

Eccentric New Orleans: A Synergy of Culture and Geography

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The eccentric city is situated "at the edge" of cultural space: on the seashore, at the mouth of a river. The antithesis that is activated in this case is not earth/heaven but natural/artificial. This city is founded as a challenge to Nature and struggles with it, with the result that the city is interpreted either as the victory of reason over the elements, or as a perversion of the natural order.

Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*

On November 12, 1997, *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* began with the ominous headline: NO FIRM GROUND. In her informative article that followed, Joanna Weiss described how southern Louisiana is in the process of disappearing, slipping permanently into the murky waters of the Gulf of Mexico. According to Weiss, "Each year the Gulf of Mexico creeps northward, swallowing bayous and bays. ... From 1978 to 1990, the state lost 24,000 acres per year" (A1). At this rapid rate of loss we might ask how much land can possibly be left in south Louisiana. In her article Weiss examined how the "presence" of the disappearing land challenges notions of private ownership. In effect, when the land is gone, what does it mean when an owner posts a no-trespassing sign in the Gulf's open waters? The rights to the questioned ooze have pitted local fishing operators against giant oil combines, such as the New Orleans-based Louisiana Land and Exploration Company (LL&E). While the locals claim that the flooded parcels of lost land should be open to public interests (fishing, crabbing, trapping, and recreation), the corporate landholders contend that their interests remain, even after their last goblet of soil has sunk into the water. Corporate concerns will not quickly relinquish their hold of possible oil deposits and essential pipelines. In many lost parcels, corporations have merely shored up their pipelines with increased depth, literally allowing oil to move over water.

There is, however, an official player in this sinking-land tug-of-war between interested local and corporate giants, according to Weiss:

The land office uses a few simple rules of thumb: If it was navigable in 1812, the year of Louisiana's first Constitution, it forever is claimed for the state. And if the shore erodes away, it becomes state land, up to the mean high-

water mark. Those rules come from longstanding precedents. The laws that govern ownership of coastal land date back to the Roman Empire, and were designed to let boats land on any shore. ... (A8)

Based on precedents that go back to the first "American" constitution of Louisiana, not to mention the laws of the Roman Empire (traditions in southern Louisiana base themselves on ancient precedents), the State assumes ownership when land becomes navigable water. The minerals and oil under the surface of lost lands, if their presence is known before the final land loss, technically remain under the control of the former owners. If minerals are discovered after the loss, the rights of their subsequent profits are open to debate, hence the squabble over ownership at the center of Weiss's article. The specific case in question concerns a large piece of lost land owned collectively by LL&E and the charitable Wisner Trust. According to Weiss, the heirs of this trust (which include the city of New Orleans, Charity Hospital, Tulane University, and the Salvation Army) divide \$1 million annually from oil leases. A local south Louisiana resident named Thomas Cheramie, who fishes and traps crabs over this formerly private land, contends that a portion of the watery Wisner holding, despite its pre-existent mineral deposits, belongs to everyone: "Really, I don't consider it land, because it's marsh with islands all over the place. It ain't no real estate" (qtd. in Weiss A8). At the present time, the State is siding with LL&E and the Wisner heirs, although all titles, deeds, and conveyances are under sharp scrutiny in preparation for future court actions.

Why is there such intense wrangling over this lost land? How does it introduce the themes of geography and disappearance into the New Orleans discussion? The circumstance of the sinking wilderness reported by Joanna Weiss illustrates the intimate connections between geography, cultural history, and contemporary politics in south Louisiana. Thomas Cheramie, the Wisner Trust, LL&E, and even the State are the latest players in a tense drama that has always taken place in the region, positioning the reality of south Louisiana's changing environment against conflicting private, public, and civic forces. Six years before the controversy of the lost Wisner lands, LL&E circulated a glossy brochure, *Louisiana's National Treasure*, in which their savvy public relations staff attempted to explain the natural and human-made reasons for coastal erosion. According to LL&E, "Change has been the most preeminent characteristic of Louisiana's coastal environment from prehistoric times until now" (4). LL&E emphasizes this "change" so that "the navigation channels and oil field canals [that admittedly] have an impact on the wetlands" might be understood in a larger perspective, merely conforming to the natural processes of coastal destruction (10). Whether or not they are prehistorically created or technologically induced, LL&E holds onto its rapidly sinking wetlands rigorously, admonishing interested public parties, such as Thomas Cheramie, to stay away. Throughout its history, New Orleanians have grappled with their environment; divergent written genres from journalistic accounts and ethnic history to local fiction emphasize the

geographical issues that have helped to shape the city's culture. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which geography, in a broad physical, historical, and cultural sense, has influenced (and continues to influence) experience in the city of New Orleans. "Our understanding of geographical space is one of the ways the human mind models space," states Yuri M. Lotman in *Universe of the Mind*, with a consequence that "geography came into being in particular historical circumstances and took on different forms according to the nature of the world, of which it was a part" (171). The constellation of meanings around *l'affaire Cheramie*, from the natural facts of subsidence and tussle over fishing rights to the legal justification derived from the precedents of the Roman Empire, locates geography in a discussion of New Orleans as a physical reality, everyday practice, and historical circumstance.

Like the controversial south Louisianan land sinking at the city's back door, New Orleans naturally subsides; only mechanical controls keep the intrusive waters at bay. According to the geographer Peirce F. Lewis:

The Mississippi Delta is a fearsome place, difficult for building houses, lunacy for wharves and skyscrapers. Nor have environmental problems disappeared under the onslaught on modern technology. ... Foundation materials are the consistency of glue in many parts of the city and there are few old buildings or sidewalks that have not settled or broken since they were built. Most dreaded are the hurricanes that boil out of the gulf with random ferocity, pushing flood waters ahead of them. (17)

Lewis makes the point that very little separates the city of New Orleans from the marsh around it. The city sits in the middle of a swamp, at the mercy of the natural forces of water, mud, gulf storms, and subtropical maladies. There is, however, a verso to this atrocious location. Despite its miserable site, the city commands a superb commercial position close to the Mississippi River's mouth. Lewis puts this geographical contradiction into perspective when he state that "the fact that a million people work and make a living on this evil site only emphasizes the excellence of the situation" (17). The geographical drama of New Orleans concerns the attempts to maintain this exceptional situation against the continual odds of a reprehensible site.

In New Orleans, the Mississippi stands above the level of the land, between ten and fifteen feet above sea level. Where other great port cities look down at their valuable rivers, New Orleanians see their river overhead, walled in by natural silt levees and a vast network of artificial controls. Because of this elevation, the powerful river that supports the city's superior situation also invites the threat of levee breaks and chaotic flooding. Particularly in early spring, as snow melts in its northern reaches, an enormous volume of water drains through the lower Mississippi at New Orleans on its final run to the Gulf of Mexico. Without brilliantly conceived artificial levee walls, channels, and diversionary spillways,

natural catastrophe would most surely be a frequent occurrence. According to Lewis:

The Army Corps of Engineers, ... in a stroke of genius, has guaranteed New Orleans an indefinite future, free from flood. Both at Morganza and at Bonnet Carré, great concrete floodgates have been built, which prevent breaching of the levee. ... If the city is threatened, the Bonnet Carré Floodway can be opened to allow surplus water to pour into Lake Ponchartrain. (17)

While the engineering feats of the Bonnet Carré and Morganza Floodways protect the city of New Orleans from the Mississippi's fury, they also hold the possibility of disaster for adjacent areas in south Louisiana. As one recent example, during the spring of 1997 the Army Corps of Engineers opened the Bonnet Carré floodgates to accommodate an unusually large volume of water. Millions of gallons of the Mississippi's polluted freshwater plunged into the brackish waters of Lake Ponchartrain, threatening the incomes of people engaged in shrimping, fishing, and water recreation. Saving New Orleans indeed comes at a substantial cost to livelihoods, adjacent settlements, and even human lives. (Considering these costly investments in the city's situation, Thomas Cheramie's resentment toward the wealthy New Orleans-based LL&E and Wisner Trust is understandable.) Despite an abominable site, New Orleans continues to thrive because it puts its outlying districts at risk.

How did this conflict between site and situation evolve? Why does New Orleans' physical survival revolve around the losses of its neighbors? Peirce Lewis posits four historical stages in the development of the city that help to clarify these geographical questions. According to Lewis, New Orleans evolved to its present state of "A New and Uncertain City" (1945-present) through the stages of "A European City" (1718-c.1810), "America's Western Capital" (c. 1810-1865), and "A Mature City" (1865-1945) (32). Each of these stages saw changes in New Orleans's political and cultural orientation, all of which helped to control the negative aspects of its site and exploit the advantages of its situation.

Early European New Orleans was designed following an ordered grid pattern. With its central plaza and manicured park oriented toward the river, this colonial settlement "represented the New Europe, planted with classical perfection on the barbarian shore" (Lewis 32). In spite of the monumentality of this first grid pattern, the French failed to populate this grandly conceived New World colony sufficiently; many of the early streets were devoid of inhabitants. Lewis attributes the city's meager population to the Bourbon regime's xenophobia and fear of internal political dissidence. With organized British, Spanish, and Native American forces assembled beyond the immediate horizon, the early French carefully policed their colony's "purity" and loyalty, severely limiting the growth of its emigrant population. Where the French carefully controlled and limited European migration, they imported black slaves in massive levels, early on

establishing a black majority in the imperial colony. In her book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, the historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall shows that the enslaved population of French Louisiana exceeded the free population as early as 1727, reaching more than two to one by 1741 (10). Bound to slave labor, European New Orleans developed as a port, conveying American goods from the interior valleys into the Gulf of Mexico. At this European point in the city's history, colonial administrators and early investors built crude levee supports and diversionary canals as modes of flood protection. Much of the renowned architecture of the early European city—today known as the Vieux Carré or French Quarter—is Spanish in style, reminders of the thirty years in which the younger branch of the Bourbon family held the city. In its first period as a European city, New Orleans established itself as a cultural and racial hybrid that was unlike any other settlement in its region of south Louisiana.

Americans were flooding into the Mississippi valley at exactly the same time that France was finishing a revolution and sporadically at war with half of Europe. ... It was manifestly the destiny of the United States to have New Orleans; there were too few Europeans to hold it against the tide of frontiersmen sweeping into the valley. In all, New Orleans enjoyed too important a location and too flamboyant a reputation to be ignored much longer. The city's geographical chickens had come home to roost. (Lewis 37)

New Orleans entered the United States as "America's Western Capital"; the city's superior situation only showed its value after it passed into American hands. Lewis remarks that the city's population tripled only seven years after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803; by 1810, the city counted the largest population outside New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore (Lewis 37). The internal emigration policies of the Americans were different from those of the suspicious colonial French and Spanish. Outsiders were encouraged to settle in the city, drawn by the labor needs of the waterfront's enormous commercial activity. In its position as the major shipping center of the expanding American frontier, New Orleans processed items from the newer regions of the South and the Midwest. These commodities, from lumber to cotton and comestibles, fed the "insatiable appetite" of New England's young industries (Lewis 37). However, this burgeoning growth in population and commercial activity created internal instability; the older French and Spanish settlers—the illustrious Creoles¹—deeply resented the new Americans' exploitation of the city's situation. "Antagonisms ... ripened to the point where in 1836 the city was formally divided into three self-governing 'municipalities,' the first municipality being the French Quarter [contiguous with the boundaries of the European city], the second being the new American city in Faubourg St. Mary, and the third, Creole and immigrant" (Lewis 39). Bitterness between the different populations was so deeply felt that even street names changed when they crossed the line of one municipality into another. Along with the official division of the city, during the apex of this period there were other internal divisions that began to draw racial lines. Blacks—slaves as

well as free men—settled in modest dwellings directly behind the grand mansions on the city's boulevards, providing essential household labor. (Unlike other American cities that quickly divided their inhabitants into neighborhoods according to race, New Orleans was, in a sense, physically integrated.) In addition to these domestic arrangements, there were other areas next to the swamps and behind the protective levees—the *battures*—in which the most impoverished residents settled. "The poorest blacks would squat on the *batture* in makeshift shacks," according to Lewis, "abandoned when the river periodically rose and carried them away" (45). These swamp and *batture* settlements would serve as precedents for certain pernicious modes of segregation that characterize the latest stage in the city's development. In historical retrospect, New Orleans reached a level of unprecedented material wealth and population in its nineteenth-century guise, far beyond its European origins at a net expense of internal alienation.

Between 1865 and approximately 1945, the city reached an economic and cultural plateau, becoming what Lewis labels "The Mature City." Unlike other Southern cities that were long devastated by the effects of the Civil War, New Orleans quickly recovered, again exploiting the economic possibilities of its valuable situation. The city remained the premier Gulf port after the war; New Orleans' new railroad lines never usurped the strength of its waterfront activities. In fact, the rail lines themselves contributed to the port's strength, as the "Deep Southern" rail lines converged at the city. Through this innovative rail system, goods beyond the connected waterways of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys could now be shipped southward to the Gulf of Mexico through New Orleans. At the northern end of the Mississippi River, the city was not as fortunate; midwestern goods no longer relied upon water routes to move from east to west, as central railroads had hubs in Chicago and St. Louis (Lewis 49). Because of changing networks of shipping, "The Mature City" no longer relied solely on internal United States trade; with the advent of competitive railroads, New Orleans looked to economic opportunities in nearby Latin America. From the late nineteenth century through the present day, the city has served as a major *entrepôt* of Latin American commodities and culture. Not only do many tropical staples such as bananas and coffee reach the United States through the city, New Orleans has also been a major settlement point for Central Americans. At the turn of the century, this grown metropolis saw opportunities outside its European past and its American present.

As was the case with "America's Western Capital," New Orleans' mature period did not pass without internal problems. Lewis extensively discusses the intense pressure that the burgeoning population put on the city's resources and space. Unlike the European period when many grid streets were empty, the streets of mature New Orleans were overcrowded and taxed to capacity. Internal American immigrants, European immigrants (Irish, Germans, and Sicilians), Central American immigrants, and an increased birthrate all conspired to push the city to its habitable limits. Without technological intervention, safe settlement could not



Figure 1. Baldwin Wood Pumping Station. Photograph by Reha S. Erzurumlu.



Figure 2. Corroded New Orleans street. Photograph by Reha S. Erzurumlu.

extend outside the protection of the Mississippi's natural levees; as was always the case, New Orleans was hemmed in by the river and the murky backswamp. Outside growth became possible when the swamp was drained. This massive engineering project made formerly dangerous space habitable; the complicated process would permanently alter New Orleans' geographical future and its relationship with its neighbors. As New Orleans embarked upon the twentieth century, new settlements were established in former pestilential districts. While technology reshaped geography to meet human demands, the process of reshaping opened new possibilities for catastrophe. Portions of the drained city would now lie below sea level at the mercy of sustaining walls, diversionary canals, and pump capacities. During torrential downpours, the city is like a giant tea saucer; dangerous amounts of water gather at the city's center in the drained swamp that now lies below sea level. As was the case in the *batture* pattern of the early nineteenth century, racism entered this draining venture: poor blacks moved into the drained swamp area at an accelerated pace after pumping began. No longer bound to the nomadic conditions of unprotected *batture* life, these people now had a permanent district. By the end of World War II, mature New Orleans had achieved international prosperity, tenuous control of an atrocious site, and, in a most retrograde fashion, the beginning of physical segregation.

The last historical stage in Lewis's paradigm of New Orleans, "The New and Uncertain City," is a frightening period that began in 1945 and is still in the process of unfolding. White suburbia and its outcome of a black inner city most characterize contemporary New Orleans. The Baldwin Wood pump (the same mechanical apparatus that allowed the Dutch to drain their inland sea) opened New Orleans' backswamp to former black squatters at the same time that it allowed fleeing whites to settle in the marshy areas that surrounded the city. By the 1960s New Orleans again had—as was the case in its first European period—a black majority, only in this present "uncertain" time, racism rather than colonial economic necessities accounted for the condition. While European New Orleans survived "due to African labor [and] African ingenuity (the early black slaves knew how to cultivate flood resistant varieties of rice, bringing seeds with them from West Africa)," many contemporary white New Orleanians rejected the black presence, abandoning old neighborhoods in search of "safe" white havens (Hall 121-22). The internal strife that characterized "America's Western Capital," dividing the city into three cultural municipalities, had now simply become a matter of race.

There are, however, some encouraging aspects to this period of uncertainty. Lewis describes how a massive long-term project to relocate the port facility will allow New Orleans to remain commercially competitive, handling container shipments from around the world (67-75). Far past the economic possibilities of the enhanced port, tourism has become a valuable industry, generating a flow of external capital and internal investment. At the center of this new touristic trade

lies the "rediscovered" French Quarter of the Vieux Carré (the area contiguous with the boundaries of the original "European City").

The Vieux Carré attracts large numbers of tourists, who stay out until all hours of the night and spend large sums of money. The best estimates come from a 1965 survey ... [that] found that 1,800,000 people came to New Orleans during the year, and spent \$170 million—which makes tourism the second largest moneymaker in the city. The survey found that most tourists, furthermore, were "influenced" by existence of the Quarter in their decision to visit New Orleans—and that tourists who stayed in the Quarter spent more than their counterparts who lived outside. (Lewis 87)

Lewis goes on to say that the 1965 figures need, at a minimum, to be doubled to reflect the economic trends of 1976. Today, the figure has grown exponentially. According to *The City of New Orleans 1999 Annual Report*:

New Orleans' historic culture and colorful landscape draw visitors from all over the world. ... The annual Mardi Gras celebration, which nearly generates \$1 billion, the Jazz and Heritage Festival and the Sugar Bowl are perennial attractions. ... New Orleans has become the leader in multi-cultural tourism and a national model for hosting large-scale special events.

As the center of New Orleans' tourism, the Quarter promises all of the clichés that the city has to offer, from piquant cuisine and significant architecture to "sinful nights" on Bourbon Street (which itself mirrors the reality of the Storyville Quarter, where prostitution was legal from 1898 to 1917). Even in the city's latest phase of geographical alienation and segregation, the Quarter serves as a beacon for urban renewal, precisely because it is the oldest section which now generates the majority of tourist dollars. Ironically, "The New and Uncertain City" has the opportunity to reclaim its importance through the grid of its earliest European phase.

Peirce Lewis is not alone in attributing great importance to the city's early European grid. At the end of the nineteenth century (as an early point in the city's "mature" phase), the author George Washington Cable set many short fictional works in and around the earlier Vieux Carré. In 1883, Cable published *Old Creole Days*, "a collection of short stories," according to his niece Kinne Cable Oechsner, "which has New Orleans as a background, and brings back the flavor of the old city" (qtd. in Cable 8). In his "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," a short story in his Creole collection, Cable fictionalizes issues of disappearance, strife, and racial segregation that have uncanny similarities to the particular historical and geographical points that Peirce Lewis outlines in his study. From New Orleans' miserable site through the racial dynamics that haunted its development, Cable integrates geography into his fiction. While it is indeed tempting to connect Lewis and Cable (a contemporary geographical study and a local color story), there is no evidence to suggest that Cable influenced Lewis directly. Geography has shaped New Orleans throughout its history; in an informative way, the



Figure 3. Spanish details on French Quarter building. Photograph by Reha S. Erzurumlu.

coincidence between the "objectivity" of Lewis's work and the "subjectivity" of Cable's story underscores this.

Cable frames "Demoiselles" with a description of southeastern Louisiana's perilous site, especially the destructive forces of the Mississippi River.

The grant of land from the French king to the original Count De Charleu had been a long Pointe "around which the Mississippi used to whirl, and seethe, and foam, in a way that it was horrid to behold. Big whirlpools would open and wheel about in savage eddies under the low bank, and choke up again, and others open, and spin, and disappear. Great circles of muddy surface would boil up from hundreds of feet below—sink, come back again under water, and with only a soft hiss surge up again and vanish." The greedy water devoured many tons of soft earth, and ate its way into the banks until the Pointe was "swallowed up and the great river glided by in a majestic curve past the grant which had become a long, sweeping, willowy bend, rustling with miles of sugar cane." (Cable 52-53)

Through a royal grant, the first New World De Charleu established his family on a parcel of land that abruptly juts into the Mississippi River. The course of this family parcel would be caught between the reality of constant erosion and the possibilities of its rich moist soil, which provides a superb environment for the cultivation of rice and sugar. The first Count's struggle with his land becomes a legacy that connects the geographical reality of colonial Louisiana with its later cultural and racial issues—the "European City" with "America's Western Capital."

Before we know that the Count received a land grant from the king, Cable introduces cultural and racial difference into the story of the De Charleu family. The first Count married a Choctaw woman "because there were not many white women in the colony at the time," and the couple had "a number of little half-breed children" (51). This interracial scenario would have been simple enough in a colonial context had the king not shortly thereafter called De Charleu back to France to clarify royal account ledgers that were destroyed in a fire. While in France, De Charleu easily reconstructed the contents of the ledgers and "forgetting about his Choctaw wife and half-breed children whom he had left behind him, met, courted, and married a rich and beautiful French woman and brought her to Louisiana" (51). The Count now had two families: one indigenous to the colony, the other imported acceptably from France. While the indigenous Choctaw children disbursed during their father's hiatus in France (their abandoned mother died while De Charleu found his good fortune), the Count's only "French" son—his second wife had died during childbirth—duly took control of the king's grant.

After the early history of the colonial Count and the two branches of his offspring, Cable moves forward several generations to the present patriarchs of the family: Injun Charlie (the only descendant of the Choctaw branch, according to Cable, "old, ignorant and deaf ... his name through some Spanish influence had

been changed to De Carlos [52]), and the present De Charleu (called "Colonel") and his seven lovely daughters. As a *rentier* (independently wealthy property owner), Charlie occupies a flat in a Vieux Carré building that he owns while the Colonel and his daughters preside over the grant, now known as Belles Demoiselles Plantation in homage to the young women.

Cable describes the beauty of the Colonel's plantation extensively, from the vast sugar cane fields to the magnificence of the great house, which, most significantly, sits below the protective wall of the levee: "From the Veranda nine miles of river were seen, and in their compass, near at hand, the shady garden full of rare and beautiful flowers; farther away broad fields of rice and cane, and the distant quarters of the slaves, and the horizon everywhere a dark belt of cypress forest" (53-54). Belles Demoiselles sits as a universe unto itself, incorporating exquisite aspects of a garden and mansion with the economic forces of cash crops and the "distant" brutality of slavery. This enclosed world is close to the "white spires of the old St. Louis Cathedral" in New Orleans' Vieux Carré (53). Despite the plantation's many proximate advantages, the Colonel's seven daughters yearn to leave Belles Demoiselles for a full-time life in New Orleans, "desiring to live in the excitements of the city" (54). To satisfy his daughters' selfish interests, De Charleu turns to his distant relation Charlie De Carlos, whom he now sees as the steward of the legitimate family's Vieux Carré holdings. In a single-minded way, the old Colonel attempts to buy his distant relative's property, hoping to convert it into an exciting social residence for his daughters.

Many trips the Colonel made into the city to bargain with Injun Charlie, but he could not be persuaded to sell his property. Finally, however, at the end of one of these interviews old Charlie suggested a deal. He stood up tipsily and said:

"All right, I'll trade with you."

"How'll you trade?" the Colonel asked in surprise.

"My house for yours." (56)

At first the Colonel cannot even contemplate Charlie's offer and impertinence: Belles Demoiselles is his legacy and forever would remain in the hands of the "pure" De Charleu family. His steadfastness, however, weakens with each of his seven daughters' complaints and innuendos: "Ah! The theatre. Ah! Orleans Street. Oh! The Place d'Armes, the ball" (57). The old Colonel cannot compete with the combined force of the young women. He realizes that he must come to some understanding with Charlie. At this point in the narrative, Cable reveals the two men's motivations. The Colonel obviously seeks to satisfy his daughters while, perhaps most importantly, maintaining his ancient De Charleu legacy; Injun Charlie's Vieux Carré property is, after all, De Charleu land. In a similar vein, according to the reflections of the Colonel himself, Charlie "cherished the knowledge of his thin strain of De Charleu blood. On no land would he live but that which had been owned by a De Charleu. If he sold his city property he must end his days at Belles Demoiselles" (57). Because of the Colonel and Charlie's

ancestral *pudeur*, the Choctaw and the French branches of Count De Charleu's family stay bound together.

The forces of nature intervene to break the haughty impasse of the proposed family exchange:

Suddenly a slight sound behind him caught his ear. He sprang to his feet. He could see nothing wrong. Yet he stood listening, his face full of apprehension and fright. Then there came a splashing sound, "like some great beast slipping into the river," and little waves came out from under the levee's bank. ...

"My God!" [the Colonel] sobbed aloud; "My God!" And as he plead a long crevice under the levee slowly became a gap ... a huge mass of earth sank into the boiling eddy. (59)

The Colonel realizes that the river had begun its final attack on Belles Demoiselles; the Mississippi that had swallowed Count De Charleu's Pointe now scours ferociously at the plantation's banks, eating its way toward the family's mansion. When he realizes that his beloved plantation will disappear within weeks, the "stricken" aristocrat races into town, with the desperate mission of consummating a deal with Charlie. Surprisingly, Charlie at first reproaches his distant relation for agreeing to trade his superb plantation for a common Vieux Carré property. Yet, he finally agrees to the Colonel's offer "as though their ancient common ancestor had told him to do what the Colonel wanted" (60). Both Charlie's initial refusal to make an unfair trade and his eventual acquiescence touch the Colonel, who begins to doubt his intentions. (He cannot cheat this only distant relative who loyally holds onto his De Charleu connection.) Before the grounds of the great house, just as the old Colonel confesses that the plantation will shortly disappear, nature again intervenes, bringing the question of a family trade to a conclusion: "Old Charlie gazed before him in horror, for Belles Demoiselles with its music, its light, its dancing figures, began to totter and sink. Shrieks of terror filled the air as the beautiful home of the De Charleus, Belles Demoiselles, 'sank down, down, down, into the merciless and unfathomable flood of the Mississippi'" (62). In one catastrophic moment, the river devours the mansion, garden, and cane fields; the king's grant and the future of the De Charleu dynasty are simply washed away. Now only Injun Charlie and the distraught Colonel remain, as the seven De Charleu daughters disappear with the plantation.

Cable does not end his story with this tragic moment of geographical closure; there is more to the De Charleu legacy than a defining ancestral land grant. After Belles Demoiselles disappears, Charlie nurses the old Colonel, who collapsed physically and mentally after his fortune and family sank into the river. The descendant of Count De Charleu's disbursed Choctaw children fully reclaims his position within the family by caring for this last, now impoverished De Charleu. This final member of the "half-breed" branch survives the Colonel, not with "purity" and the preferred riches of Belles Demoiselles Plantation, but with implacable family pride and the solidity of his Vieux Carré building.

Beyond questions of physical and cultural geography, Christopher Benfey in his book *Degas in New Orleans* argues that "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" acts as a racial provocation, throwing clichés of interracial families and miscegenation at New Orleans' white population. This incendiary message, according to Benfey, "was too much for many [New Orleanians], who felt that Cable was implying ... that they were a population of half-breeds and philanderers" (118). Benfey construes Cable's final scene between Injun Charlie and the dying Colonel as an "acknowledgement of miscegenation as a pervasive fact of antebellum life in the city" (119). While Cable situates the Colonel and his seven daughters in the rarefied environment of a doomed plantation, he situates Charlie in the urban environment of the Vieux Carré, the successful, interracial center of early nineteenth-century New Orleans. Cable indirectly tells his readers that the "half-breed" Charlie's honesty and family pride overwhelm the injustices of the first New World De Charleu. In this way, Charlie fictionally embodies a chance for the city's different races and classes to coexist peacefully, recognizing their historical and family connections (119). Benfey's reading depicts George W. Cable's New Orleans as an enclosed world, in which survival itself depends upon an acknowledgment of interracial blood alliances.

Cable's interrelated, contained New Orleans world invites another look at Peirce Lewis's work, specifically his notion of the city as an "inland island." Sequestered by its physical site (swamp, river, and brackish water of Lake Ponchartrain), New Orleans stands alone in south Louisiana, culturally different from neighboring communities, regional neighbors, and the United States. According to Lewis, "it is an island in Cajun southern Louisiana, an island in the South, and an island in the nation" (11). The city's relationship to its neighbors highlights Lotman's notion of a city as a symbolic space: New Orleans, unlike cities that relate "to the earth which surrounds them, or [cities] that [are] isomorphous with a state" (Lotman privileges the example of imperial Rome in this respect), indeed may be conceived as "the antithesis to [its] surrounding world," in a competitive, and at times antagonist, relationship to the physical and cultural world around it (191).

Unlike the Francophone Cajuns who arrived from Acadia (present-day Nova Scotia) in south Louisiana in 1755 and 1758 after they were deported by the British, most of the early Francophone New Orleanians came to the city directly from the Old World (Europe and Africa). While historical Cajun culture was primarily rural in nature, Peirce Lewis has shown that New Orleans, since its first period as a "European City," developed around urban concerns. Cajuns and New Orleanians maintained little contact; the former tending to the daily concerns of subsistence farming, the latter exploiting the economic possibilities of their superior situation. Despite proximity, a shared language, and shared Roman Catholic faith, Cajuns and New Orleanians would remain distinct, culturally divided by issues of urbanization and ancestry.

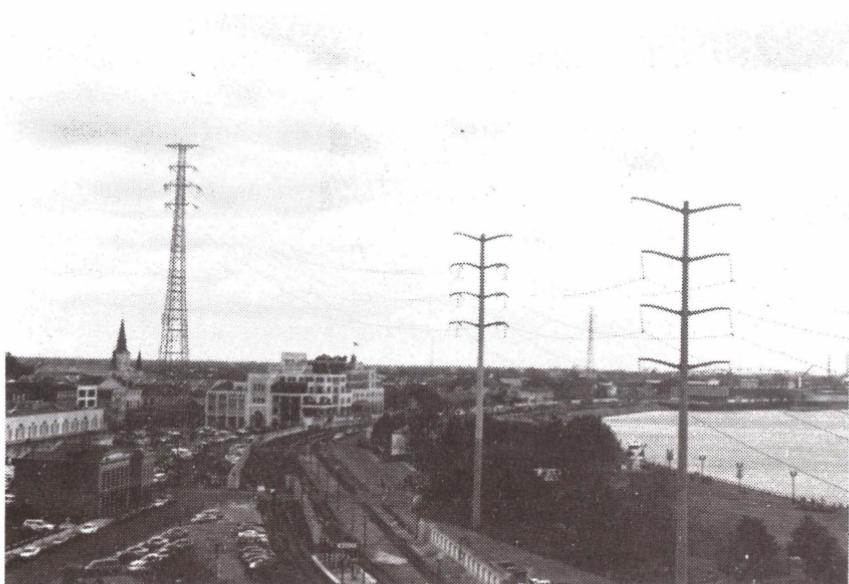


Figure 4. Mississippi River and adjacent French Quarter. Photograph by Reha S. Erzurumlu.



Figure 5. Distinguished old house. Photograph by Reha S. Erzurumlu.

In the larger context of Louisiana, New Orleans is an isolated urban enclave in a rural Roman Catholic region. Northern Louisiana bears little similarity to the southern part of the state; its language, culture, Protestantism, ethnic derivation, and economy resemble other southern states, not the Latin and African influences of lower Louisiana. Beyond language, religion, and ethnicity, Lewis factors politics into the state's internal divisions. The force behind populists like Huey Long came from northern Louisiana and rural Acadiana (the predominantly Cajun parishes), not New Orleans' "city slickers and big money capitalists" (Lewis 12). New Orleans stands alone in the state as an ethnically diverse, primarily Catholic, urbanized island, floating in a populist agrarian sea.

Outside Louisiana, Lewis suggests that New Orleans is an island in the South. Traditionally, southern metropolises have had low population densities. From small towns to large cities, urban congestion and concentration have not been typically southern problems; most cities stand apart, separated by large rural areas. In this geographical context, urban growth invariably meant expansion, or annexation, something quite impossible in most of New Orleans' history. Hemmed in by uninhabitable swamps and water, New Orleanians evolved in congested urban space, allowing different cultural practices to mingle. Lewis even asserts that the city's sophisticated cuisine and lax attitudes toward sex find their origins in urban concentration. Historically, New Orleans is the only large city in the South that developed a multicultural culture like other great American port metropolises--New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and San Francisco. In short, this city near the mouth of the Mississippi has been a densely populated island in the open terrain of the South.

There is one final aspect to New Orleans' island status, which Lewis labels "Island as World City." Lewis uses the city's unusual situation to define its world status. Because New Orleans sits near the mouth of the Mississippi River, which drains so much of the central United States, it has always had economic connections beyond southern Louisiana, the state, the South, and even the nation. New Orleans is a major port that is supported by a vast hinterland (Lewis 15). This hinterland--the upper and middle Mississippi valley--ships a wide array of goods through the port, constantly pumping capital into the city's economy. Lewis points out that the vastness of the city's hinterland means that New Orleans will always have an eye to the world; if a local crop fails, goods from another "drained" region will fill the city's barges and shipping facilities. In short, because of its breadth of movable hinterland goods and commodities, "New Orleans is rich, it *is* superior, and its nearest competitors are half a continent away" (15).

What then is at stake in the case of New Orleans' isolation? To a great extent, New Orleans' popular culture and literary expressions derive from its multi-tiered island status—in Cajun south Louisiana, in Louisiana, in the South, and in the nation as a world city. Afloat on an "inland island," a group of stranded inhabitants of many ethnic origins, classes, and racial backgrounds forged a

culture at odds with the world around it. Despite the reality of slavery, Africans and Europeans developed an economy and culture in colonial New Orleans based on mutual values. At a very early point in its history, a response mechanism developed in the city that had the ability to integrate and respond, creating an essential synergy between geography and culture. Despite historical changes, massive technological developments, and expanded modes of communication, the inhabitants of new Orleans still respond to the natural threats, artificial controls, and external political forces that shaped the city's early culture, ensuring that their local culture will continue to develop.

Notes

¹ For one interpretation of the historical and cultural codes that surround the Creoles of New Orleans, see Benton Jay Komins's "Succulent Tomatoes, Extraordinary People and Intriguing Performances: Some Literary and Cultural Encounters with New Orleans' Creoles" in *Comparative Literature Studies* 36:1 (1999): 45-67.

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