amplification.⁴⁴⁶

A man represents himself here twice as rich as he is. The most ordinary habitation is a terrestrial paradise. The men are always frank and generous, the women never old, nor the girls ever ugly.⁴⁴⁷

Our Creoles likewise chuck [*sic*] themselves in talking of the illustriousness of their families... They are the greatest egoists in the world; their conversation is eternally about themselves. They are vulgarly familiar with their equals, insolent towards their inferiors, cruel to their slaves, and inhospitable to strangers.⁴⁴⁸

Not one to discriminate in his discriminations, Berquin viewed free people of color with equal contempt.

The mulattoes are in general vain and insolent, perfidious and detested, much given to lying, and great cowards. They have an inveterate hatred against the whites, the authors of their existence...

The mulatto women have not all the faults of the men. But they are full of vanity, and very libertines, money will always buy their caresses.... They live in open concubinage with the whites....⁴⁴⁹

On enslaved Africans, Berquin was no less or more vicious:

Negroes are a species of beings whom nature seems to have intended for slavery; their compliancy of temper, patience under injury and innate passiveness, all concur to justify this position....

[T]he negro slave of Louisiana... is lazy, libertine, and given to lying, but not incorrigibly wicked.

I do not consider slavery either as contrary to the order of a well regulated society or an infringement of the social laws. Under a different name it exists in every country. Softer than the word which so mightily offends the ear; call it dependence.⁴⁵⁰

New Orleanians, to Berquin's ear "have a disgusting drawling method of pronouncing their words;" they "lame and disfigure certain [French] words," perhaps because of a "physical... defect in [their] organ of speech..."⁴⁵¹ He mocked their pretentiousness: "A *tutoiement* prevails in the familiar conversation of domestic life. It is never *you*, but always *thee* and *thou*. It has however, no particular force. It is the babble [that] owes it origin to the base birth, the vulgar manners and low discourse of the first colonists." That base birth, Berquin patiently explained, accounted for the loathsomeness of the people of New Orleans.

Louisiana... has always been a colony more or less poor, and insulated, for a long time, from the rest of the globe. The country miserable in its soil was

not less so with regard to its inhabitants.⁴⁵²

[T]he Creoles of Louisiana being all of base extraction... were naturally illiterate, ignorant and rude.... [T]he present race seem to have degenerated from their ancestors, they are rude, envious, interested, avaricious, and presumptuous.... [T]heir ignorance exceeds all human credibility.⁴⁵³

It is no wonder, then, that the New Orleans of Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon was a city of illiteracy and brutishness:

There is neither a college, nor a library here, whether public or private.... A librarian would starve [here] unless he could teach his readers the art of doubling his capital.... There is only one printing office in the city [and one] meagre weekly newspaper....⁴⁵⁴

A Creole told me... that a never failing method to make him fall asleep, was to open a book before him.⁴⁵⁵

Men of cultivated talents are very rare here.—There are few good musicians, and I know but one portrait painter.... I am persuaded there are not ten men of polite literary attainments [among the] ten thousand souls [of] New Orleans.

The standard of individual merit in this country is, first a man's riches, and secondly his rank. Virtue and talents obtain no respect.⁴⁵⁶

Berquin concluded his prejudicial diatribe by portraying himself as the heroic bearer of a moral burden:

If I have been acrimonious in my strictures on certain classes of [Louisiana's] inhabitants, it was with a design to mark vice with infamy, and expose meanness to contempt.... Let the stricken deer go weep; the sorrow of the wretched provokes no sympathy.⁴⁵⁷

Although differing entirely in their assessments, the commentaries of the anonymous French officer, of Soniat, of Bouligand, and of Berquin trace a course that runs through numerous historical observations of New Orleans society. Commentators, both visiting and resident, seemed hell-bent on *passing judgment* on the city and its people—draconian and absolutist judgment, with little nuance and qualification. Many admired and extolled the city; many others loathed and excoriated it; few fell in between.

New Orleans' ability to inspire passionate and polarized reaction continues to this day. First-time visitors are usually either appalled or enthralled with the city's raffish air and tolerated vices, either disturbed or fascinated by its elegance and decadence. Fervent reaction to New Orleans ratcheted up even higher after Hurricane Katrina subjected the city's troubles and glories to international discourse.

Ask an informed American citizen today to ruminate on Dallas or Atlanta or Phoenix, and you will probably get small talk, lukewarm pleasantries, and a brief conversation. Ask them what they think about New Orleans, and you are in for not only an opinionated retort, but a sentimental smile, a scolding finger, a treasured memory, a shaking head, or an exasperated shrug over the course of a conversation spanning the spectrum of the human experience. This enigmatic capacity to rile and inspire, to scandalize and charm, to liberate and fascinate, helps explain why thousands of people have rejected the amenities and opportunities of the lukewarm Dallahs and Atlantas and Phoenixes of the world, and chosen instead to cast their lot with this troubled old port—embracing all its splendors and dilemmas, all its booms and busts, all its joys and tragedies.

Because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I spew thee from my mouth.

—Revelation 3:16

Ethnic Tensions, circa 1802: Incident at a New Orleans Ball

Geopolitics and ballroom dancing in a tumultuous era

His riches lost to the slave insurrection in Saint-Domingue, Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon (see previous reading) sought refuge in circa 1800 New Orleans and schemed to rebuild his fortune. Thwarting his ambitions, in Berquin's view, were the appalling conditions of the Spanish colonial city and the despicable character of its Creole people. He set out on a literary mission to expose this scandalous state of affairs.

Berquin's book, *Travels in Louisiana and The Floridas in the Year 1802, Giving a Correct Picture of Those Countries*, viewed a return to French dominion plus new American investment as Louisiana's salvation. That hidden agenda underlies his account of an incident at a New Orleans ball, the scene of many near-violent ethnic tensions in the years around Americanization.⁴⁵⁸

According to Berquin, hundreds mostly of French Creole ancestry had commenced forming *contre-dances Francais* when

[t]he eldest son of the [Spanish] governor, not liking the French country dances, [substitute] English country dances; an innovation the company tolerated from deference for his distinguished rank. This act of complaisance in the assembly was misunderstood by the youthful Spaniard; he abused it grossly.

Interrupting the French country dances,

our young illustrious Spaniard calls out, "*Contre-danses Anglaises!*" and the dancers[,] inflamed at his want of moderation... ordered the music to play on, & claiming unanimously, *Contre-danses Françaises!* The son of the governor soon found partisans who joined with him in the cry of "*Contre-danses Anglaises!*" While the dancers, firm to their purpose, reiterated "*Contre-danses Françaises!*" it was confusion worse confounded, & vociferation without end. At length the illustrious Spaniard finding the dancers obstinate, called out to the fiddlers, "Cease playing, you rascals!" The fiddlers instantly obeyed.

The officer who was stationed with a guard of soldiers to maintain order in the place, thought only of enforcing the will of the illustrious Spaniard; he ordered his men to fix their bayonets, and disperse the dancers. The scene now begged all description. Women shrieking and wringing their hands, girls fainting and falling on the floor, men cursing and unsheathing their swords. On one side grenadiers with fixed bayonets stood in a hostile attitude; on the other the gallant dancers were opposed with drawn swords.⁴⁵⁹

Berquin then added two additional ethnic dimensions to the impending brawl:

During this squabble and uproar, how did a number of Americans act, who were present at the ball? Men of a pacific nature, and habituated to neutrality, they neither advocated the French nor English country dances. [Instead] [t]hey ran to the assistance of the fair ladies, who had fainted away; and, loaded with their precious burdens, carried them through drawn swords, and fixed bayonets to a place of safety.

It was at the moment a conflict was about to take place...likely to terminate in a tragedy, that three young Frenchmen, lately arrived from Europe, mounted the orchestra and harangued the crowd. They spoke with an eloquence prompted by the occasion. They decaimed on the superiority of concord over dissention; they entreated, conjured, and exhorted the parties, as they respected the safety, preservation, and names of the ladies not to make a field of battle of a place that was consecrated to soft delight. Their exhortations restored peace and harmony to the society.... The ball was then resumed [and] remained in possession of the advocates for the French country dances....⁴⁶⁰

Perhaps events transpired precisely as Berquin recorded them in that crowded New Orleans ballroom two centuries ago. That is unlikely. His narrative, with its foolish Spaniard, its frivolous and hot-headed Creole, its heroic and gallant Americans, and its eloquent, peace-loving Frenchmen "lately arrived from Europe" aligns suspiciously well with Berquin's political objective, as infused by his American translator's agenda: to excoriate Creole society, attract American investment, restore French colonial power, and rebuild in Louisiana the fortune he lost in Saint-Domingue.⁴⁶¹

History overtook Berquin's agenda. Even as the ink dried on Berquin's manuscript, France negotiated away its last best hope for a major North American pres-

ence. The French prefect who relinquished the colony during the Louisiana Purchase ceremony described Berquin's book—which "caused a considerable stir" when copies began circulating locally—as a "bilious" and "filled with sarcasm," the man himself "narrow and warped."⁴⁶² Creole society, it turned out, needed none of Berquin's rebuking: severed culturally and politically from its French Caribbean source region, it gradually melded with American culture.

Only one of Berquin's goals—increased American investment—came to fruition, perhaps more so than the cantankerous old philanthropist would have preferred.

Streetcapes of Amalgamation

Creole/American cultural hybridization in the nineteenth-century streets of New Orleans

"During most of the nineteenth century," wrote historians Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon,

New Orleans remained in counterpoint to the rest of urban America. New-comers ... recoiled when they encountered the prevailing French language of the city, its dominant Catholicism, its bawdy sensual delights, or its proud free black population—in short, its deeply rooted creole traditions. Its incorporation into the United States posed a profound challenge, the infant republic's first attempt to impose its institutions on a foreign city.⁴⁶³

Anglo influence arrived in tiny doses to colonial Louisiana, well before the birth of that American republic. It commenced in 1699, when Bienville famously rebuffed Capt. Louis Bond's *Caroline Galley* at English Turn; it continued in 1719, when an Englishman named Jonathan Darby set foot in New Orleans proper.⁴⁶⁴ Anglo presence increased greatly, with division, as France lost the Seven Years' War and with it its North American colonies, leaving New Orleans with unwelcome Spanish *dons* in the *Calld* and unwanted English neighbors across Lake Pontchartrain. It ratcheted up in the late 1790s, when American immigrants began to move to Spanish New Orleans, which granted to the infant republic the treasured right of deposit upon its wharves for shipments on the Mississippi.

Spain grew increasingly apprehensive about the westward-leaning United States' interest in the lower Mississippi frontier. With Latin American colonies demanding its attention and resources, Spain secretly retroceded Louisiana to militarily powerful France; Napoleon accepted, envisioning the cumbersome colonial orphan as a breadbasket for France's extremely lucrative Saint-Domingue sugar colony. But when a major slave insurrection on that Caribbean island succeeded in expelling French

troops and creating the Western Hemisphere's second independent nation (Haiti), Napoleon's only remaining interest in Louisiana was to keep it out of English hands. When American diplomats broached purchasing New Orleans, Napoleon offered them the entire colony instead. On December 20, 1803, the vast Louisiana claim transferred to American jurisdiction, and Creole New Orleans became, on paper, a U.S. city. Ambitious Northern businessmen eyed the new American port on the southwestern frontier as a potentially lucrative opportunity. Many lost no time in emigrating.

"The Americans [are] swarming in from the northern states," recollected Pierre Clément de Laussat, the last French official to oversee Louisiana, barely four months after the raising of the American flag:

Each one turned over in his mind a noble plan of speculation[;] they were regarding Louisiana as the holy tribes invaded the land of Canaan. Their tendency, and instinct, is to exclude from these privileged regions any generation but their own.⁴⁶⁵

Some Anglo-American emigrants derived from English stock and hailed from New England and the Mid-Atlantic states; others were of Celtic, Upland Scottish, or Irish Southern heritage and arrived from the upper South. Nearly all were Anglophone Protestants of American culture and nationality. More still came after the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, in which Louisianians once again rebuffed an English intrusion, this time with violence and finality. "Americans are pouring in daily," remarked an amazed Benjamin Latrobe four years after the battle.⁴⁶⁶ Choctaws—that is, natives—held little in common with their new compatriots, but increasingly had to share space, sway, and say with them.

The slow and, to tentimes painful, absorption of post-colonial Creole New Orleans into the Anglo-American United States defined the city's experience for the remainder of the nineteenth century. The transformation infiltrated all manifestations of culture, in a way that often mystified newcomers. "What is the state of society in New Orleans?", asked Latrobe rhetorically in 1819. One "might as well ask, What is the shape of a cloud?"⁴⁶⁷ The process of cultural amalgamation played out in politics, economics, religion, law, linguistics, and architecture, as well as in music, food, drink, dance, festivity, and recreation. Irishman Thomas Ashe's description of New Orleans nightlife in 1806 captured the city's oft-observed twilight personality shift, not to mention its penchant for pleasure:

The instant the [sun] sets, animation begins to rise, the public walks are crowded... the inhabitants promenade on the Leveé... the billiard rooms resound, music strikes up, and life and activity resume their joyous career.... The [dining] table is excellent, being covered with fish, soups, ovals, roasted, broiled, and stewed meats, with vegetables... Coffee is served soon after dinner (... dinner-hour is three...), after which it is customary to enjoy a *siesta*.⁴⁶⁸

That decidedly European ambience soon began to Americanize. At times the amalgamation occurred subtly; other times it transpired loudly and visibly in the

streetscapes, as witnessed and recorded by observant visitors. Among them was Charles Sealsfield, who, in his book *The Americans As They Are* (1828) noticed the emergence of the “refined” Greek Revival style—the Americans’ first major architectural import—against the otherwise “crude” buildings of Creole New Orleans:

[T]he houses are rapidly changing from the unimproved Spanish style, to more elegant forms. The new houses are mostly three stories high, with balconies, and a summer-room with blinds. In the lower suburbs, frame houses, with Spanish roofs, are still prevalent.⁴⁶⁹

One particular Creole cultural trait consistently offended Protestant sensibilities: disregard of the Sabbath. “The general manners and habits are very relaxed” in New Orleans, noted an English visitor in 1811. “The first day of my residence here was Sunday, and I was not a little surprised to find in the United States the markets, shops, theatres, circus, and public ball-rooms open. Gambling houses throng the city.”⁴⁷⁰ Sealsfield concurred in 1828:

It was on a Sunday that we arrived; the shops, the taverns of the French and creoles, were open as usual. . . . the coffee-houses, grog-shops, and the establishments [drinking holes] of the French and German inhabitants, exhibited a more noisy scene. A kind of music, accompanied with [singing] resounded in almost every direction. This little respect paid to the Sabbath is a relic of the French revolution, and of Buonaparte [sic], for whom the French and the creoles of Louisiana have an unlimited respect, imitating him as poor minds generally do. . . .

To a new country, accustomed in the north to the dignified and quiet keeping of the Sabbath, this appears very shocking. The Anglo-Americans, with few exceptions, remain even here faithful to their ancient custom of keeping the Sabbath holy.⁴⁷¹

Creole and Anglo ethnic predominance in the lower and upper city thus produced, at least on Sundays, two very different street scenes—one bustling and festive, the other reverent and quiet.

Joseph Holt Ingraham, in his travelogue *The South-West by a Yankee*, described in 1833–34 the emerging Anglo-American street scenes in a neighborhood once dominated by Francophone Creoles:

After passing Rue Toulouse, the streets began to assume a new character; the buildings were loftier and more modern—the signs over the doors bore English names, and the characteristic arrangements of a northern dry goods store were perceived. . . . We had now attained the upper part of Chartres-street, which is occupied almost exclusively by retail and wholesale dry goods dealers, jewellers, booksellers, &c., from the northern states, and I could almost realize that I was taking an evening promenade in Cornhill [England], so great was the resemblance.⁴⁷²

Ingraham then proceeded down Canal and doubled back on Levée Street

(now Decatur). He continued, “The stores on our left were all open, and nearly every one of them, for the first two squares, was... a clothing or hat store... kept by Americans; that is to say, Anglo-Americans as distinguished from the Louisiana French....” It was not until he approached the market, about five blocks down, that “French stores began to predominate... one could readily imagine himself, aided by the sound of the French language, French faces and French goods on all sides, to be traversing a street in Havre or Marseille.”⁴⁷

An observer in 1872 detected the full range of cultural differentiation in downtown street scenes, ranging from the geopolitical to the architectural, linguistic, gastronomic, and musical. “Almost entirely unlike any other city in the world, the begonia is New Orleans.” That uniqueness, he implied, rested on the Creole/American dichotomy:

So unharmonious was the intercourse between the French and American population, that some years since [1836] a divisional line was drawn between them [on Canal Street].... In crossing the line, it was passing from an American into a French city. The change is so visible, as the customs of the two. The buildings in the French portion [exhibit] an antiquated appearance, and almost unique, though modelled from the Spanish with a semblance of the French style.... The shops... bear a greater resemblance to Paris, than of any city in the Union.

The language used is a mongrel of the French and Spanish.... The mode of living is widely dissimilar to that of the American, though of late some few dishes have been introduced on the American tables [of the most fashionable boarding houses]....

The soft music of the guitar, or the humming of the tambourin, or the croaking of the band organ, greet the ears of the stranger in every direction; *for unlike the cities of the north, street music is tolerated in New Orleans.*^{47a}

Frederick Law Olmsted, a keen student of landscapes if ever there was one, read the cultural amalgam in the streetscape as he rode a cab up present-day Decatur Street to the St. Charles Hotel in 1854. In the Lower Quarter, Olmsted witnessed “narrow dirty streets, among grimy old stuccoed walls: high arched windows and doors, balconies and entresols, and French noises and French smells, French signs, ten to one of English.” In the upper Quarter, he reported that “now the signs became English, and the new brick buildings American.” Upon crossing Canal and heading up St. Charles Avenue, he saw “French, Spanish, and English signs, the latter predominating.”^{47b}

London-based war correspondent William Howard Russell recorded rare street-level descriptions of Confederate New Orleans as he arrived under tense circumstances a month after the bombardment of Fort Sumter. “[S]uch a whirl of secession and politics[!]” he remarked as he took in the scenes:

The Confederate flag was flying from the public buildings and from many private houses. Military companies paraded through the streets, and a large proportion of men were in uniform...

The streets are full of Turcos, Zouaves, Chasseurs [French infantry units and other foreign soldiers who wore distinctive uniforms]; walls are covered with placards of volunteer companies; there are Pickwick rifles, La Fayette, Beaugard, MacMahon guards, Irish, German, Italian and Spanish and native volunteers.... Tailors are busy night and day making uniforms....

There are some who maintain there will be no war after all.... No one imagines the South will ever go back to the Union voluntarily, or that the North has power to thrust it back at the point of the bayonet.⁴⁷⁶

Despite the excitement of the moment—a New York firm had just moved town; a frightened aristocrat associated with an abolitionist paper ensconced himself in a hostile neighborhood; Russell still took time to critique the ethnic cityscape. “A great number of the men and women had evident traces of negro blood in their veins,” he observed as he disembarked the Pontchartrain Railroad in the Faubourg Marigny,

and of the purer blooded whites many had the peculiar look of the fishy-flesh population of the Levantine [eastern Mediterranean] towns...all were pale and lean.

There is an air thoroughly French about the people—cafés, restaurants, billiard-rooms abound, with oyster and lager-beer saloons interspersed. The shops are all *magazines*; the people in the streets are speaking French, particularly the negroes who are going out shopping with their masters and mistresses, exceedingly well dressed, noisy, but not unhappy looking... [T]he richness of some of the shops, the vehicles in the streets, and the multitude of well-dressed people [gave] an impression of [a] wealth and comfort of the inhabitants.

The markets are swarm with specimens of *the composite race* which inhabit the city, from the [pure-blooded] negro, who is suspiciously like a native-born African, to the Creole who boasts that every drop of blood in his veins is purely French.⁴⁷⁷

Russell settled at the St. Charles Hotel—“an enormous establishment, of the American type, with a Southern character about it.” Shortly thereafter news arrived that federal troops had invaded Virginia. The first major battles ensued that summer, and within a year of Russell’s visit, New Orleans succumbed to Union forces.

After the war and Reconstruction, the German travel memoirist Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg read as much cultural fusion into the New Orleans streetscape as his antebellum predecessors. Regardant Canal Street, he rhapsodized:

Here the South lies at the end of [this] international thoroughfare, the tropical West Indies at the other. The contrasts collide in one city, it seems, and in *this* street. Situation, prospect, traffic, the splendor of shops, all of life as lived in a street—in a word, *everything*—says we stand on the boundary between two great but distinct cultures. Anglo-Saxon and Latin meet *here*. Everything says we tread the contiguous edges of geographical zones. Tropi-

cal and temperate interact *here*.

Canal Street divides New Orleans as the Straits of Dover do England from France. Indeed, English culture and French—better called Anglo-Germanic and Latin—could not be more precisely and more surely set at intervals than here, on either side of our broad Canal Street. From the Mississippi inland, everything to the left [of Canal Street] is Anglo-Saxon, and to the right it is Spanish, Italian, and French... the bastion of Creole culture. West of Canal, then, we hear *street, cent, and mister* without exception; east, *rue, centimes, and monsieur* also without exception. Ask directions in public and get the answer in English to the left, in French to the right. Each nation dwells as a separate society isolated from one another, not mingling.⁴⁷⁸

Hesse-Wartgen, Olmsted, Ingraham, and other travel writers, for all their excursions at encoding streetscapes, nonetheless were first-time visitors who relied on initial impressions to form their assessments. Had they spent more time in the city and tracked its day-to-day idiosyncrasies, they probably would have confirmed what Benjamin Larocbe predicted in 1817: that Creole culture was slowly succumbing to Anglo-American society. True, it predominated in the early years of Americanization, especially after 9,000 Francophone Haitian refugees arrived in 1809 and reinforced the city's French Caribbean cultural ambience. But loosening ties to the motherland, increasing numbers of American emigrants and European immigrants, and growing entanglements with American political, legal, economic, religious, and social networks left Creole society threatened, reactionary, and receding.

Tensions, occasionally coming “perilously close to armed violence,”⁴⁷⁹ mounted in the 1820s. Bills circulated—and nearly passed—to “convert the whole [of New Orleans] into two cities to be called the Upper and Lower city, arising from the opposing influence of American (as they are called) and French interests.”⁴⁸⁰ Americans finally won legislative consent in 1836 for a similar plan, dividing New Orleans into three semiautonomous units essentially to free themselves of Creole predominance. The inefficient “municipality system” was abandoned in 1852, but only after the Americans established alliances with uptown German and Irish immigrants to ensure numerical superiority over the Creoles. The reunified city was now politically Anglo-dominant; city government relocated from the old Spanish-style Cabildo on Jackson Square to the new Greek Revival City Hall on Lafayette Square; the fulcrums of commerce, politics, and communications shifted from the Creole old city to Anglo Faubourg St. Mary. The keenly observant French social geographer, Elisée Réclus, who visited the city as a young man the year after the city’s reunification, noticed the emerging cultural Americanization:

In fact, the French are only a small minority here [in the French Quarter;] most of their houses have been purchased by American capitalists.... The American section, located west [across] Canal Street, [is] the center of political life.

The population of New Orleans... includes barely 6,000 to 10,000 French, or one-twentieth, [plus] the same number of Creoles who are not yet com-

pletely Americanized.

It is clear that the French language will increasingly disappear.... Soon the Anglo-Saxon idiom will dominate unchallenged, and all that will remain [of the old ways] will be the names of streets: Tchoupitoulas, Perdido, Bienville, etc. At the French Market, which foreigners once visited without fail in order to hear the melody of languages, one now hears only English conversations.

Even the opera house is proof of the gradual disappearance of foreign or Creole elements. Formerly, this theater showed only French plays, comedies, or vaudeville, but to continue to be profitable, it was forced to change its playbills and its name. Today it is patronized by the American public.⁴⁸

Twenty-four years after Réclus' amalgamation interpretation, and around the same time that Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg reassured his readers of the continued vitality of New Orleans "two great but distinct cultures," an interesting "Letter from New Orleans" (1877) appeared in Northern newspapers. It concurred with Réclus' 1853 assessment about as much as it contradicted Hesse-Wartegg's contemporary take. The anonymous piece presents a valuable critical analysis of the still-visible yet waning French-Creole culture in the streets of the Crescent City:

New Orleans is gradually but very perceptibly, parting with its distinctive French character. It may be two generations before it will have become sufficiently Anglicised to present no marked features of contrast with the other large cities of the United States. But the inroads of the Anglo-Saxon, the Celtic and Teutonic races are such that it is only a question of time, and a comparatively short time at that, when the descendants of the Latins will be swallowed up and disappear in the embrace of their more hard and vigorous neighbors.

The writer then breaks with nineteenth-century travelogue tradition by—quite accurately—dismissing the notion of a purely French-Creole quarter separated resolutely from an equally purely Anglo-American sector:

The boundary which separates the French from the English portion of the city exists now only in name. In the long, narrow streets of Frenchtown, there is scarcely a square where the Germans, the Irish and the Americans have not established themselves in active competition with the French. Side by side with the coffee and the absinthe shops are the lager beer saloons and the gin mills. Next to signs bearing the poetical and high-surrounding names with which the French language so abounds, you read "Smith," "Brown," "Thompsons," &c in great variety.

Nor did another staple of the antebellum travel writer—a trip to the French Market—impress this critic. The French market was formerly the object of much interest and curiosity to visitors," he allowed, "and no one who came to New Orleans thought he had 'done' the city if he did not rise at daylight on Sunday morning and go to the French market." He continued:

The stranger who now jumbles out of his bed at dawn... sees [at the Market] a great display of fruits and flowers and numberless little coffee stalls; he bears a great deal of jabbering in a villainous patois that sounds perhaps a little more like French than does Cherokee. He looks in vain for the pretty flower girls, the type of the French peasantry, for the tambourine and the catinets, for the side-shows which are so picturesque an accompaniment of French market places. He cannot play the gallant to the sallow, toothless old hags who chatter and gibe at him like so many monkeys while they importune him to buy their wares. Everything looks dirty and smells bad, and it is a very short time before you have all you want of the French market.

Recovering from his disappointment, the visitor returns to the theme of Creole cultural decline.

Up to 1868, the courts kept duplicate copies of their records in French and English. Now [they] are transcribed in English exclusively. L'Abeille, (the bee,) a French daily newspaper, which has been in existence fifty years, is still printed. It is quite large sheet and looks moderately prosperous, although the signs of decay are very perceptible to the experienced eye, and the day is not far distant when L'Abeille will be no more. *The amalgamation process is seen in everything, and the end is a mere question of time.*⁴⁸²

In 1914, the state legislature rescinded the law that required certain legal documents to be published in French, a stipulation that had kept L'Abeille in business even after Creole French grew rare. Nine years later, the paper folded.

Cultures rarely truly disappear; rather, they hybridize—as the previously cited source put it, “amalgamate”—into a new form, which may reflect any combination or outgrowth of its antecedents. Some saw it coming: English-born architect Benjamin Latrobe, who reflected on the impending cultural Americanization in 1819, wrote

The state of society [in New Orleans] is puzzling. There are in fact three societies here: 1. the French, 2. the American, & 3. the mixed. The French society is not exactly what it was at the change of government, & the American is not strictly what it is in the Atlantic cities.

[One] cannot help wishing that a *mean*, an *average* character, of society (a) grow out of the intermixture of the French [Creole] & American manners.⁴⁸³

To a degree, Latrobe's wish came true. Creole culture is by no means dead in modern New Orleans: thousands of residents identify themselves (in certain contexts) as Creole, or black Creole, and certain neighborhoods—particularly the Seventh Ward—are widely recognized as cultural hearths of Creolism. As recently as 1970, fully 41,719 U.S.-born residents of Orleans Parish (one of every four or five) claimed French as their “mother tongue,” the language spoken in their childhood home.⁴⁸⁴ Creole foods remain popular, as are civic traditions such as Mardi Gras and All Saints Day. Remnant French Creole words and phrases are occasionally heard in conversation. Downtown neighborhoods such as the French Quarter, faubourgs Tremé and Marigny, Bywater,

and the back-of-town to Bayou St. John are replete with Creole architectural styles, typologies, and buildings—trains—in short, with Creole streetscapes.

But every surviving Creole trait is outnumbered enormously by those reflecting national and global culture. History seems to have proven Benjamin Latrobe right when he predicted in 1799,

in a few years . . . this will be an American town. What is good & bad in the French manners, & opinions must give way, & the American notions of right & wrong, of convenience & inconvenience will take their place. . . . [E]very thing French will in 50 years disappear. Even the miserable patois of the Creoles will be heard only in the cypress swamps.⁴⁸⁵



Nativity as Ethnicity in New Orleans

The significance of being—and not being—from New Orleans

Deep in the digital tocombs of the 2000 Census, in Summary File 3 of the estimates made from nineteen million “long-form” questionnaires is an interesting statistic: 77.4 percent of New Orleans’ 484,674 residents were born in Louisiana, the highest rate of in-state nativity among major American cities (see map, “Nativity by State and City”).⁴⁸⁶ In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, city advocates upheld that figure as evidence of a strong sense of place-rootedness and love-of-place (“topophilia”) on behalf of New Orleanians. Perhaps. But it also reflects the city’s inability to attract new blood, because of limited opportunities and myriad quality-of-life challenges. Indeed, nativity rates at the state and city level nationwide tend to correspond to depressed, declining areas, such as the Rust Belt, seemingly corroborating that a rejection by outsiders trumps the dedication of insiders in determining the percentage of people born locally.⁴⁸⁷ In New Orleans, socio-economic problems motivated tens of thousands of families to flee their supposedly beloved city, helping drop its peak population by one-quarter since 1960.

Yet thousands of people have bucked the trend by moving *into* New Orleans in that same era. Many, particularly in the professional and creative classes, were specifically drawn by New Orleans’ intriguing charms, and unlike natives, were self-selected for “Orleanophilia” from a nationwide pool of millions. Some newcomers might be what Eric Weiner, author of the recent bestseller *The Geography of Bliss*, described as “hedonic refugees:” people who “have an epiphany, a moment of great clarity when they realize, beyond a doubt, they were born in the wrong [place],” and transplant themselves to another one, finding a better “cultural fit”—and greater happiness.⁴⁸⁸ Other new New Orleanians seem to have more in common with expatriated Americans liv-

ing in Europe or the tropics—“expats”—than with their compatriots who have simply moved to another American city. Despite their relatively small numbers and recent arrival, non-natives, or “transplants,” often revel in their adopted community and become surprisingly influential cultural forces there.

That has long been the case in New Orleans. The city’s history is replete with culturally influential transplants, including (to name but a few) Rhode Island-born Judah Touro and Baltimore-born John McDonogh, Irish architect James Gallier, the Mobile-based founders of the Krewe of Comus, Greek-born writer Lafcadio Hearn, and most notably, Mississippi-born playwright Tennessee Williams, who throughout his life eloquently and consistently embraced New Orleans as his “spiritual home.” The phenomenon continues today, when, contrary to popular perceptions, New Orleans’ artistic, musical, culinary, literary, historical, and preservationist communities disproportionately comprise non-natives. Transplants abound among the organizers of public festivals, the patrons of the Contemporary Arts Center, the authors at literary events, the renovators of historical homes, the revelers of the ribald *Krewe de Vieux*, the gallery-hoppers of Julia Street, and the night-clubbers of Frenchmen Street.⁴⁸⁹ This is not to say that locally born people eschew such activities: prosperous uptown “blue bloods” and Jewish families, most of them with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century local lineages, generously patronize the city’s cultural and social institutions, while the African-American community forms a veritable reservoir of deeply rooted local cultural traditions. Rather, it simply recognizes that transplants, on a statistical, overrepresented in outwardly visible cultural endeavors.

Transplants form certain geographies. Those from out-of-state hail disproportionately from southern California; major Texas cities; Chicago; Atlanta; Memphis; Washington D.C.; Miami; San Francisco; Hartford; nearby Eloy; Mobile, and Jackson; Jacksonville, Boston, and New York City (see map, “Sources of Transplants to New Orleans”).⁴⁹⁰ They usually settle in New Orleans’ historical areas, comprising one-third the residency of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century neighborhoods compared to less than one-fifth of twentieth-century subdivisions. Calculated another way, 44 percent of the residents of neighborhoods of the “highest” historical significance are transplants, compared to 30 percent of “significantly” historical areas, 21 percent of “somewhat” historical neighborhoods, and only 16 percent of “non-historical” areas (see graph, “Natives, Transplants, and Historical Neighborhoods”).⁴⁹¹

Why? People who choose to move to New Orleans often expressly seek to escape the perceived homogeneity of the rest of America, and therefore gravitate to houses and neighborhoods that reflect the distinctive historical essence of the city. Why flee Midwestern blandness only to settle for an equally banal ranch house in a modern New Orleans subdivision? A galvanized townhouse, a colorful shotgun, or a quaint Creole cottage is far more appealing. Accordingly, New Orleans’ iconic neighborhoods—the French Quarter, the downtown faubourgs, the Garden District and uptown—are usually home to the highest number of transplants. Sixty-one percent of the French Quarter’s 2000 population and 55 percent of the Garden District’s were not even born in Louisiana, let alone New Orleans. One must visit the modern subdivisions of the lakefront, eastern New Orleans, or the West Bank—places routinely dismissed as

“placeless” and “historically not significant”—to find native-born denizens predominating by over 80 and 90 percent. And only the poverty-stricken subsidized housing projects boast nativity rates approaching 100 percent.

Mapping out New Orleans' nativity patterns yields a whole new cultural geography compared to standard interpretations based on race, class, and other factors (see map, “These Patterns Emerge...”). The stark divide between the mostly black Lower Ninth Ward and mostly white St. Bernard Parish completely disappears when one plots nativity, as nearly everyone in both areas was born here. New Orleans East and Westwego seem very different when we segment society by race, but quite similar when we do so by nativity. Conversely, Uptown and Lakeview seem the same in terms of race and class, but quite different in terms of nativity (the “white teapot,” it turns out, is also a “transplant teapot”). Remarkably, the Vietnamese enclave of Versailles, often viewed as an exotic exception to “classic New Orleans,” turns out to be more native-to-Louisiana than the world-famous French Quarter and Garden District, which get all the attention. St. Bernard Parish boasts the metro area's highest parish-level nativity rate—64 percent, arguably making it a treasure trove of genuinely local culture—yet few books extol the parish, hardly any dissertations are written about it, and few documentary filmmakers lug their cameras there.⁴⁹²

The residential geography of natives and transplants proved consequential during the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe (see map, “Natives, Transplants, and Katrina's Floodwaters”). Transplants' predilection for historical houses placed them, more often than not, on higher ground, because most old neighborhoods occupy the better-drained natural levee which generally did not flood. Natives, on the other hand, who lived for generations in cramped historical housing stock and were more inclined to flee to spacious modern lakeside suburbs in the early- to mid-1900s, unwittingly placed themselves upon lower-lying terrain. Those areas flooded deeply. Katrina's flood disrupted the lives of New Orleanians of all backgrounds, but disproportions did exist, and one of them regarded nativity.

The cultural influence of transplants often flies beneath the radar of discourse about the city. Perhaps this is because transplants do much of the chattering about the city (you're reading one now), and ascribing cultural significance to themselves seemingly undermines the very attributes of deep-rooted localism which attracted many transplants to New Orleans in the first place. Or perhaps it involves transplants' omnipresent angst over cultural “authenticity”: if *native* implies *authentic* and *real*, then *transplant* must mean the opposite—and who wants that?

Such worries should be set aside. Yesterday's transplants are today's natives; today's transplants are tomorrow's natives. As for locally distinctive cultural traits, cities and other human communities both *produce* and *attract* people with certain characteristics. The societies of New York City or Los Angeles do not necessarily produce disproportionate numbers of great artists and performers; they *attract* them from across the globe. The same is true for software engineers in Seattle, policy-wonks in Washington, and scholars in Boston. Both groups—those produced by, and those attracted to, certain cities—help form those places' distinctive local cultures. A New Orleans musician originally from Des Moines, a Nebraska-born French Quarter chef, or a Gentilly

playwright originally from San Francisco all legitimately help form local New Orleans culture simply by nature of the city's ability to draw them here.

Still, transplant and native populations see things quite differently.⁴⁹³ Transplants (setting aside immigrants for the purposes of this discussion) are more likely to be white, professional, better-off in terms of income and education, and childless, or at least less fruitful, compared to their locally born neighbors. They also tend to be more socially liberal, less culturally traditional, and more secular than natives. Many, probably the majority, of the city's openly gay population is non-native. Tulane University, whose faculty and student body are even more out-of-town than the rest of the city is native is culturally and geographically central to the transplant universe. Transplants' accents tend to be of the neutral Midwestern variety, and conversations with strangers often begin with the question, "So, where are you from?" They tend to describe various parts of the city in terms of faubourgs or historic districts, or in reference to popular restaurants, nightclubs, special food stores, or other entities relevant to their interests. Transplants are more likely to listen to National Public Radio and listen to sponsored WWOZ than commercial stations, and tend to be "Jazz Fest people" more so than "Mardi Gras people." They predominate disproportionately at events involving the arts, culture, and social, urban, and environmental causes. In urban controversies, transplants often embrace aesthetic or idealistic values—"save the architecturally significant structure;" "preserve the historical character of the neighborhood," "protect the environment"—because those values fortify the very reasons why they moved here. Remarkably, many transplants exhibit a hypersensitive aversion to anything touristy (particularly Bourbon Street), a strategy designed to distance themselves as far as possible from dreaded notions of cultural inauthenticity and fakiness.

The native-born population, on the other hand, tends to be less moneyed, less educated, more religious and traditional in culture, and more likely to be African American (in large part because so many native-born middle-class whites departed). Natives also count among their ranks many influential "old money" families, who may share a common race and class with their prosperous transplant neighbors, but little else. Natives of the working class often speak with a post-city accent, use vernacular expressions such as "where y'at" or "making groceries" and are more likely to eat traditional foods on a weekly schedule, such as red beans and rice on Monday and fish on Friday. Natives of the upper class tend to pronounce their city's name with the tri-syllabic *er-le-ans*. Natives in general tend to regionalize the city into wards, school districts, or church parishes, and are oftentimes unfamiliar with trendy revived faubourg names or historical districts. Their conversations often begin with, "So, what school did you go to?" or "What church do you belong to?" In municipal controversies, natives often advocate for the pragmatic—"we need economic development;" "our young people need jobs"—over the abstractions favored by many transplants. Natives tend to prefer Mardi Gras over Jazz Fest, the public University of New Orleans over the pricey and exclusive Tulane, and commercial radio over public stations. Natives predominate overwhelmingly (sometimes exclusively) in the memberships of old-line krewes and uptown social clubs, among the attendees of the plebeian Gretna Heritage Festival and St. Bernard Parish Crawfish Festival, and in just about any event affiliated with a church.

Nativity informs many urban-policy controversies in New Orleans, oftentimes trumping the race- and class-related factors which tend to get more attention. During the raucous 2005-07 debate about the future of public housing (which explicitly did *not* break down along racial lines), those protesting the proposed demolitions angrily pointed out that three of the four redevelopment firms came from out-of-state, while those favoring demolition puffed at the large numbers of out-of-town activists among the protesters. In the testy post-Katrina planning meetings of 2005-06, white New Orleanians—sometimes responded to out-of-town experts' recommendations to close down certain low-lying, heavily damaged neighborhoods by citing their nativity—"Well I'm *born* here, born and raised, six generations..."—as if it were a credential. In some ways, it is: nativity reflects commitment to place, and ratchets up one's status as a stakeholder.

The differences between natives and transplants already seem to form, or at least inform, two separate sub-cultures, perhaps even two ethnicities. There is historical precedence for blurred lines between nativity and ethnicity in New Orleans: the common denominator unifying the city's ethnic Creole population in the early nineteenth century was not principally race or class, but deep-rooted Louisiana nativity. Rivalry between native Creole and newly arrived transplants—Anglo-Americans as well as immigrants—practically defined New Orleans society between the Louisiana Purchase and the Civil War.

The little-researched notion of nativity as ethnicity is explored more broadly in the next reading.

Nativity as Ethnicity in America

Dynamics between natives and transplants in the United States

Social science research commonly deconstructs American society along the fault lines of race, ancestry, gender, class, education, religion, political leaning, and orientation. Yet much cultural differentiation transcends those lines, or complicates the social terrain therein. This essay posits that nativity—where one is born, and the depth of one's roots in that place—ranks high among those segmentations, serving as a unifying bond inextricably linked with parallel cultural traits such as accents, customs, foods, spirituality, relationships with nature, politics, and overall world view. Nativity, in some cases, almost functions as a sort of ethnicity.

Early nineteenth-century New Orleans offers one example. When English-speaking Protestant Anglo-Americans transplanted themselves to this seemingly exotic and foreign city on the southwestern frontier, they encountered here a more sedentary

and conservative people of varied backgrounds—French, Spanish, Hispanic, African, Caribbean—who looked, dressed, spoke, worshipped, governed, worked, recreated, socialized, and thought differently. What bonded these diverse New Orleanians together, and distinguished them from the incoming Anglo-Americans, was their own shared color/era Louisiana nativity: their Creole ethnicity. They were *from here*, and attached importance to it.

Hispanics represent another example. The Hispanic (or Latino) ethnicity unites peoples of diverse backgrounds—the majority of indigenous and/or Spanish blood, plus others of African, German, Italian, English, Asian, and Jewish ancestry—who all share a nativity to Latin America.

That a common nativity binds people of otherwise varying backgrounds comes as no surprise. Nation-states bank on this notion (to varying degrees of success), but they then indigenously dominated nations of the Old World or immigrant-based societies of the New World. Nativism at the national scale fueled the Know-nothing movement against Catholics and immigrants in the 1850s, while regional nativity stoked the South's violent resistance to Union advances during the Civil War. History is replete with nativity narratives; they operate at various spatial scales and intensity levels, and yield both the best and worst in human relations.

This hypothesis goes further than the axiomatic nativity-is-important theme. It suggests that nativity—particularly when those who possess it feel threatened by those who do not—forms a strong sense of unifying identity. Nativity is relevant even among Americans born in the United States, with all its supposedly geography-neutralizing telecommunications technology and more every-five-years rootlessness. Nativity is culturally significant: Americans who are native to a certain place often see things very differently than their newly arrived neighbors, and that difference often plays out in the public arena. Many land-use controversies in rural areas are better understood as dynamics between natives and transplants, rather than as struggles of class, race, or gender. A public hearing on timber policy in Oregon or a predator-control initiative outside Yellowstone National Park, for example, is likely to break down along native/transplant lines, the former usually supporting timbering, mining, or ranching activity, the latter siding with environmental health and ecological values. Likewise, urban controversies in places like San Francisco or New Orleans often pit natives, who tend to favor pragmatic economic development and job creation (reasons for them to stay here), against transplants who are likely to prioritize for abstractions such as historicity, sustainability, and urban livability (the very reasons why they moved here).

Exceptions and complicating variables abound with regard to these generalizations, but they do not negate the importance of place in group identity. Yet scholarly research on this dynamic between natives and transplants is hard to find. A literature review proves to be a frustration in semantics: key terms such as “native,” “nativity,” “local,” and “place rootedness” can be pegged against “transplant,” “transplantedness,” “newcomer,” and “mobility,” but none roll off the tongue. None grab the essence, and all suffer from multiple meanings. Most scholarly articles on “nativity” use the term in reference to national birthplace vis-à-vis immigration, rather than the state-, region-, or city-level nativity I am focusing on here. The word “native,” of course, also yields litera-

ture on indigenous peoples—yet another dimension to the dynamic. Other searches call forth investigations in the area of regional identity, which comes the closest to the angle discussed here. Sociologist John Shelton Reed, for example, has explored concepts of “regional sociology” throughout his body of work on the South and Southerners, whom he terms a “quasi-ethnic” regional group.⁴⁹⁴ A fair amount of literature exists on the nativity-based notion of Creolism, possibly the best historical documentation of the phenomenon.

Why researchers have not appreciated the significance of nativity in modern America may derive from its low profile: it is often overshadowed by the more conspicuous social segmentations of race, gender, class, and ancestry, which have become the prevailing coin of the academic realm in recent decades. Native/transplant tensions sometimes play out against a backdrop of gentrification, and are thus categorized—and sometimes mischaracterized—as race and class issues, rather than place-related ones. Nativity-based interpretations of conflicts also do not lend themselves to the sort of progressive social activism practiced by researchers in the advocacy tradition of academia. The struggling response to nativity may also stem from the fact that most scholars themselves lead the mobile lives of transplants, and overlook place-rootedness as a legitimate source of perspective-difference simply because it is not their personal life story.

While the native/transplant dynamic appears to be little-studied, the act of residential relocation preceding it—the mobility rate—is carefully measured by demographers and tracked by economists. Nearly fifty million Americans—one in six—move to new residences every year, and of those, over eight million cross state borders. Attracting the interstate movers are Nevada, Alaska, Wyoming, Idaho, Arizona, Oregon and other states in the booming West and South; supplying them are California, Ohio, New York, and other places primarily in the northern and eastern United States. Mobility rates correlate to age: twenty-somethings made up 14 percent of the total population in 2006 but accounted for 57 percent of movers; those over age fifty comprised 27 percent of Americans but only 14 percent of movers.⁴⁹⁵ Unlike nativity, American mobility is a favorite topic of social scientists and writers. James M. Jasper explored it in his 2000 publication, *Restless Nation: Starting Over in America*, as did David Popenoe in *Private Pleasure, Public Plight* (2001). Robert Putnam touched upon it in his influential bestseller, *Bowling Alone* (2000). Contrary to popular belief, mobility rates have been fairly stable for decades and have even declined by some measures, leading some to debunk the old “America’s-increasingly-mobile-society” cliché as a myth.⁴⁹⁶ Despite the ups and downs of the mobility rate, however, the nation’s nativity rate is unquestionably diminishing. Mobility is episodic: Americans move at greater or lesser rates depending on demographics, economics, and other factors. Nativity, on the other hand, is binary. You only have to move once to lose forever your status as a native by birth. Thus, even if mobility rates decline, the ranks of transplants grow, and the number of deeply rooted natives shrinks.

Nativity occurs along temporal and spatial continuums. Given enough time, transplants matriculate into the ranks of natives; exactly how much time depends on various factors. Someone who moved to Alaska in the 1970s might convincingly claim

native status as he sneers at a transplant who arrived in the 2000s, so rapidly is that state attracting newcomers. A third-generation resident of Portland, Oregon may boast a stronger claim to nativity in that young West Coast boomtown than a third-generation Charlestonian, who may defer to one who goes back six or seven generations in that old Southern port. A resident of the suburbs of Westwego or Kenner might proudly claim nativity to New Orleans, only to be dismissed by another who hails from New Orleans proper. New Orleansians whose ancestors arrived in the 1800s often joke about their rejection from certain social circles by the descendants of those who arrived in the 1700s. American Indians proudly hold their superlative nativity status as an argumentative trump card, stuffing a sock in the mouths of nativity-claiming whites who, of course, arrived millennia later. Nativity is a complex, fluid phenomenon; like Creolism, people adjust their claim to it depending on the audience, context, time, and place. Even quantitative measurement is a challenge: U.S. Census nativity data aggregated at the block-group level (the highest spatial detail publicly available) reflect only the birth state (or birth nation for immigrants), which means that researchers cannot quantify nativity at the city or town level where much of this dynamic plays out.

Nativity in America serves as a reliable source of self-pride, as evidenced by the popularity of T-shirts and bumper stickers reading “CALIFORNIA NATIVE,” “FLORIDA NATIVE,” “WYOMING NATIVE: ENDANGERED SPECIES” etc. This is a bit paradoxical, since *non*-nativity, in a larger sense, is a legacy shared by most Americans. A willingness to risk everything and leap into the geographical unknown to find a better life might be the closest thing Americans have to a unifying ethos, or possibly even a gene. One might expect Americans to be proud of mobility. Yet we glance down warily when we admit we “just moved to the area” (have you ever seen a “FLORIDA TRANSPLANT” bumper sticker?) and puff with pride when we announce we’re “born and raised here, five generations.” Perhaps pride in nativity varies directly with perceptions of transplant threat. For all the native pride in Louisiana, rarely does one see a “LOUISIANA NATIVE” bumper sticker—perhaps because, with the nation’s highest nativity rate (19.4 percent), native-born Louisianians do not truly feel threatened by transplants.⁴⁸

People may explain only part of the urge to declare nativity. Perceptions of cultural threat or feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis a wealthier, better-educated, more cosmopolitan transplant “invasion” may also be at play. (*Forbes Magazine*’s recent list of America’s twenty-five “smartest cities” was entirely dominated by communities with high transplant and low nativity rates.⁴⁹) This is where nativity gets complicated, as it often travels hand-in-hand with class and education differences. To whom are native-pride messages directed? Is the driver of a vehicle with a GEORGIA NATIVE bumper sticker scorning all those recently arrived Hispanic immigrants filling bottom-rung jobs in the construction and service economy? (Indeed, many academics, predisposed to standard conflict narratives, might view anti-Hispanic racism as the driver’s motives.) Or is the bumper sticker really directed at all those brash, worldly, well-heeled young professionals who moved recently to “his” state—people who may look like him, but who don’t speak his accent, don’t eat his foods, don’t worship, vote, or recreate his way, and don’t seem to have anything to say to him the few times they interact?

Transplants' views of natives are equally complex, indeed paradoxical. At an abstract level, transplants often embrace the native population endearingly, if not patronizingly, as "colorful" or "authentic" elements of their adopted towns and cities. But on an individual level, transplants often disdain locals as uneducated, coarse, lower-class neighbors with dubious values, and socialize with them only passingly.

This tension has its own lexicon. Natives use anti-transplant code words and phrases such as "city slicker," "Easterners," "Northerners," "Carpetbaggers," "Yankees" or variations of "these folks who move in from" In disagreements, natives pointedly remind transplants "look, you're not from here," or suggest "if you don't like it, go back to . . ." Transplants respond with, "hey, you don't own this place" or "this is a free country." They betray anti-native sentiments when they affect exaggerated local accents, poke fun at local customs, or say things like "good ol' boys," "local yokels," "rednecks," "hillbillies," "crackers," or "they've been here since the beginning of time."

The dynamic also limns a certain geography. It is strongest in cities and towns with (1) robust, expanding economies, particularly in the white-collar professions and information technologies, and/or (2) high scenic, recreational, historical, cultural, climatological, or quality-of-life attributes. These two factors—economic opportunity and an appealing environment—drive much non-immigrant transplanted.⁴⁹⁹ Some places score high on both accounts and attract transplants in droves: Seattle, Portland, Austin, the Colorado Rocky Mountain Front, and Las Vegas (80 percent non-native, the highest in the nation) are the best examples, followed by cities like San Francisco and New York.⁵⁰⁰ Other places offer a sound economy and a reasonably attractive climate and atmosphere, and draw outsiders to lesser but still substantial degrees: Atlanta, Asheville, and Nashville, for example. Still others provide the sound economy but less so the atmosphere (Minneapolis comes to mind), or plenty of atmosphere amid a lousy economy (New Orleans), and thus draw transplants to varying levels of significance. Places like Washington D.C., Virginia Beach, and San Diego exhibit very high transplant rates because government jobs or military service compel outsiders to move there.

Certain "boutique communities" offer such highly desirable scenic, historic, or cultural attributes that transplantation transforms their societies utterly. Sante Fe, Key West, and Jackson, Wyoming are among the premier examples. Picturesque college towns in New England, the Appalachians, the Rockies, or the West Coast are also native-transplant hot-spots, though here the dynamic (sometimes referred to as "town gown" antagonisms) is complicated by differing class and education levels: less-educated, working-class natives versus better-educated, upper-middle-class transplants affiliated with the university. Boulder's University of Colorado, Ithaca's Cornell University, and New Haven's Yale University are three of hundreds of examples.

If current trends continue, the native/transplant dynamic will likely augment in the twenty-first century, as more and more Americans pull up roots from the places of their ancestors. But eventually it seems destined to decline, as the notion of multi-generational place-rootedness gives way to periodic place-hopping, and local culture becomes interchangeable with national culture.

We would be a lesser nation for it.



The Lexicon of Place

Deconstructing New Orleans' names, nicknames, and slogans

Nicknames tend to get ascribed to that which deviates from the norm. This is usually true for people; it's certainly true for places. Archetypal American suburbs like Scottsdale, Arizona or Longmont, Colorado, earn no widely recognized nicknames, neither as terms of endearment nor disdain. Some communities, sensitive about their own banality, nickname themselves in the hope of instilling an identity and convincing visitors that one exists. Rarely do such consciously promoted monikers stick. Even locals don't buy that Slidell, Louisiana is "The Camellia City" or Wave land, Mississippi "The Hospitality City."

Mention "The Big Apple," "Beantown," "City of Brotherly Love," or "City of Light," however, and their respective urban associations are universally understood. The sobriquets do wonders in imparting a sense of appealing distinction to those places, not to mention a desire to visit. That New Orleans bears arguably the most nicknames and slogans of any American city, ranging from the elegant ("Crescent City," "Queen City of the South," "Creole City") and the disapproving ("Great Southern Babylon," "Sodom and Gomorrah," "The Wet Grave"⁵⁰¹) to the self-promoting ("America's Most Interesting City," "Gateway to the Americas," "Birthplace of Jazz") and the blithe ("City that Care Forgot," "Big Easy")—can thus be interpreted as an effect, perhaps also a cause, of the city's widely perceived deviation from the national norm.⁵⁰² New Orleans' veritable glossary of lasting monikers seems to imply that *something different happened here*.

Nicknames are significant. If geography may be understood as that which inscribes *character to place*, then city nicknames operate as accessible, widely circulating "buzzwords" that drive, for better or worse, the mental imagery and stereotypical characteristics held by millions of people about certain locales. For this reason, nicknames should not be dismissed as trivial; they warrant scholarly investigation because they help form mass perception.

History does not record the various names given to the future New Orleans site prior to colonialism. One amateur historian, writing in 1889, reported that the area was called *Balbancha*, Choctaw for "the place where there is unintelligible talk," referring to the various languages spoken among those who sought refuge here from belligerent tribes to the west.⁵⁰³ That name has also been ascribed to the lower Mississippi River.

Naming of the colonial city came about in more conventional ways. A September 1717 entry in the register of John Law's Company of the West read, "Resolved to establish, thirty leagues up the river, a burg which *should be called* New Orleans, where landing would be possible from either the river or Lake Pontchartrain."⁵⁰⁴ The name

honored Philippe, duc d'Orléans, who, as Regent of France acting on behalf of seven-year-old King Louis XV, sponsored Law's monopoly to develop Louisiana.

French historian Baton Marc de Villiers du Terrage, working off primary documents in 1920, judged that the envisioned settlement first gained its name "not by the [French] Marine Board, nor by the directors of the Company of the West, but by Bienville and L'Épinay, in their report of May, 1717, on the new posts to be established." The savvy Bienville, understanding that toponyms drive perceptions and were therefore consequential, had previously suggested renaming other outposts already burdened with dubious names. The indecisive-sounding "Mobile," for example, should become "Fort Immobilie," while the nearby barrier island originally branded awfully as "Massacre" (for the human bones found there in 1699), might do better as "Dauphine Island. Bienville also appreciated how the "very exotic" names of "Biloxi" and "Natchitoches" struck Paris on ears. One record from July 1717 shows that the name "Orléans" nearly went to "Massacre Island. In the end, the name "New Orleans" seems to have made it from the Bienville-L'Épinay letter of May 1717 to the company register of September 1717, after which it quickly became known both in Paris and Louisiana.⁵⁰⁵

New Orleans thus gained its name in the time-honored manner conduced by countless institutions: as an attempt to flatter a patron. That the name somehow earned a feminine grammatical gender, contrary to the French custom of listing cities as masculine, has provided fodder for generations of metaphorically inclined literary types. Write Father Charlevoix in 1722, "Those who have given [the city] this name, must have imagined Orleans was of the feminine gender. But of what consequence is this? Custom, which is superior to all the laws of grammar, has fixed it so."⁵⁰⁶ According to Marc de Villiers du Terrage, "the reason for the feminising of New Orleans was probably euphonic. *Nouveau-Orléans* would have been too offensive to the ear. It is true that *Nouvel-Orléans* might have passed. Perhaps *Nouvelle-Orléans* was adopted by analogy with *Nouvelle-France*, *Nouvelle-York*, etc."⁵⁰⁷

Had the city been relocated to the Bayou Manchac distributary, as was proposed a number of times, that locale probably would have been christened under the same name. Or had it been transferred to pre-existing settlements at Mobile, Biloxi, or Natchez, the syllables "Nouvelle Orléans" might have disappeared from the French colonial Gulf Coast.

It succeeded, of course, despite myriad challenges and regime changes. "Nouvelle Orléans" was hispanicized to "Nueva Orleans" when the colony transferred from France to Spain in the 1760s, although the translated name predominated more in official documents and maps than in the spoken word of the still mostly Francophone population. (The new name's gender, unlike that of the French version, aligned with the Spanish linguistic tradition of characterizing cities as feminine.)

"Nueva Orleans" was officially anglicized to the gender-neutral "New Orleans" when the American flag arose on December 20, 1803; colloquially, however, both the French and English versions circulated in the early nineteenth century, reflecting the city's era of cultural transition. As the city Americanized and English became its *lingua franca*, the English version "New Orleans" became inextricably intertwined with this particular crescent of the Mississippi.

While there is only one “New Orleans,” the toponym “Orleans” was later adopted by at least ten towns, townships, or counties across the United States. They occur mostly in states touched at least tangentially by the French in America, such as Vermont, New York, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa. Another 220 minor cartographic features also bear the name. Worldwide, “Orleans” occurs as a civil toponym about twenty-five times, again in a spatial pattern reflecting France’s influence: nine times in the mother country, five times in Algeria, twice in the West Indies, and most others in former French America.⁵⁰⁸

Nicknames for New Orleans began to be coined once this remote and exotic city began to be enveloped into the American fold. Most of the earlier ones called attention to its reputation for frivolity, filthiness, and—that salacious nineteenth-century word—*wickedness*. Disapproving slogans reflecting these sentiments, including “the Great Southern Babylon,” “Necropolis of the South,” and particularly “Sodom and Gomorrah,” appear regularly in literature of the times. An 1812 *New-York Gazette* piece saw New Orleans’ recent bouts with hurricanes and fires as products of its reputation as “a second Sodom... exhibiting, particularly on the Sabbath, scenes of the most licentious wickedness.”⁵⁰⁹ An 1815 Boston article reported on the characterization of the Louisiana Purchase as “a wicked waste of the people’s money” and New Orleans “as a place that has disgraced America by its worthlessness and vice... very little better than old Sodom and Gomorrah.”⁵¹⁰ A 1819 article in the *Boston Recorder*, which reported New Orleanians celebrating the Fourth of July, even when it occurred on a Sunday, editorialized that “New Orleans has been long represented as the Sodom of our country [where] the institutions of religion are not regarded either by the civil or military authorities...”⁵¹¹ A missionary minister visiting in 1821 reminded his readers that “New Orleans is of course exposed to greater varieties of human misery, vice, disease, and want, than any other American town... Much has been said about [its] profligacy of manners... moral... debauchery, and low vice... [T]his place has more than once been called the modern Sodom.”⁵¹² An anonymous booklet authored “by a resident” in 1850 catalogued the city’s crimes in extensive sub-chapters entitled “Illegitimate Families,” “Concubinage,” “Kept Mistresses,” “Extent of Licentiousness,” “Regular Prostitutes,” “Prostitution of Wives,” “Amalgamation,” “A Man Selling His Own Children,” “Slave Girls Hired As Bed Companions,” “Disregard of the Sabbath,” “Bulldozing,” “Drinking Houses,” “Vagrants,” “Women Whipping on the Plantations,” “Chain-Gangs of Women,” and “Depravity of Slaveholders,” among others. He held back when he characterized New Orleans as “this Babel of all Babels, this Sodom of a Sodom...this modern Golgotha”⁵¹³

As the city’s stature and prosperity rose, so did the implications of its nicknames. Joseph Holt Ingraham, a Northerner born in 1809 who visited the Old Southwest around 1833 and wrote a travelogue in 1835, claimed to have coined the nickname that would become the city’s premier for over a century to come. “I have termed New-Orleans the crescent city... one of my letters,” wrote Ingraham, “from its being built around the segment of a circle formed by a graceful curve of the river at this place.”⁵¹⁴ He certainly was not the first to associate the region’s graceful river meanders with the word “crescent.” Bienville himself used the French equivalent of that word repeatedly

during the foundation era—“one of the finest crescents of the river...,” “the very fine crescent of the port of New Orleans...,” etc.—prompting French historian Baron Marc de Villiers du Terrage to comment in 1920,

This expression, found in a memoir drawn up in 1725 or thereabouts, shows that the crescent, which was later to give New Orleans her nickname, had been observed almost from the start.⁵¹⁵

The word occurs in other early sources. In his 1758 account of Louisiana, Le Page du Pratz described the hairpin meander of English Turn as forming “the figure of a crescent, almost closed.”⁵¹⁶ An 1818 Gettysburg newspaper quoted a Kentuckian saying that New Orleans “is built in the shape of a crescent, the curve of the river constituting a safe and commodious harbor,”⁵¹⁷ and ten years later, a Georgia newspaper described the bend as a “vast crescent” connecting “loops, schooners, and brigs” crowding at one end with ocean-going vessels and steamboats at the other.⁵¹⁸

But such descriptions fall short of nicknames. We do know that by 1839, four years after Ingraham’s book, a “Crescent City” shipping line was in operation, and by 1840, a local newspaper named *The Crescent City* circulated. The next year, *The Weekly Crescent City* hit the streets.⁵¹⁹ In 1842, Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro used “Crescent City” three times in his book *Random Shots and Southern Breezes*; two uses appeared in quotations, suggesting that the term was new and conscientiously borrowed, heard enough to be invoked without explanation but not enough to be invoked inconspicuously.⁵²⁰ A review of Tasistro’s book appearing in *The United States Democratic Review* that same year made passing reference to “the ‘Crescent City,’ as New-Orleans has been called,” again implying recent coinage.⁵²¹

Dignified and mellifluous, “Crescent City” stuck. In 1846–47, another Northern visitor (and future mayor of New York City), Abraham Oakey Hall, wrote sketches about his destination and published them in 1851 under the title *The Manhattan in New Orleans; or Phases of “Crescent City” Life*. Scottish geologist Charles Lyell, who visited on Mardi Gras 1846, also repeated the term in his 1849 travelogue.⁵²² So prevalent had the appellation become by the 1850s that some visitors conscientiously reflected upon it. French geographer Elisée Réclus, who visited what he termed “the metropolis of the South” in 1853, found its nickname “poetic” and suggested updating it to “the Double Crescent City,” because the recent annexation of Lafayette gave New Orleans “two graceful curves.”⁵²³ An observer scanning the cityscape from the roof of the Custom House in 1858 wrote,

Beyond rolls the river, sweeping round in the curve which has given [New Orleans] its name, ‘twin sister’ to the Crescent Moon.⁵²⁴

Such publications, which hit the streets during New Orleans’ heyday as one of the most important cities in the nation, helped instill “Crescent City” as the universally accepted nickname for the ascendant metropolis. A number of businesses, associations, vessels, and rail lines reinforced popular usage by incorporating the term into their names.

Digital database searches lend further support to Ingraham's coinage claim. A search on "Crescent City" in Cornell University's "Making of America" online database, which accesses over 110,000 volumes of books and periodicals published between 1815 and 1926, yielded not a single occurrence prior to 1840, but one in 1842, twenty-four during 1843–50, and fifty-one during 1850–55, by which time the moniker was entrenched.⁵²⁵ Queries of the *Archive of American Literature* database, which stores millions of newspaper articles dating from 1690 through 1922, show that "Crescent City" occurred not once before 1835, but 18,314 times afterwards (starting in 1839–40), in contexts almost always relating to New Orleans.⁵²⁶ Likewise, the commercial database *newspaperarchive.com*, which digitized 73 million pages from 239 years' worth of newspapers from 753 cities, yielded zero hits for the key words "New Orleans" and "Crescent City" from 1759 to 1835, but 9,446 from 1836 to 2007. A number of other historical databases produced no pre-1835 use of "Crescent City."

Also corroborating Ingraham's claim is his literary reputation for coining terms and embracing colloquialisms. Scholars of American English have identified his *The South-West by a Yankee* as the first documented source of a number of Americanisms, including "fernuda grass," "Havana cigar," "flower-pot plant," and "sporting gentleman."⁵²⁷ Their research, however, makes no mention of what may be his most significant linguistic contribution. Ingraham later settled in Natchez, Mississippi, becoming locally prominent as a lawyer, author, teacher, and legislator. He died in 1860.

"Queen City of the South," or "Queen of the South" (note again the feminine gender) is a bit more fluid—and contested—than Ingraham's term. Lacking the alliterative brevity of "Crescent City," the phrase operates more along the lines of a slogan than a nickname, and might have been used more often to describe New Orleans retrospectively, after its prestigious era had begun to wane. An 1847 *Scientific American* article saluted Cincinnati as the "Queen City of the West" but bestowed no equivalent Southern title upon New Orleans, despite its mention on the same page. Two 1850 occurrences of "Queen City of the South" crowned Charleston with that honor, and Atlanta as "destined to become" that noble metropolis. *Harper's Magazine* in 1858 dubbed St. Louis as the "Queen City of the Mississippi Valley," but again failed to honor New Orleans when it was cited later on the same page.⁵²⁸ An 1883 article in *Harper's Magazine* further validated Cincinnati's claim to the nickname:

Cincinnati is rich in *sobriquets*. That of the "Queen City" is so widely known as to be a synonym [for] Cincinnati [that] would be understood from Maine to California.

The article goes on to say that "the sobriquet for Cincinnati now most in vogue is that of 'the Paris of America'—a claim that might appall a New Orleanian."⁵²⁹

A *Harper's Weekly* article published as Union troops seized the city in May 1862 reminded its readers that "New Orleans, as every one knows, is the queen city of the South... The city is built around a bend in the river, from which circumstances it bears the sobriquet of 'The Crescent City.'⁵³⁰ A later national article published in 1885, recounting the 1862 events, ascribed the *Queen City* title retrospectively—and with a

dash of cynical irony—to the city:

The Chalmette batteries [prepared] to meet our fleet.... Farragut made short work of them, however, and our fleet, meeting with no further resistance, passed on and anchored before New Orleans. The Queen City of the South lay at the conqueror's feet, unable to do anything in the way of defence....⁵³¹

Of all the city's slogans (distinguished here from nicknames), the one that circulates most frequently today is "The City That Care Forgot." At once world weary and liberating, the enigmatic phrase is curiously, perhaps intentionally, ambiguous, depending on whether one interprets "care" to mean kindness or worry. It seems to have entered the literary lexicon at latest by the early twentieth century, though its exact origins remain foggy. Historian Robert C. Reinders, author of the 1964 publication *End of an Era: New Orleans, 1850-1860*, stated in a chapter entitled "The Good Times" that "one hundred years ago, as today New Orleans was billed as 'the city care forgot.'"⁵³² It is not clear, however, if Reinders meant to cite the slogan figuratively or literally; his accompanying quotations from the 1850s substantiate the spirit of the phrase but not its precise phraseology. Digital database searches of over a hundred million pages of historical newspapers dating back to the eighteenth century failed to return a single usage until the early twentieth century—no surprise if the term circulated primarily in local slang.

Confirmed early usages start to appear as part of a circa-1912s tourism marketing campaign by the famed St. Charles Hotel. The February 9, 1912 *Daily Picayune* featured a four-column advertisement that read

NEW ORLEANS
 "THE CITY CARE FORGOT"
 The St. Charles
 "The Center of the City" Hotel Life⁵³³

Management of the St. Charles went national with the campaign: a March 1912 *Des Moines Capital*, a January 1913 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and other papers repeatedly ran an advertisement that read,

NEW ORLEANS
 "THE CITY CARE FORGOT"
 QUAIN T HISTORIC
 NEW ORLEANS
 America's Carnival and Convention City
 The St. Charles
 Finest all year Hotel in the South⁵³⁴

The marketers paralleled their campaign with a photo booklet entitled *Souvenir of NEW ORLEANS "The City Care Forgot,"*⁵³⁵ which, by 1917, reached its third

edition. The campaign's liberal use of the slogan seemed to imply that it resonated with familiarity among readers. It went unexplained in the text, lest one construes the pamphlet's generous coverage of Carnival revelry, luxurious accommodations, and leisurely sight-seeing as ample evidence for the city's capacity as a refuge from worldly cares.

Another advertisement by the Texas and Pacific Railroad in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (1915) echoed similar tones of exoticism and escapism posed to lure travelers: "Occasion Extraordinary—New Orleans—"The City Care Forgot"—Spend Three Glorious Days in New Orleans."⁵³⁶ Similar usages appeared in other American newspapers in the 1910s-20s; the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, for example, ran the circa-1913 St. Charles ads repeatedly in 1922. Also that year, a major *New York Herald*-copyrighted article on "a atmosphere seeker" tourism in New Orleans appeared under the headline "Life Throbs Anew in *viuix Carre* of City Care Forgot."⁵³⁷

A 1926 promotional publication by the New Orleans Federation of Clubs, entitled *New Orleans: Key to America's Most Interesting City*, offered an insignificant perspective of the slogan and its implications. "New Orleans," it explained,

is lovingly referred to throughout the length and breadth of the United States as "The city that care forgot" and it is this implanted idea in the minds of Americans that still gives it a flavor of present-day romance and results in such a tremendous influx of visitors [each] winter.

If "The City That Care Forgot" garnered such widespread association with New Orleans in the mid-1920s, then the slogan's roots might indeed grow deeper than the previous decade. As for its implications, the Federation quickly assured potential investors that, in fact,

New Orleans is not entirely a "City that care forgot" for it is one of the most up-to-date and modern American cities, home to an ever growing and expanding business spirit and center of finance....⁵³⁸

The tone of the aforementioned document, and the pointed disassociation from the implications of a leisurely care-free city, reflect a formal decision in 1922 by the Association of Commerce's Conventions and Tourism Bureau to promote New Orleans as "America's Most Interesting City." Wrote historian Anthony J. Stononis in his recent treatise on tourism,

through the distribution of one hundred thousand stickers bearing the phrase ["New Orleans—America's Most Interesting City"], to be used on packages mailed [worldwide], local businesses hoped to relegate to the scrap heap the familiar descriptions of New Orleans as the "City That Care Forgot" and the "Paris of America." These old slogans needed correction if not erasure from the public mind...making life in New Orleans seem little more than "a series of parades and Bacchanalian debaucheries."⁵³⁹

In fact, both slogans were used to promote commerce in this era. Those in finance and industry preferred the former; those in tourism liked both.

The above examples show that "The City That Care Forgot" first circulated

broadly in the 1910s and 1920s to attract visitors by depicting New Orleans positively as a quaint and charming refuge from worries. It did not come about in a rueful attempt to impugn New Orleans as a rough and unforgiving port city, though it could be construed that way. (Activists imploring improvement of the city's social conditions often-times rewrote the phrase to read "The City that Forgot to Care.") Whether the original slogan was coined for those escapist purposes is difficult to ascertain; indeed, it may never have been specifically coined at all, but rather extracted loosely from variations circulating in late nineteenth-century parlance, as suggested by the historian Reiniers. One possible precursor appeared as a subtitle to a nostalgic 1890 article on "The Old Crescent City," which read, "Where Time Fleets Carelessly."⁵⁴⁰

The slogan reached larger audiences when it appeared in the influential Federal Writers' Project *New Orleans City Guide* (1938) and in Edward Laroque Tinker's *Creole City: Its Past and Its People*. Those widely read sources helped instill the phrase in the literary lexicon, although its length and awkwardness precluded it from emerging as a truly ubiquitous nickname.

Not so "Big Easy." Succinct, languid, and slightly provocative, that term seems to have emerged from the music and nightclub scene of the early 1900s. Jazzman Pops Foster, born on a plantation in 1892, recalled performing around 1908 "over in Gretna [a]t the Big Easy Hall and the Drag Nasty Hall (it's still in Gretna)," in an interview recorded in 1967.⁵⁴¹ Other secondary sources claim the legendary joint was located in Storyville or somewhere up town; neither of Foster's halls appear in the Gretna listings of *Young and Co. Business Directory for 1908-1909*, suggesting that their monikers were nicknames or that the venues operated off-the-books. When Pops Foster died in 1969, a newspaper story with a San Francisco dateline reported that

About 300 came to church to see him off, New Orleans style, [as] Turk Murphy's band played the same tunes Pops slapped out years ago in places like Funkeybullet's Hall, Henry Metzingo's and the Big Easy.⁵⁴²

"The Big Easy" apparently circulated sufficiently in the vernacular speech of certain socio-economic circles, historically and contemporarily, to inspire *Times-Picayune* reporter James Conaway to adopt it as the title of his 1970 novel about police corruption in New Orleans. That book brought the term to wider attention. Some of the first nationwide appearances of "Big Easy" as a nickname for New Orleans arose subsequent to Conaway's publication. One occurred in an insightful 1972 Associated Press article by Sid Moody entitled " Mardi Gras in New Orleans: Is It Worth It?," subtitled "Fat Tuesday in the Big Easy." The journalist described the

constant nightroar of the kids of Bourbon St., pierced by rattle bells in the city they call "The Big Easy," swilling Boone's Farm, grabbing flesh, [and] rapping with cops....⁵⁴³

Note that Moody felt a need to introduce the nickname to his readers, implying limited usage or recent coinage.

Around the same time, "The Big Easy" appeared repeatedly in the gossip col-

umns of local journalist Betty Guillaud, who, according to a colleague, “used it in her *States-Item* column [in the early 1970s] to contrast life in New Orleans with the rat race of the Big Apple.”⁵⁴⁴ Guillaud’s later *Times-Picayune* gossip column, “Big Easy Does It,” further reinforced the nickname. Said Guillaud years later, “[p]eople have credited me with inventing it and I’ve asked me to use it for lots of things.... Sandy Cash wrote a song by that title and there was a TV series [in 1982] which didn’t fly. Someone even wanted to use it for a restaurant.”⁵⁴⁵ According to columnist Chris Rose, Guillaud, “more than anyone else, gave the city’s nickname cache and relevance and made it stick.”⁵⁴⁶

Hollywood might have played a bigger role in entrenching the nickname. When a movie about police corruption was changed from a Chicago setting to New Orleans, its star actor Dennis Quaid suggested entitling it “The Big Easy.”⁵⁴⁷ The movie’s 1987 release and subsequent popularity helped stoke the local tourism industry by delivering 108 minutes of nonstop clichés and stereotypes—exaggerated accents, wacky ceremonies, loose morals, official corruption, and incessant obsessions with food and festivals—all set to Cajun music and packaged under the title *The Big Easy*. What a travelogue had accomplished for “Crescent City” in the 1920s, a Hollywood production did for “The Big Easy” in the 1980s. In the two years prior to the film’s release, major American newspapers used the term “Big Easy” in their articles only once, while “Crescent City” appeared forty-one times. After the movie came out, “Crescent City” continued its same pace (forty-three occurrences during 1987-88), whereas “Big Easy” surged to 109 times. During the year following Hurricane Katrina when journalists filed thousands of articles about New Orleans, “Crescent City” appeared 672 times in the headlines and lead paragraphs of major American newspaper articles, while “Big Easy” occurred 898 times.⁵⁴⁸

The success of “The Big Easy” is not a mystery. It plays off New York City’s “Big Apple,” the tag resonated with familiarity and ease of recollection. Its economy of words and syllables rendered it friendly to headline writers, travel writers, and glib television personalities. Its odd yoking of two adjectives conveyed a swaggering, nonchalant roguishness that seemed to satisfy popular expectations about the city’s care-free attitude—the same expectations, incidentally, that “The City that Care Forgot” helped instill. “Big Easy,” in short, was not only convenient and cool, but also rang true to outside ears. That the nickname’s popularity rose precisely as tourism replaced petroleum and shipping as the city’s premier economic sector was no coincidence: a marketer could not have invented a better term to convince visitors to partake of the city’s opportunities for escapism. The suggestive nickname worked almost too well: at one point, the city’s tourism promoters—like their predecessors in 1922 vis-à-vis “The City that Care Forgot”—backed away from “The Big Easy,” according to one historian, “out of fear that it detracted from their growing efforts to appeal to tourist families.”⁵⁴⁹

The shift from the elegant “Crescent City” to the raffish “Big Easy” may symbolize, to some, New Orleans’s transformation from an affluent, ascending metropolis with a genuine *raison d’être* to a poor and descending one married to a phony tourism construct. This interpretation is complicated, at the very least, by the fact that New Orleans was quite troubled even during its so-called “golden age,” as reflected by certain decidedly unflattering historical nicknames.

"Crescent City," "Queen of the South," "Sodom and Gomorrah," "City that Care Forgot," "America's Most Interesting City," "The Big Easy:" What can we learn about New Orleans through its lexicon of names, nicknames, and slogans? Some early ones reflect outsiders' sense of disapproval of that which offended their presumed cultural norms: New Orleans as the alien, the condemned, the threatening "other." Others arose from an embracing appreciation of geographical and cultural beauty and distinction: New Orleans is colorful, curious, romantic, unique. Still others were conscientiously coined by vested interests (oftentimes by exploiting reputations and images imported by earlier nicknames) and promulgated for economic aims, namely tourism and shipping: New Orleans as product, service, experience. The nicknames reveal a wide range of images, judgments, and agendas imposed both externally and internally, oftentimes contested, and implying either compliment or critique.

At one point almost all can agree: this lexicon of place both reflects and drives popular perceptions that, compared to other American cities, *something different happened here*.



Wards, Faubourgs, and the Perception of Place

How New Orleansians delineate, label, and argue about their urban space

New Orleansians perceive, delineate, and label their urban spaces in myriad ways. Some use faubourgs, municipalities, districts, and wards; others refer to church parishes and school districts; still others spatialize the city by ethnic groups; by neighborhood age and atmosphere; by economic class and public safety ("good" and "bad" areas); by nodes, nuclei, and landmarks; and vis-à-vis Canal Street, the lake, or the river. The spatial perceptions vary, complexly over time and within sub-segments of the population. While some geographic aficionados insist that neighborhoods are named absolutely and delineated officially, like matters of law or physics, such perceptions of place are more appropriately viewed as the human constructs they are, wonderfully individualized and wholly subject to interpretation. Therein lies their significance.

The subjectivity begins with the city's first neighborhood. "French Quarter," "the Quarter," "old city," "original city," Vieux Carré (Old Square), and Vieux Carré de la Ville usually describe those blocks bounded by present-day Iberville Street, North Rampart Street, Esplanade Avenue, and the Mississippi River. In informal contexts, they also include the "100 blocks" between Iberville and Canal, although this strip did not fall within the original city and remains today beyond the jurisdiction of the Vieux Carré Commission. Portions of blocks along North Rampart and Esplanade also spanned beyond the original plat but are now officially "in" the French Quarter. In historical records, the

French Quarter comprised part of the First Municipality when the city experimented with semi-autonomous municipalities in 1836. After reunification in 1852, the French Quarter became part of the new Second Municipal District, which was in turn sliced into the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth wards, all of which remain in use today. Some locals shrug off this arcane bureaucratic limits and refer generically to all quaint, historic neighborhoods below Canal Street as “the French Quarters”—plural—or simply as “the quarter.”

Faubourg or *faubourg* (literally “false town”) is the French term for an outer suburb. Sometimes used synonymously with the term *banlieue* (“outskirts” or “suburbs”), it described the subdivisions laid out within old plantations beyond the limits of the original city, starting in 1788. Both terms faded as French disappeared from local speech in the late 1800s and early 1900s, but *faubourg* was revived in the 1970s through the efforts of preservationists, neighborhood organizations, and real estate agents. The first neighborhood to re-embrace the term was the Faubourg Marigny, which in my view is the quintessential New Orleans faubourg. The term is now commonly used as a synonym for “historic neighborhood” throughout New Orleans, encompassing (by definition) the French Quarter. Popular with culturally aware history buffs (many of them transplants), the term *faubourg* is ironically uncommon among deep-rooted locals (particularly native-born elders) who came of age when the term was defunct.

Faubourg Ste. Marie. “Faubourg St. Mary,” “St. Mary,” “Second Municipality,” “American Sector,” “American Quarter,” “Central Business District,” and “CBD” all refer to the area loosely bordered by present-day Canal Street (or Iberville Street), Claiborne or Loyola avenues, Howard Avenue or the Pontchartrain Expressway, and the Mississippi River. In certain historical contexts, the “Canal Street Corridor” (between Iberville and Common) is considered separate, because this swath remained a dusty commons for twenty years after the faubourg’s 1788 platting. *Faubourg Ste. Marie* is generally used for discussions recounting the late 1700s and early 1800s, while Faubourg St. Mary, St. Mary, and the American Sector usually connote nineteenth-century contexts. “Second Municipality” applies exclusively to the municipality era of 1852–52, while “Central Business District” and “CBD” refer to the area in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Today, the CBD falls within the First Municipal District and mostly the Third Ward. One real estate investor is currently spearheading an effort to designate officially and market the CBD as “The American Sector,” playing on the world-famous cliché of the French Quarter.

Everyone has a particular idea of where “downtown” becomes “uptown” in New Orleans (and, relatedly, whether the words should be capitalized as proper nouns or lower-cased as general urban regions). Many people today divide the two places-of-mind along the Pontchartrain Expressway, which roughly separates the harder, congested streets of the commercial sector from softer, leafier residential environs. Others refer exclusively to the Garden District or the University area as “uptown” and the French Quarter and Central Business District as “downtown.” Years ago, Canal Street would have been seen as the demarcation—a notion still held by many New Orleanians, despite the fact the most local usage of “downtown” and “uptown” implies otherwise. Understanding the two distinctive yet nebulous regions is enabled by embracing

their various and adamantly defended definitions, rather than by dogmatically attempting to reject all but one.⁵⁵⁰

The term “Garden District” (in use at least since the 1850s) connotes the wealthy historic neighborhood bounded generally by Magazine Street and Jackson, Louisiana, and St. Charles avenues, historically the inland portion of the former Jefferson Parish (city of Lafayette). Here, wealthy families of predominantly Anglo-American stock built spacious mansions (1830s–50s) set back from the streets and surrounded by greenery, a very different urban environment compared to the French Quarter. Exact limits of the Garden District depend on whether one is referencing official city neighborhood delineations, local historic districts, or national historic districts. Even then, many locals and most visitors use “Garden District” to mean all prosperous, isolated uptown historic neighborhoods.

Wards as a political-geographical unit were introduced with the 1805 chartering of the city, replacing a Spanish equivalent from colonial times. Serving as voting districts, demographic units for censuses, and other municipal purposes, wards were delineated and redrawn four times over the next forty-seven years. After the city's unsuccessful sixteen-year experiment with semi-autonomous municipalities, the reunified city government (1852) redrew ward lines for a fifth time. Because Felicite Street had for many years, marked the Jefferson/Orleans parish line, the new wards were enumerated starting from Felicite (First Ward) and continuing consecutively downriver to the Orleans/St. Bernard parish line near present-day Jackson Barracks (Ninth Ward). Each ward extended perpendicularly from the river, where most people lived, straight back into the uninhabited backswamp. To equalize population sizes within wards, the high-density French Quarter was sliced into the narrowest wards (Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth), while the lower-density upper and lower faubourgs spanned broader swaths. The lowermost outskirts of the city were so depopulated that a single mega-ward—the Ninth—enveloped the entire area. City fathers then “swung around” above Felicite Street and demarcated newly annexed Lafayette's wards Ten and Eleven. The numeration continued upriver as more Jefferson Parish communities merged with New Orleans: Jefferson City became wards Twelve, Thirteen, and Fourteen in 1870, then Algiers on the West Bank was annexed as Ward Fifteen. Upriver expansion concluded when the city annexed Carrollton, which became ward Sixteen and Seventeen. As development spread toward the lake, old ward lines that once projected neatly off the sinuous Mississippi were extended and angled somewhat awkwardly to intersect the smooth west-to-east arc of the lakeshore. The modern-day map of New Orleans wards, unchanged since the 1880s, thus reflects the city's piecemeal growth since 1852.

An additional adjustment in ward geography came in the 1920s, when the newly excavated Industrial Canal severed the Ninth Ward into “upper” and “lower” sections (a reference to the flow direction of the river, not topographic elevation). By the late twentieth century, the riverside sections of the upper and lower Ninth wards became respectively known by the more appealing monikers of Bywater and Holy Cross, while areas behind St. Claude and Claiborne generally remained anonymous. Their higher degree of historical and architectural significance brought Bywater and Holy Cross to the table of urban planners and preservationists, thus subjecting them to

specialized naming and greater attention—more evidence for the significance of place names and nicknames. Real estate agents, who know this well, are universally enamored with mellifluous historical monikers under the theory that more people would rather live in “the Faubourg Bouligny” than in “the Thirteenth Ward.”

Place perceptions and labels inform on nativity, race, and other social dimensions. New Orleans natives with deep local roots often use the ward system in perceiving urban space, probably because it formed the premier space-delineation option prior to the official urban-planning and historic-delineating era that began in the 1970s. Recent transplants, many of who specifically moved to the city for its historical and cultural charms, tend to recognize space vis-à-vis recently revived historical names, like Faubourg St. John, “the Marigny,” and Faubourg Tremé (see *Nativity as Ethnicity in New Orleans*).

Because nativity rates are much higher among black residents than whites, ward names particularly common as a spatial reference in the African-American community. Elderly natives of any race are often unfamiliar with the trendy revived faubourg names, just as many recently arrived transplants and college students are at a loss when asked what ward they live in. Native-born New Orleansians, who tend to be culturally traditional and family-oriented, are more likely to identify landmarks and recognize the city by churches, church parishes, and school districts, a spatial lexicon that does not work for many young, secular, childless transplants. What is “the Seventh Ward” to a native-born black Creole may be “Faubourg New Marigny” or “the Jambalaya neighborhood” to a white transplant; what is the “Upper Ninth Ward” to the working class may be “Bywater” to artists and bohemians. Older members of the black community still speak of the “back-of-town” and “front-of-town,” even though the swamps and marshes that gave meaning to those ancient spatial perceptions (see *Geographies of Nuisance and Risk*) have long been drained away.

Spatial references often reveal subtle (or not-so-subtle) social, racial, and political narratives. Politicians in New Orleans cleverly deploy localized spatial references (to wards, uptown, downtown, or the back-of-town) to confirm their authenticity, establish their “street cred,” or allude to racial dynamics. When Mayor Ray Nagin famously assured black residents that post-Katrina New Orleans will remain a “chocolate” city, he pointedly shrugged off “what people are saying in uptown,” implying that residents of that urban region bore other racial designs.⁵⁵¹ The adjectives “inner-city” and “suburban,” which originally carried geographical meaning, are now widely and openly used as race and class euphemisms—despite the fact that many inner cities are gentrifying while suburbs grow increasingly diverse. Sometimes prejudices are revealed when observers unconsciously describe the same area differently, depending on context. “When something bad happens,” lamented one New Yorker, “[this] neighborhood is called Harlem. When something good happens, it is the Upper West Side.”⁵⁵²

Like city dwellers anywhere, New Orleanians also break down space through landmarks such as favorite restaurants, stores, places of worship, or nightspots. Landmarks often work better than street addresses or intersections in communicating location. Say “4133 South Carrollton Avenue,” or “the intersection of South Carrollton and Ulloa,” and even long-time residents may ponder a while before picturing that particu-

lar locale; say “near the Rocker Bowl” and, for many, the picture clarifies significantly. Such landmarks form a perceptual map which can be shared within one’s social network, but not necessarily beyond it. Someone from New Orleans East with no interest in either music or bowling might prefer a straightforward street address than some unfindable reference to an unfamiliar venue. So central was a health-food store to the identity of the Esplanade Avenue neighborhood that some residents jokingly called the area “Fairbourg Whole Foods,” a reference that might baffle those neighbors who could not afford to shop there.

Gangs a century ago often identified themselves by referencing neighborhood landmarks: the “St. Mary’s Market Gang” and “Shot Tower Gang,” for example, were named for two prominent features in the Irish Channel area. Gangs today usually spatialize their identity by ward (e.g., “10th Ward Posse”), something regularly seen in graffiti and on commemorative T-shirts sold at gangster funerals. Curiously, some gangs based in housing projects adopt ward-based names that do not reflect the actual ward locations of their home turf. Wards often pop up in rap lyrics; one rapper in 2005 dubbed himself “Fifth Ward Weebie.”

Government agencies and advocacy groups eschew nuanced, fuzzy perceptions of place, preferring instead bureaucratic and legal clarity in the sub-regionalization of the city. To this end, they periodically impose rigid boundaries and official monikers upon the cityscape. In 1973-74, the architectural firm Curtis and Davis’s *New Orleans Housing and Neighborhood Preservation Study* identified and delineated sixty-two “official” city neighborhoods (later increased to seventy-three), cartographically depicted as tidy little polygons based on census tracts, natural barriers, transportation arteries, and social and economic patterns. Planners have widely adopted the Curtis and Davis map in the past three decades, yet most New Orleans would be at a loss to identify three-quarters of its “official” neighborhoods.

Another imposed official delineation of place and place in New Orleans is by historic district. The city boasts some of the largest urban National Register Historic Districts in the nation. Inclusion in the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Register of Historic Places is largely a honorary designation; the only material benefits involve certain tax credits and special consideration vis-à-vis federally funded projects. Yet these delineations have proven highly influential, in large part because the Preservation Resource Center, New Orleans’ largest historic-protection advocacy group, embraced them in a widely distributed and very influential map and website. Local historic districts, on the other hand, span far less acreage and are less known by the public, but have more “teeth” in protecting architecturally and historically significant structures. They are overseen by the Historic District Landmarks Commission, with involvement from the City Planning Commission and other groups.

New Orleans’ most distinctive spatial perception involves not place but direction. Rather than the cardinal directions, which only serve to confuse in crescent-shaped New Orleans, *lake side*, *riverside*, *upriver* (or *uptown*), and *downriver* (or *downtown*) are universally used as surrogates for northward, southward, westward, and eastward. Confusing at first, the system works well (except perhaps in the jumbled Bayou St. John/Mid-City area) and makes more sense locally than allusions to distant poles

and stars. Logical as it is, the terminology does not travel well. Residents of urbanized St. Bernard Parish, for example, do not go “downriver” to get to the rural coastal region, but rather “down the road.” Likewise, fishermen in places like Yscloskey and Shell Beach go “up the road” to shop or do business in Meraux or Chalmette.⁵⁵³

The Hurricane Katrina catastrophe turned worldwide observers into new speakers of New Orleans’ lexicon of place. Hundreds of *arrivistes* from journalism and academia trooped into the city in the wake of the deluge and eagerly embraced the clearly defined official neighborhood maps for their reporting and research. Two of the hardest-hit areas—Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward—emerged in media reports as metaphors for the socio-economic and cultural-geographical chasms within the beleaguered metropolis. *Lakeview*, on the one hand, lent its name to symbolize all that was suburban, white, and middle-class: a typical American twentieth-century subdivision implicitly wealthy enough to enjoy a *view* of the *lake* too innocent enough to misunderstand the water’s threat. It flooded terribly. The *Lower Ninth Ward*, on the other hand, spoke to all that was poor, black, underprivileged, and disenfranchised: *Lower*, implying class, isolation, and topography (even though Lakeview lies lower); *Ninth* as in “bottom-rung;” and *Ward*, that gritty, antiquated political unit unknown to many Americans except as a place for society’s lunatic fringe. It flooded worse than Lakeview. Scores of other neighborhoods also suffered the deluge from working-class white Chalmette to wealthy black Eastover, to the Vietnamese enclave at Versailles and the small Hispanic cluster in Mid-City. But media outlets continued Lakeview and the Lower Ninth Ward to symbolize all angles of the tragedy that viewers needed to know.

Had they listened closely to New Orleanians, they would have heard much more complex, nuanced, and fascinating perceptions of place.

“The Cradle of Civilized Drinking”

Ruminations on New Orleans’ ancient reputation for escapism

[T]o all men whose desire on [v]i to be rich, and to live a short [m] but a merry one, I have no hesitation in recommending New Orleans.⁵⁵⁴

—Henry Bradshaw Ferron, 1819

On a per-capita basis, the Yellow Pages recently listed more bars for New Orleans—55.3 per 100,000 population—than any other major American city. The Crescent City and San Francisco claimed approximately double the per-capita number of drinking establishments of Denver, Boston, Portland, Phoenix, and Las Vegas, and over five times the rate from other large cities.⁵⁵⁵

This pre-Katrina statistic corroborates popular perceptions of New Orleans

as a drinking town, a reputation nearly as old as the city. An anonymous critic writing in 1744 roundly rebuked the city's society, noting that even men of little means "are seldom without wine in their cellars; the tradesmen is seldom a week without drinking it beyond moderation; but that is nothing in comparison with the soldier."⁵⁵⁶ Wine and liquor comprised fully one-third of Louisiana imports in 1788.⁵⁵⁷ An indignant newcomer visiting later in the Spanish colonial era wrote of New Orleanians,

In their parties there is no delicacy. All is grossness, and noise, and uproar. Wine, no conversation is sought. The men will not only get tipsy, but stagger and reel in the presence of the ladies; this intemperance... incurs no disgrace... the ladies laugh at the eccentricity of their walk.

The city abounds with tippling houses. At every cross street of the town and suburbs one sees those places of riot and intoxication crowded day and night. The low orders of every color, white, yellow, and black, mixed indiscriminately...⁵⁵⁸

The stigma of intemperance increased markedly in the early American years, as shopping activity bustled, transients abounded, and reputations spread. "This place is one of the worst I ever witnessed," wrote a homesick New Resident in 1817: "the chief amusements are gambling and drinking... quarrels and even murders are very frequent here."⁵⁵⁹ Reported John H. B. Tauboe, who visited in 1834,

In all the streets around, cafés and barrooms [on the Sabbath] were open and in the receipt of a full and noisy custom. Rum and gin, Monongahela [rye whiskey], and Tom and Jerry [sweetened hot rum] here live in palaces... of taste [e]legance and refinement... The smoking room is large [;] a whole army of bottles, with contents of all colours and the slaves in close array...⁵⁶⁰

Another man, describing in 1807 the city's varied and low-priced eateries, reported that "the profit is on the liquor, as evidenced by 'the immense patronage these establishments enjoy, and their multiplication within our last year.... Many of these lunch and drinking establishments are coin[ing] money; they monopolize the corners of every square; whole rows of them may be found in some localities, and new ones are springing up every day."⁵⁶¹ "The city's more than twenty-five hundred taverns are always filled with drinkers... especially during election time," wrote the French geographer Lisée Réclus during his 1853 visit.

[They] fuel the most violent passion with brandy and rum... if [a political candidate] doesn't know how to drink a cocktail with style, he will lose popularity and be branded a traitor. When political adversaries meet in a bar, drunk or sober, insult is followed by fistfights or gunshot... not unusual. More than once, the conqueror has been seen drinking over the corpse of the conquered.⁵⁶²

An 1850 anonymous expose on the city's licentious ways, *New Orleans As It Is (Truth is Stranger Than Fiction)*, excoriated the local embrace of spirits:

Of [all] the sources of evil and cause of contamination, there is none... so glaring as the immense number of drinking houses in every part of the city....

[C]og shops... are found in whole blocks—on three of every four corners, where one street crosses another, and ranges of building from street to street, every door leading into a drinking house. The style and splendor of [some bars and saloons surpasses] the mansion of a wealthy millionaire in this country.

[Drinking] is the great propelling power that drives on the maddening car of human passion into every other scene of vice and pollution.... This practice of a most constant drinking through the day, pervades all classes of society. Not only the male portion, with scarcely an exception, but the *ladies*....

[W]ines and liquors of all kinds constitute the principal offerings in the courtesies of every day life.... [T]hree-fourths of the men... are confirmed drunkards [taking] up to twenty-five to thirty [drinks] a day, and yet these are all high-minded, sober, and respectable gentlemen, full of Southern chivalry.⁵⁶⁵

The cocktail, though not invented in New Orleans as is often claimed, certainly gained fame here, and it was here more so than any other American city. That absinthe, the notorious greenish-hued European spirit, flavored Modern New Orleans, described recently as “The Cradle of Civilized Drinking,” is home to some of the nation’s oldest and most famous bars, among them Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop, the Old Absinthe House, the Napoleon House, and Pat O’Brien’s. Many today relish this ancient reputation: a coffee-table book celebrating New Orleans saloons, *Obituar Cocktail*, became a local bestseller in the late 1990s. A festival dedicated to the cocktail recently drew over 12,000 people. A legislator in 2008 filed a bill to declare the Sazerac as Louisiana’s “official state cocktail,” indicating the mischievous and defiant sense of pride held by many residents for their putative tolerance for drinking.⁵⁶⁴

New Orleans’ historical affinity for alcohol thrives today, though under more controlled circumstances than in the days of grog shops and dram houses. Beer by the pint is sold at the most mundane public events, and first-time visitors are often stunned by the casual legality of open containers. “Booze is part and parcel of just about every event and occasion in town, from debutante balls to jazz funerals to pee-wee league T-ball games,” wrote columnist Chris Rose with barely an ounce of hyperbole.⁵⁶⁵ The impression is not lost on the nation: a 2004 Internet survey of 500,000 people ranked New Orleans as America’s number-one city for bar-hopping, night life, and dining out—and dead last, incidentally, in cleanliness. A similar 2007 poll concurred: first in “cocktail hour,” “going out all night,” and “wild weekends;” last in safety and cleanliness.⁵⁶⁶

A number of factors explain the city’s modern-day embrace of drinking, spanning from the historical and geographical to the cultural and the economic. Port cities as a general rule boast lively night scenes. Sailors, travelers, visiting businessmen, and other transients, liberated by their anonymity and decoupled from the responsibilities and restraints of home, gravitate to opportunities for immediate gratification, in which

alcohol usually plays a primary role. (Sex is a close second—and, not coincidentally, accounts for another historical reputation associated with this city.) Sailors at sea for extended periods of time demand such services immediately upon disembarking; port cities happily oblige, calling off traditional bans on late-night and Sunday sales to accommodate those arriving at odd times. (The words “Last call!” are rarely heard in New Orleans.) Port cities with their diverse ethnic stock are also typically more cosmopolitan and liberal than interior cities. So we should not be surprised that New Orleans, San Francisco, and Boston score among the highest bar rates in aforementioned Yellow Pages survey.

A second possible reason explaining New Orleans' lead in this area is its Latin cultural connection, informed by Southern European and Mediterranean Catholic societies which view alcohol as part of the daily bread. Germans, who arrived in large numbers in the 1820s-30s, did their part by introducing beer (rather successfully) to what was very much a “wine town.” More conservative areas of the South, usually with greater Protestant Anglo influence and less immigration, tended to view alcohol as an escapist vice, and still do today. In Louisiana, hard liquor is available in any supermarket, even K-Marts and Wal-Mart, and Daiquiris are sold legally in go-cups at drive-throughs. In neighboring states, only special liquor stores vend hard liquor, and many counties, particularly in Texas, prohibit alcohol entirely. Drinking is simply part of the culture in Louisiana, especially in New Orleans—and some may argue that is for the better. After acknowledging the widespread availability of spirits, the previously cited circa-1947 resident commented,

We have TOLERATION [here in New Orleans]—freedom to think,—to do and live as you please.... This is the very happiest state of society.... There are few great crimes committed. Even drunkenness, considering the facilities, is exceedingly rare, and there is [here] an utter absence of that abandonment and degradation, which infests large classes of the population of other cities.”⁵⁶⁷

For all the availability and acceptability of alcohol in Louisiana, the state regularly ranks average in terms of both alcohol use and abuse. While the New Orleans area had, as of 2004, a higher percentage of citizens (8.33-8.4 percent) reporting recent alcohol dependence or abuse than the state (8.15 percent) and the nation (7.36 percent), the differences were not huge. The figures generally fell in the middle range of American states, and well short of the nation's highest (13.5 percent, in Wyoming). Regions with the highest percentages of their citizens reporting regular alcohol usage consistently clustered in the north central United States—an area not known for its ports, immigrant populations, or Latin heritage.⁵⁶⁸

An above-average number of bars vis-à-vis an average level of alcohol consumption logically implies that visitors comprise many of the bar patrons. Many, perhaps most, of the Yellow Pages listings represent bars located in the French Quarter and CBD which cater to tourists and conventioners and their “party town” expectations, rather than locals living out their daily lives. The perception of New Orleans as The City That Care Forgot might have developed over centuries via sailors and visi-

tors letting loose in this remote and exotic port, but with the mechanization of shipping and the advent of other transportation options, those bar hoppers of old are gone, leaving only the reputation of a Sodom and Gomorrah. The modern tourism industry enthusiastically exploits this historical reputation, creating an expectation of revelry that perpetuates the reputation, leading to greater expectations. The result: Bourbon Street, go-cups, a bar on every corner, and otherwise decent citizens publicly indulging to excess. The high rate of bar-busing in New Orleans, then, may simply reflect the city's huge tourism and convention industry, annually numbering over ten million visitors (pre-Katrina) and promoted by a crack professional marketing staff. It may also be a case of a numerator inflated by tourism divided by a relatively small denominator, since New Orleans had one of the smaller populations among the thirty-five major cities included in the study.

Hurricane Katrina changed all these numbers—of bars, population, tourism, liquor sales—but all signs indicate that the city's centuries-old reputation as a drinking town will, for better or worse, endure. Bars were among the very first businesses to reopen after the catastrophe—indeed, the only ones to remain open during the incident. Bars, nightclubs, and restaurants later in the autumn of 2005 reopened at a pace far brisker than any other business type, even those dealing in necessities.⁵⁶⁹ Many New Orleanians imbibed liberally during the stressful and uncertain times following Katrina, when an open saloon was far easier to find than an open supermarket.

Whatever the fate of New Orleans, it is a safe bet that one of its last establishments will be a “grog house,” and one of its more enduring reputations will be that of a drinking town.

On the Whitewashing of Tree Trunks

Some unscientific hypotheses about a curious tradition

Ordinary street scenes and city capes can serve as Rosetta Stones of culture and history. Consider, for example, the tradition of whitewashing the lower portions of tree trunks, seen throughout New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. Little scholarly research has been conducted on this peculiar custom, but personal (unscientific) observations throughout the Americas suggest various hypotheses:

Ask Louisianians why they do it and most will cite a pragmatic environmental reason: to keep potentially harmful borers off the tree. And this may well be true, especially if lime-based whitewash (toxic to insects) is used.

Others explain the coating as protection against wintertime freeze/thaw cycles and the effects of the sun. “The trunks of young trees,” recommended a 1919

California newspaper column entitled *Good Orchid Practice*, “should be whitewashed as soon as they are planted in the orchid, to prevent sunscald and the drying of the buds...”⁵⁷¹ When telephone poles and lampposts are given the same treatment, public safety (marking of traffic obstacles) explains the phenomenon.

But there may also be a deeper significance here. Throughout Latin America, whitewashed tree trunks appear in *parques centrales*, long grand avenues, in school yards, and in court yards. Asked about the tradition, many Latinos will explain that it gives a clean, measured, *bonito* appearance to vegetation that, if left unchecked, could become overgrown, unruly, and *feo*. French geographer Elisée Réclus seemed to prescribe to this aesthetic explanation in his 1853 critique of New Orleans society:

Under the pretext of art, rich individuals limit themselves to whitewashing the trees in their gardens. This luxury has the double advantage of being pleasing to their sight and of costing very little.⁵⁷²

An 1897 article about a reunion of former slaves at a park in Waco, Texas mentioned that “the trunks of the trees were whitewashed for the occasion,” a festive backdrop for the barbecue picnic, fiddle players, and orators.⁵⁷³ Another article from South Carolina in the same year also alluded to an aesthetic rationale for the tradition:

One of the prettiest places in Columbia just now is the park.... [T]he trees have put on their green foliage[;] the undergrowth has been cut out and snakes no longer have a resort. This week Chairman Willis of the park committee has been having the trunks of the trees and fences whitewashed and when the work is completed there will be *no neater or prettier place* in the whole city.⁵⁷⁴

Whitewashing tree trunks may represent a controlling of nature—a “neatening up;” a taming of its ragged and potentially threatening edge. It may be a product of the same cultural instinct that makes American spend untold hours and countless dollars cutting grass and trimming hedges. Yet unlike mowed lawns, whitewashed tree trunks are not evenly distributed throughout the United States. They are rare in the northern and central parts of the country, but common in certain neighborhoods in the urban Northeast, in the border country from Texas to California, in southern Florida and parts of the interior South, and in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. They are also typical of societies of the Mediterranean region and other parts of Europe and Russia. The tradition may be a Mediterranean-region aesthetic trait which first used primarily into areas colonized by France and Spain, and, later, into areas where immigrants from the Mediterranean region settled. This may explain why whitewashed tree trunks are found throughout the Latin world, in both cool, dry mountain environments and hot, moist, coastal environments, but less so in the Anglo world, regardless of environment. They are also found in many tropical East Asian societies.

Which brings us to the Vietnamese neighborhood of Versailles in eastern New Orleans, where whitewashed tree trunks also appear. Did these Catholic East Asian peoples adopt the tradition recently from their Louisiana neighbors? Did they pick it up long ago from French colonizers and bring it here when they immigrated to the

Catholic world of southern Louisiana, which *also* happened to have a French heritage? Or did they develop it independently for pragmatic environmental reasons? In one Versailles example, pine trees were painted the same pastel-blue-and-white colors used for the Virgin Mary statues standing in nearby front yards. Was this color scheme intended to deter insects or mark traffic obstacles? Not likely, or at least not entirely, as evidenced further by an example on North Carrollton Avenue, which incorporated a whitewashed tree trunk into a religious shrine: the mature live oak's whitened base rose out of a local garden of white monumental tones adorned with a Virgin Mary statue.⁵⁷⁵

In this seemingly mundane landscape feature, we may be seeing a centuries-old tradition that informs on topics ranging from European colonization and immigration, to the spatial extent of the Latin and Anglo worlds, to spiritually and public religious expression, to the relationship between humans and nature. Mapping this phenomenon might add to the understanding of the cultural geography of the United States. And it might well place New Orleans, Versailles and all—the heart of America's Latin South—there.