New Orleans as an American jungle: Colonial roots and capitalist representations

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New Orleans as an American Jungle: Colonial Roots and Capitalist Representations

Director: Kathleen Kane

In his scene notations for Suddenly Last Summer, a drama set amidst bizarre tensions that unravel the cohesion of identities in an affluent, deranged family living in New Orleans' Garden District neighborhood, Tennessee Williams envisions the domestic spaces of the city as loci of a mystical jungle. His representation is not unique; New Orleans has continually suffered under the masque of the exotic since its earliest history, and the reputation persists in both literary and political discourses. Northern literary markets may have commercialized, popularized, and thus reinforced exotic representations of the city, which have continued far past post-Civil War times. However, New Orleans' early colonizer communities identified their position as one developmentally bound by and ideologically opposed to what they considered a surrounding wilderness of vast and unconquerable swampland. Their responses often manifest as performances of whiteness and within the emergence of a Creole mythology.

The thesis investigates the representational vocabulary of New Orleans. Singular as a colony provincialized by French rule and later passed to Spanish and then American control, New Orleans is perhaps most recurrently represented as a jungle. The image is suggestive not only of the imperialist ideologies responsible for racial tensions, but also of the role of the city as an active site of play for the American imagination. Poems by Joy Harjo and Brenda Marie Osbey, which present anti-colonial challenges to the maintenance of New Orleans as an active site of perpetuated colonial ideas, are set against critiques offered in the drama of Tennessee Williams. The thesis excavates the writings of each in order to determine the function of the representation of New Orleans as jungle and to trace colonial roots. Uncovered are recurrent tropes such as the weaving of death with pleasure, the city's identification as a locus of madness, and the threat of struggle for survival in primitive conditions. Economically successful cultural practices, including Mardi Gras, vampire tours, and voodoo museums, also indicate the need of the West for a jungle, a place of exoticism where epicurean delights underscore the persistent presence of colonial ideology.
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The Idea of New Orleans in American Rhetoric

A fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature....

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, FROM Suddenly Last Summer

The initial scene notations for Tennessee Williams’ Suddenly Last Summer depict New Orleans’ affluent Garden District as a savage garden, a jungle where beasts and serpents inhabit an area also populated by the city’s wealthiest denizens. Designated by the borders of Louisiana and St. Charles Avenues and Magazine and First Streets, the neighborhood represents American colonialism at its most opulent period of self-assertion. In a city originally inhabited by French and Spanish settlers in the Vieux Carré (today’s French Quarter), the foundation of the Garden District marked the arrival of American settlers moving conspicuously away from the earlier settlements to invest in a singularly American expression of private property. Significantly increasing the city’s population,¹ the members of this wave of American settlement appropriated the architectural styles of patioed, iron-worked French Quarter houses, blending them with the open-lawned, tree-lined houses found in the New England colonies. The creation of the district evinced the initial productions of the American idea of New Orleans. Their acquisition of the city had coincided with the introduction of the cotton gin, transforming the area’s economy and luring American settlers into a rapidly growing colony that would thrive
as a riverside location connecting the area's newly rich plantation owners with the merchants who purchased from and supplied them. The American residential developments responded to this explosion of fortune and population, which manifested in the construction of a self-segregating area defined by its location outside the boundaries of the existing city, as well as by the self-aggrandizement apparent in the architectural departure from existing colonial residences. Imposing ideas of size and wealth that asserted both the singularity and success of American empire, the American settlers relied on the possession of much larger tracts of land than had been occupied by property owners in the Vieux Carré. The creation of the district was only one expression of a project that formidably opposed the existing Franco-African base of the colony, as the Americans eventually obtained economic domination and instigated further development that relocated the prime commercial and residential areas outside the Vieux Carré.

James Marston Fitch, a scholar of Creole architecture, indicates that the Americanized, hybrid design, which continued to dominate the façade of the expanding city, long remained a distinct cultural expression of a unique urban upper class. According to Fitch, the tradition of these "upper class residences... survived as a viable idiom in New Orleans right up to World War I, when it finally was submerged in the 'national' prototypes espoused by national magazines for laymen and professionals" (85). The lasting dominance and singularity of this American culture indicate that a study of the idea of New Orleans in the American imagination must recognize the influence of the American project, including its tendency toward masking. The creation of a dominant residential model and the relocation of the city's business district outside the existing city center have attempted to mask the pre-American cultural bases of a city initially imagined under other colonial histories and comprised of a population representative only of a cultural crossroads. Many pre-American communities, especially the French-identified creoles, resisted - if not challenged – the expanding American culture, but their influence, though not obliterated, did diminish significantly. The American project was
envisioned at a point that coordinated a solidifying of United States territory with intense economic expansion, thus allowing the Americans to become the foremost contributors to the idea of New Orleans. Ensuing ideological struggles for the identity of the city did continue, however; the complexities and contradictions inherent in the idea of New Orleans as it has been formulated through the present era reflect these struggles. Disparities and factionalism have frequently resulted in identifications of New Orleans as a jungle, as indicated in the selection from Tennessee Williams' play *Suddenly Last Summer*. Williams attempts to undermine or unmask the image of the city's separatist and extravagant American aristocracy by mapping his idea of the savage jungle onto the garden. In the play, the wealth and refinement of Garden District citizens mask their underlying carnivorous violence. Williams' description of a jungle atmosphere becomes his playing ground to reveal obsessions with family status and greed that provoke one urgent matriarchal figure to pursue a lobotomy for a relative whose admissions threaten to ruin the matriarch's social position.

Williams' use of the jungle metaphor as a lens through which to view New Orleans' Garden District is a strategy common to the literary mythification of the city, but the figure has broader implications and additional origins. The metaphorical designation of New Orleans as an exotic and dangerous landscape is also present in the city's various political discourses. For example, Mike Foster was severely criticized during his 1995 gubernatorial campaign for referring to New Orleans as a jungle, and his remark provoked feedback from local citizens that subsequently echoed north as far as the pages of the *Chicago Tribune* (McNulty 10). In his ensuing apology, Foster contended that he did not intend the metaphor as a racial offense, as it was perceived, but as a localized indication of the threat of a steadily increasing crime rate which could potentially thwart the city's economic growth by provoking fear in both local and tourist communities. In part, the debate over Foster's use of the term "jungle" seems to issue from its shifting etymological currencies. Originating in India, "jungle" originally signaled
“waste or uncultivated ground” before its reformulation as an Anglo-American term for the “luxuriant and often almost impenetrable growth of vegetation covering a tract,” which is also “the dwelling place of wild beasts” (*OED*). Implications from both constructions of the literal meaning of the term seem to underscore Foster’s metaphorical remark. Unattended, the problem of violence in New Orleans could empty the city of its tourism dollars, de-cultivating a once-thriving city into a landscape of waste. Also implied in Foster’s deployment of the term is an equation of the perpetrators with beasts; the implication would not be lost on citizens of Louisiana, where colonially-rooted derisive slurs such as “jungle bunny” have long had currency, denigrating African-Americans by associating them with stereotypes of jungle animals. According to Frantz Fanon, the slur masks colonial guilt; in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon quotes Bernard Wolfe to trace the roots of designations such as this one: “Ever since slavery began, his Christian and democratic guilt as a slave-owner has led the southerner to describe the Negro as an animal.... If the black man found himself relegated to the Limbo of mankind, he was the victim not of Americans but of the organic inferiority of his jungle ancestors” (qtd. 174). The irony present in the latter half of Wolfe’s remark draws attention to an essentializing colonial lens through which the black man was regarded, which saw his complexion as the mark of an animal, and the place for that animal, the jungle.

In his apology, Foster chose to align his remark with the figurative use of the term, which describes the chaos of spaces such as cities and schools. In terms like “blackboard jungle” and “concrete jungle,” the latter half of the term describes the former approximation as “a wild, tangled mass...a place of bewildering complexity or confusion...a scene of ruthless competition, struggle, or exploitation” (*OED*). Resonances of the literal term, however, are naturally embedded in its figurative usage; hence, the user must account for the element of the beast. In Foster’s remark, this element becomes humanized and racialized. While Foster may have intended to address only the city’s crime rate, his metaphor does evoke an exoticized
dynamic of predator and prey that infuses the figurative construction of the term with implications of racial roles. This dynamic is rooted in a colonial imagining that manifests in American literature and national mythologies and relies upon the maintenance of ideas of whiteness and blackness. Generated from what bell hooks calls “a standpoint where ‘whiteness’ is the privileged signifier” (167), the dynamic necessitates that whiteness and blackness assume binary positions from which “white” civilization, responsibility, steadfastness, and law assume the capability to challenge “black” savagery, recklessness, vile caprice, and malevolence. Adoption of white cultural standards is urged while blackness is rejected, provoking Fanon’s applicable criticism of the colonized’s acceptance of the colonial mentality: “he becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (18). In the dynamic critiqued in Foster’s remark, the pursuer or the initiator of chaos occupies the role that threatens the civil order of whiteness. From a standpoint that recognizes the frequent privileging of whiteness, the role appears to be filled by the black interloper who, according to Fanon, will be determined by his skin color to be “wicked, sloppy, malicious, instinctual” (192). The existence of this character or group is often assumed in Eurocentric representations of New Orleans as a jungle. In the racialized dynamics of both Foster and Tennessee Williams, appeals to whiteness assume the existence of a threatened law-abiding and morally responsible group, upon whom chaos is or may be incurred. While Foster’s remark appeals to the possibility that whiteness is under siege, Williams’ play deconstructs the dynamic. In Suddenly Last Summer, Garden District residents affect an exterior of whiteness by expressing refinement and shock at the possibility that savage crimes have been enacted upon their relatives. Williams explicitly shows, however, that these appeals are mere masks for the residents’ equally cruel acts, the reprehensibility of which they seek to deny.

The use of whiteness and blackness in political rhetoric and in literature and the recurrent figurative identification of New Orleans as a jungle are rooted in a highly specialized
vocabulary of representations indicative of the city's singular and potent colonial history. If the jungle is perhaps the most recurrent image within this vocabulary, it may also be the city's most revealing metaphor. It is an American creation suggestive not only of the imperialist ideologies responsible for racial tensions, but also of the role of the city in colonial sport, as an active site of play that is maintained for the American imagination. In the American jungle, the presence of blackness enables what Toni Morrison refers to as an “American romanticism,” which relies on and must account for “a resident population, already black, upon which the imagination could play” (37). According to Morrison, this romanticism creates “a battle plain [attractive to white Americans] on which to fight, engage, and imagine their demons” (36) and relies on the imaginative possibilities of darkness, against which the white imagination can assert itself. Imaginatively maintained as a jungle in literature and political rhetoric, New Orleans often suffers under the mask of this extravagant and exploitative habit of American imagination. The city has long been represented, if not marketed, as a location comprising hybrid – or creolized, to speak within the vocabulary – possibilities of movement between spaces that the American imagination reads as contradictory: civilization and wildness, death and pleasure, and whiteness and blackness. Constructions of New Orleans-as-jungle rely on this movement because the sport and play of the jungle result from the threat or thrill of transgression between the spaces occupied by the Eurocentric self and those it relegates to the exoticized other. New Orleans' construction as the archetypal American jungle can be read as a process of metaphorical imagining based upon the unique factionalism resulting from New Orleans' colonial history and a pan-European reaction to the city's geography, both requiring opposition for the movement of the imagining self. Other aspects of the city's vocabulary, however – including recurrent tropes and themes and often revisited, localized liminal spaces – are more complex, as the figures can serve to establish control, to support colonial ideologies, to re-appropriate, to argue or denounce stereotypes, or to affirm community solidarity. In order to engage with a polyvocal utterance of
representational strategies, we must investigate representations that variously seek to maintain the jungle, as well as those that seek to deconstruct or undermine aspects of it.

How can the mythic jungle of New Orleans, which is racialized in Foster's remark and exoticized in Williams' work with its voice of "sibilant hissings," be de-mystified? The solution must include some genealogy of its creation, taking into account interweavings of the city's geo-social complications and its colonial history. Exoticized through pervasive metaphors and tropes, including the jungle image, the idea of New Orleans relies upon a dialectical colonial response to the limitations of the swampland landscape and to the existing hybrid cultural bases encountered by incoming waves of new powers and settlers.

Geographically, the idea of the jungle results from the mapping of exotic image and constructed ideology onto a difficult space ripe for exoticized interpretation. Bound by swampland that resisted development until the employment of a pumping system mandated for construction in 1899, New Orleans was perceived from its earliest colonial days as a community bound by unconquerable wildness and threatened by baleful conditions potentially capable of consuming the city. Early colonial reports collected by Louisiana historian Charles Gayarre indicate that the colonial government urged the felling of large numbers of trees surrounding the city. A 1726 report identifies the dense timber as the main cause of disease in the city, which is "being smothered by the neighboring woods, which press so close around it" (qtd. 373). Gayarre also describes the threat presented by the city's low-lying location: "In 1727...New Orleans, not being protected by a levee, was subject to annual inundations, and presented no better aspect than that of a vast sink or sewer" (381). Further evidence damning the convergence of wildness with the colony's attempt at civilization follows, describing the persistence of water in the colony and the intrusion of reeds and tall grasses in yards and city streets.³

The imperial colony was also threatened by the activity of maroon communities who had claimed the outlying swampland areas of New Orleans by the late 1770s. Since their
peripheral status as runaway slaves did not allow them to maintain residence within the city, these borderlands increasingly became their defended territory. This development plausibly fused a connection in the colonial imagination between the imaginative possibilities of darkness constructed to describe both place and race. The colonizers, although reliant on maroon participation in the local economy, record few forays into the *cipriere*, and those reported seem exclusively focused on maroon raids. The maroons' secluded and resistant existence within a landscape already perceived by the colonists as threatening, or closing in upon the city, could have justified, for the essentializing colonizer, his maintenance of jungle imagery to describe both the landscape and its inhabitants. Since full deployment of the metaphor relies upon both geographic conditions and social environment, the coordination of both elements under the colonial imagining of darkness contributed to the dialectic that more and more firmly differentiated the growing city from the surrounding landscape, exoticized as wildness that threatened convergence with the city. Likewise, the dialectic more strictly encoded the inextricable merging of place and race within the colonial idea of darkness.

The water table that provided New Orleans' backswamp also offered newcomers to the city further fodder for their ideas of New Orleans' jungle-like wildness. The tropical climate remains responsible for largely unmanageable populations of mosquitoes, palmetto bugs or cockroaches, and other insects, whose inescapable presence is matched only by the audible hum of incessant buzzings and chirpings. The climate also provides prime growing conditions for a variety of dense, lush, bright vegetation. In fact, several early nineteenth century French visitors, apparently visually and audibly stimulated by the physical setting of the new city, provide notes detailing the existence of the city's curious vegetation. According to New Orleans historian Herbert Asbury, who published his own exoticized text in 1936, reported sundry flora included a button-tree, which supplied the colonists with an unceasing supply of garment buttons, and an oil-tree, which emitted an excellent sample of oil when tapped. The
visitors also remarked upon the miraculous savoyanne-root, a chewable root capable of making
the chewer fireproof. Asbury also reprints the observations of French naturalist Baudry des
Lozieres, laudable for perhaps the only record of the man-plant:

These strange plants bore some resemblance to an Irish potato or white truffle, but were much larger than the largest yam. They had the perfect shape and face of a human being, with the features of the face clearly marked, a neck, shoulders, and a well-defined body. Some of the plants were small, others large; some had male, others female features. They seemed to form a regular colony or settlement, and quivered when touched, and even seemed to move away, as if they intended to defend themselves. They received at once the name of man-plant. (qtd. 17)

Through their fantasies of native flora, the city’s early visitors participated in a tradition of localized exoticism that responds to a geographical landscape whose elements – intense humidity, swampland, and profusion of insect life – had not been encountered in Europe. Appealing to the thrill of natural wealth and supply, as well as to the threat of transgression that recognized life in the liminal spaces between human and not-human, these writers constructed some of the earliest fantasies of New Orleans. They read the rich field of the unknown through an exoticism that imagines the coordinate existence of contradictory possibilities – in this case, including trees producing man-made products and flora that are both human and not human. This type of exoticism is constructed through the manipulation of an unfamiliar other to create differentiation and often to involve the possibility of transgression for the Eurocentric self. In the case of the early fantasies of New Orleans, the elements of an unfamiliar landscape are assimilated into a myth that draws irreducible differences between the observing, Eurocentric self and the seemingly impossible other. The threat and thrill attendant upon a merging with this apparent impossibility largely form the strains of successive interpretive descriptions.

This mythic pattern can also be traced to tracts published in France in 1719, which printed some of the initial observations of the colony of Louisiana and are described in a nineteenth century text by Charles Gayarre. Counterbalanced possibilities of potential wealth
and threat provided the venturing colonist with a lens through which he might observe the exotic other and choose to merge with it. Attempting to solicit a substantial population base for the colony, advertisers initially promised an idyllic landscape, “cloth[ing] Louisiana with all the perfections they could invent. It was more than the old Eden, so long lost to mankind” (209). Gayarre also accounts for descriptions which indicated that “the whole surface of the country was strewn with lumps of gold,” and that dew gathered in the flower-cups of an indigenous plant might “in the course of a single night, be converted into a solid diamond” (211).

Opposing observations circulated throughout France soon afterward, however. Following John Law’s mismanagement of the colony during the 1720s, new tracts published damning descriptions of the territory as “a vile compound of marshes, lagoons, swamps... inextricable and gloomy forests, peopled with every monster of the natural and of the mythological world” (224). Gayarre’s recapitulations continue: “In such a country, the European race of men rapidly degenerated, and in less than three generations was reduced from the best-proportioned size to the dwarfish dimensions of pigmies” (225). Imagined in extreme conditions that ultimately promised the transformation of the European newcomer, New Orleans, as the capital of the Louisiana colony, was created even in its initial history to include the simultaneous possibilities of Eden and destruction.

Exotic representations also surround the city’s water politic, which adds a curious dimension to burial traditions. The water table necessitates singular cemeteries which, in their aesthetic ornamentation, seem to provoke a lingering awareness and romancing of death in New Orleans. This response to death becomes evident in the current popularity of cemetery tours and in the excess of representations reliant upon the liminal possibilities of death. Ironically, death seems to play a major role in the commercial livelihood of the city, and the activity of that zone has instigated provocative responses in the Eurocentric imagination since early colonial times, when colonists first encountered the difficulties that the water table presented to burial.
As a solution to the frequent flooding of cemeteries and the subsequent unearthing of buried caskets, tombs were constructed above ground and then elaborately adorned, offering citizens a prominent visual reminder of death. Herbert Asbury writes that the city was known until the 1840s as the "Wet Grave." Illustrating the distaste with which burial customs were regarded, he records the response of an English traveler to the city in 1832:

Coffins are therefore sunk three or four feet by having holes bored in them, and two black men stand on them till they fill with water, and reach the bottom of the moist tomb. Some people are particular and dislike this immersion after death; and, therefore, those who can afford it have a sort of brick oven built on the surface of the ground, at one end of which, the coffin is introduced, and the door hermetically closed, but the heat of the southern sun on this 'whited sepulchre' must bake the body inside, so that there is but a choice of disagreeables after all. (qtd. 8)

Through their visual prominence, the tombs insinuated a persistent awareness of death into the culture of New Orleans, thus opening the interstitial space fast separating the living and the dead. Evidence of this opening appears in the quote above, in which the traveler creates an extension of the living self that imagines physical sensation lingering after death. The response is not unprovoked; in New Orleans, the physical bodies of the dead continued to be affected by elements which would saturate or "bake" the flesh, a process perhaps more easily imagined or observed than the slow disintegration that could be forgotten once the body had been hid underground. For the Europeans, whose insistence on the separation of the living and the dead was evidenced by their placement of cemeteries outside the immediate boundaries of their cities, the opening up of the liminal space was exotic. Elements that they had intended to confine as separate, contradictory possibilities had begun to coincide within a shared space. The ensuing narrative strains of the threat and thrill of transgression between these elements have evolved to include a Eurocentric construction that is one of the city's most common representational themes. That construction, which can also be presented without the
accompanying exoticism that deems it mysteriously contradictory, is the mixing of death with pleasure.

The linking of death with pleasure emerges as a unique theme nearly ubiquitous in representations of New Orleans. It is also essential to the living model, as it is an apparent dynamic of many of the cultural performances enacted in the city today. During jazz funerals, members of the city’s African-American community erupt into music and dance after “cutting the body loose,” a transformative ritual moment that evinces celebration and community solidarity as integral parts of the burial rite. Death and pleasure are equally essential to Mardi Gras, the feast that precedes six weeks of Lenten abstinence. The carnival revelry is intended as both celebration and death; one must kill the urge for pleasure via excess before entering Lent. As already described, death is also aestheticized in the city’s cemeteries. In literary and cinematic representations of the city, the dynamic performs like many elements of the vocabulary; constructions of the theme seek varying ends and may obfuscate or deconstruct colonial roots. For instance, the dynamic can be exoticized and carnivalesque, as it is presented in the film Easy Rider, in which expectations of pleasure are continually thwarted by death. Hinging on the arrival of Billy and Captain America in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, the film manipulates scene and activity so that the already-potent carnival dynamic is fueled by a saturation of conjoined death-and-pleasure imagery. Captain America foresees his demise while waiting in the halls of a bordello; later, he, Billy, and the whores experience an acid trip that turns emotionally consuming in one of the city’s elaborate cemeteries. The dynamic directs the larger focus of the film as well. Billy and Captain America expect the city to act as a jungle into the freedom of which they can escape – as the site of play maintained for the adventuring, transgressing, or escaping American imagination. However, New Orleans acts as a jungle of undoing. It is ultimately represented as a chaotic, tangled field defined by strict yet unethical codes, and it cannot be escaped.
Not every construction of the death and pleasure dynamic exoticizes the linking of its constitutive elements, however. New Orleans poet Brenda Marie Osbey utilizes the dynamic in a manner that recalls the function of the theme in jazz funerals. In All Saints, readers are urged to “live among your dead, whom you have every right to love” (1). Throughout the text, Osbey emphasizes that the dead are still active members of the community and contribute to its re-membering and solidarity. Her work also recalls a local colonial tradition in which funerals offered New Orleans’ slave community the rare opportunity to gather. The funeral occasion thus invited celebration for the convergence of a dispersed community; Osbey’s re-membering works similarly. She recalls colonial figures and narratives that have been carefully extricated from the city’s jungle narrative, which relies on fantastic, exploitative imaginings of the city’s Afro-American culture but fails to engage with this culture responsibly. Osbey’s narratives invest the city’s usual tropes with a perspective that confronts and undermines the jungle ideology. Similarly, Joy Harjo’s poem “New Orleans,” critiques the colonial relationship between death and pleasure. She mourns the silencing of “voices buried in the Mississippi/mud...beneath the currents stirred up by/pleasure boats going up and down” (3053). The juxtaposition of voices and boats links the large-scale deaths of indigenous peoples, often inconsequential to early colonial explorers, with the colonial search for pleasure through the acquisition of land and wealth. In the second section of this paper, I will return to Osbey and Harjo to delineate further their employment of New Orleans’ representational vocabulary.

Exoticism – as the simultaneous existence of contradictory possibilities – does not inform the constructions of the death-and-pleasure theme consistently, but seems to arise only in Eurocentric constructions of the dynamic, as these constructions often assume the possibility of transgression into unknown or seemingly impossible spaces and the coordinate responses of threat, thrill, or conquest. The jungle as a space of undoing also appears in these constructions, as an inversion of the myth of conquest, in which the chaos of the jungle is not navigable, and
its beasts are untamable and consuming. As a Eurocentric dialectical response, the habit of exoticizing stems not only from responses to the city’s geological conditions, but also from interpretations of existing cultural bases met by newly arriving settlers as colonial powers interchanged. The shift to American control brought about by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase provides evidence for the creation of at least two narratives that are seminal to the idea of exotic New Orleans: the performance of whiteness and the Creole mythology. These narratives establish contradictory fantasies, generated as they are from Latin and Anglo-American perspectives, as the creoles and Americans vied for political and ideological control of the city. Within these narratives can be seen the initial constructions of the idea of New Orleans as a place renowned for the simultaneous, tangled existence of contradictory social elements, including sensuality, aristocracy, sin, cultural backwardness, and refinement.

The performance of whiteness, as identified by performance studies scholar Joseph Roach, is a complex political and narrative strategy intended to create boundaries which establish the civility and moral refinement of the actor, whose expressions of superiority reveal class and race bias. Roach offers the observations of two early nineteenth century Americans, Lilian Creté and Benjamin Henry Latrobe, as models for performances of whiteness. Creté’s record depicts the early 19th century event of Sunday gatherings at Congo Square attended by the city’s black community and observed by white onlookers:

There were sensual, even blatantly erotic dances, in which the dancers mimicked the motions of lovemaking.... A horde of white spectators pressed round the gates of the square, their faces registering a mixture of amusement, astonishment, shock, scorn, and indulgence. The African rhythms and dances were obviously not to everyone’s taste, and some of the Americans in the crowd must have looked on the scene as a display of savagery that no one but a black or Creole could savor or condone. (qtd. 64)

In this observation, Creté explicitly constructs a binary system in which whites displaying civility and moral superiority evaluate a performance as the savagery typical of and attractive to
the city’s black and creole communities. Each of the five white responses she records assumes a superior, evaluative position that fails to negotiate a non-derisive interpretation of the city’s existing cultural performances. Roach observes in this account “the carefully constructed performance of whiteness enacted by the onlookers, most particularly by the ‘shocked’ Anglo-Americans among them” (64). Their performance is hardly surprising, as it reveals the construction of boundaries likely felt necessary by the strangers to the city, the immigrant puritanical Americans whose claims to power were threatened by the activity and solidarity of New Orleans’ black and creole communities.

Roach also offers Latrobe’s account, dated 1819, which similarly describes groups of dancers and musicians performing in Congo Square, their sounds reverberating several blocks away from the square. Latrobe announced that he had “never seen anything more brutally savage” (qtd. 66). Roach finds the comment ironic. He writes, “Coming from the architect who had overseen repairs to the devastated White House after the remorseless sack and burning of Washington by the British, this critique is an extraordinary piece of Americana indeed” (66). By identifying the activity of the black community as savage, Latrobe’s critique, like Crete’s, also indicates the characteristic primitivism that was relegated consistently to all groups actively contributing to the city’s foundational Franco-African culture. In justifying their American rights to power of the colony via superiority, according to their own restrictive, puritanical ideologies, persons such as Crete and Latrobe provided representations of a New Orleans that appeared exotic and foreign, decidedly un-American, and sexually expressive. To reading audiences from Anglicized colonies, reports of New Orleans would thus have inscribed in the colonial imagination an idea of the city as a separate and primitive landscape, highly sexualized and morally depraved. This is an image ripe for a later, secularized re-imagining of New Orleans as a romanticized site of chaos and play, or of chaos and threat. The models are not mutually exclusive.
While the Americans carefully constructed their performances of whiteness, thus differentiating themselves from the city’s extant communities via a haughty exclusivity, the creoles whom they attempted to debase participated in a cultural imagining strikingly parallel to the American performance. The emergence of a creole mythology, a self-imagining of the group as purely European in descent, seems to coincide with the arrival of the Americans, as a means of survival in a hybrid community where shifting power had become more strictly associated with whiteness. Their performance of whiteness appears to respond to the Anglo-American ethic that infiltrated New Orleans with the surging immigration of American citizens entering the city after 1803. Observing the Franco-African culture of the city through the strident lens of Protestantism, immigrant New Englanders posted signs protesting advertisements of the creole community’s Sunday balls. Their conservative newspapers ranted against the lenient mores of a culture whose members practiced dancing, horse racing, and theater on Sundays rather than observing the Christian morality of Sabbath abstinence. In his article “Creoles and Americans,” historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. records an early 19th century condemnation of New Orleans as a “‘modern Golgotha,’ whose history presented ‘the fullest measure of human woe, of moral degradation, of human suffering…the blackest rage of human passion, and all the dark and damning deeds that the fiends of the infernal regions could perpetrate’” (qtd. 150, italics mine). The indictment, aimed at the constituent cultural populations active in New Orleans at the time of the purchase, included the creole culture which began to imagine itself falsely as strictly French or Spanish in origin and which had flourished, in active communion with the African culture that it failed to recognize, during the previous periods of French and Spanish rule. Responding to the pervasive American sentiment that equated the creole group with inherent sin and wickedness, the creoles created an alternate self-conception, also appealing to whiteness as purified through the bloodline, but privileging values the creole deemed un-American.
The two groups who imagined themselves dominant on the basis of their whiteness, the Anglo-Americans and the French and Spanish creoles, both constructed their identities in terms of aristocratic refinement that expressed horror at the cultural baseness of the social groups against which they defined themselves. Employing a strategy similar to the white shock performed at Congo Square, creoles responded to immigrant Americans by encoding them as “swinish ‘Kaintucks’ storming from their river flatboats and barges to carouse in the waterfront dives of the city, or as crabbed skinflint Yankee tradesmen cold to the joys of theater and ballroom as well as to more shadowy pleasures of life” (Tregle 135). The similar performances of whiteness highlight discrepancies in cultural values, which led the creoles to justify their superiority over the incoming Americans on the basis of the latter group’s inability to form an integrated sensibility of refinement and pleasure. Unlike the Americans, whose number continued to grow rapidly in the city after 1803, the creoles faced cultural annihilation as Americans gained control of the local economy, government, and language. In response, the creoles who identified themselves according to strictly European bloodlines began to re-imagine the creole population as possessing an eternal essence and inherent perfection.

Asserting their claim to longevity, the creoles began to refer to themselves as the ancienne population, a phrase through whose rhetoric, Tregle indicates, the creoles may have hoped to challenge American control successfully by appealing to the timelessness of their own group solidarity. The choice of the phrase, however, ultimately secured a myth of a vanished culture. The creoles created nostalgia for their own disappearance, their legacy, through the creation of a false reputation based upon ideals and a disappearance starkly more dramatic than the actual shift of power. Their self-conceptions are embedded in this fantasy that is brewed with appeals to a sense of aristocracy and sensuality which they found lacking in American culture. Tregle’s description of the quintessential male of the creole myth exudes fantastic appeal: he “moves in a world devoted to the theater and opera, occupying himself with
thoroughbred horses, dueling foils, and the pleasures of both dining and gaming tables, eschewing in his patrician self-esteem all employment which might require removal of his jacket or the use of his hands” (136). Popularization of the myth resulted in a second formative expression of exotic New Orleans, again relying on the possibilities of the unknown, but this time generating a nostalgic experience for a falsely vanished culture. In this construction of exotic New Orleans, the city is imagined as a site of a lost, idyllic grandeur that never actually existed. French colonial New Orleans, imagined from a perspective that sought to idealize Creole constructions of whiteness, was thus re-created under a sensualized and grandiloquent mask that sought to obscure other realities of the era and of its primary faction of power.

Explicating the American tendency toward a construction of exotic New Orleans is also a concern for Southern literature scholar Lewis Simpson. In tracking the production and maintenance of the illusory image of the city’s idyllic grandeur, Simpson also recognizes the creation of a Southern legacy, a lost ideal. While he affirms that New Orleans was imagined as America’s most exotic Southern city even before the Civil War, he identifies the popularization of the myth and the deepening of its nostalgia as constructions responding to Southern defeat in the war. He writes,

But after the surrender – when the Confederacy became at the stroke the Old Confederacy and the South the Old South, and the aura of a never-never-land exoticism began to spread over the land of the Lost Cause – New Orleans in the guise of Old New Orleans became the leading presence of that form of nineteenth-century literary exoticism known as local color. (80)

The re-imagining of the city as a cherished ideal as response to a loss of political power aligns Simpson’s theory with the careful imagining exhibited by New Orleans creoles after the city shifted from French to American control. The distinction between the two mythologies, however, rests in the surge of literary activity and production demands that followed the Civil War. During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, New Orleans was offered up through the works of Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, George Washington Cable, Lafcadio
Hearn, and Kate Chopin as a city rife with struggles between old and new forms of society. Simpson quotes a northern journalist who, observing the city in 1873, described the old system as a "picturesque and unjust civilization of the past" (qtd. 180). Simpson’s contention with the description lies in the superficiality of the adjectives chosen, since these responded to an increasingly popular strain of local-color exoticism, a mask of the idyllic grandeur of Old New Orleans. Unrecognized or masked by this strain, which has continued to determine the production of the image of nostalgic New Orleans in literature and film, are the actual complexities of a city created and re-created under three flags of colonial empire and fed by a multi-national immigrating base.

Popularized through the mask of the exotic among post-Civil War audiences who overwhelmingly favored a New Orleans setting in novels romanticizing the Old South, the city quickly found its exoticism becoming a marketable commodity. Simpson observes that “by the beginning of the twentieth century the local-color damnation of New Orleans was so complete that it was virtually impossible for the imagination to transcend it” (82). Popularized by its image, New Orleans steadily attracted new groups of writers, notably William Faulkner, who attempted to direct the city’s literary mode toward more modern themes. However, notes Simpson, “what at first appeared to be the subversion of local colorism by a mode of fierce novelistic realism has proved to be simply an inversion of the genteel local-color image into a local-color image of exotic depravity” (82). Faulkner’s Absalom Absalom! is emblematic of this complaint, as it draws upon one of New Orleans’ most controversial historical practices in order to emphasize the moral ambiguity of one character and to instigate the undoing of another.

In the novel, Henry Sutpen discovers in New Orleans that his sister’s fiancé Charles Bon is involved with a quadroon mistress, with whom Bon has a son. Bon defends his practice of plaçage, defined by scholar James Woodland as “the economic arrangement approximating marriage between wealthy white men and women of color.” Woodland elaborates that “the
plaçage system was the clearest example of the difference of New Orleans from the rest of the South or the country as a whole” (46-7). In defending the practice to Henry, who has called the mistress a whore, Bon appeals to a sensibility of sensuality and aristocratic manners – the idea guiding the production of nostalgic New Orleans – which masks what Henry considers to be the moral reprehensibility of the practice. In his appeal, Bon both reifies the quadroon women as luxurious trophies purchased by men sworn to afford them and defends the practice according to a noble sense of service and self-sacrifice. He argues,

No: not whores. Not even courtesans: – creatures taken at childhood, culled and chosen and raised more carefully than any white girl, any nun, than any blooded mare even…more valuable as commodities than white girls…and chosen by some man who in return, not can and not will but must, supply her with the surroundings proper in which to love and be beautiful and divert, and who must usually risk his life or at least his blood for that privilege. No, not whores. (93)

Re-imagining the image of New Orleans maintained by the creole mythology and appealing to its inaccessible, exotic nostalgia, Faulkner invests the myth of Old New Orleans with a sense of depravity that results from the mapping of controversial practice onto a sensibility formerly exoticized as ideal. The contrapuntal position of the two elements emphasizes the exotic strain, in which occurs the simultaneous possibility of contradictory elements. In this instance, depravity retains some hint of mystery because the existence of the ideal is not wholly negated. Rather, it serves as a justification for Bon, who can easily transgress the ethical gap between the elements. Faulkner’s New Orleans, a society whose justification of its acceptance of plaçage is revealed in Bon’s defense, thus is exoticized as a liminal, ambiguous space, in which possibilities of moral ideals and moral baseness can coincide for an insider. For Henry, the outsider, simultaneous possibilities upset the moral conscience, especially since Bon plans to wed this depraved morality into the Sutpen family. Henry’s foray into the liminal space begins
the dissolution of his character, and he eventually kills Bon, identifying New Orleans, "with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous" (86), as a field of undoing for the entering stranger.

Writers such as Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, negotiating their own roles as both writers and readers, both comprised and perpetuated those audiences who remained interested in texts creating an exotic American city. The process of literary production thus effectively continued to determine New Orleans, in the imaginations of its audience, as the central American location for exotic setting, behavior, and circumstance. Emphatically re-imagined as such through the continuing production of representations of the exotic, New Orleans has skimmed its tourists and its immigrating population from crowds seeking the living model for this exoticism. Both determining and producing the continuing representations of the city, popular demand has perpetuated the exotic image of New Orleans through the arts, policies, and economic interests of the populace, contributing to the maintenance of the city as an active site of imaginative play relying on transgression.

The image of New Orleans as exotic is successfully maintained through business ventures that promote transgressive possibilities -- Mardi Gras, swamp tours, voodoo museums, and vampire balls -- that lure both tourists and native New Orleanians into activities that promise the Eurocentric imagination an experience unlike any other. The success of these ventures does not simply underscore an American penchant for the unusual. New Orleans is created through many representations as a place of distinct otherness, capable of effecting human transformation on a grand scale. The imagined city is used as a device, a catalyst. Often it becomes the site in which the entering stranger is consumed, unable to escape the strange and fevered set-apart world of New Orleans. In the film Easy Rider, the bohemian traveler enters New Orleans anticipating his escape into the ultimately wild, jungle-like freedom of Mardi Gras; however, the film re-imagines the popular jungle-as-freedom motif as a mask for constriction. The jungle is thus represented as sinister, as a field of undoing that underlies the
luring, popular mask of free play. In Williams’ play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which will be further analyzed in the second section of this paper, the function of the city-as-catalyst is similar; New Orleans elicits the unfolding of madness and the eruption of brutal domestic violence visited, again, upon a traveler entering the city. Faulkner’s Henry Sutpen suffers a similar fate upon entering New Orleans; the dissolution of his character begins once he visits the city, eventually provoking him to murder. In none of these constructions can the entering stranger come to terms with the jungle; rather, the stranger is consumed by death or madness.

This fantastic empowerment of the city reveals the Western need for a discrete space of opposition, distinctly removed from rational and mundane activity and pliable to the imaginative needs of fictitious discourses. As indicated by the popularity and longevity of the image, the West finds pleasure in this wildness, in the thrill that results from the mixing of fear and empowerment. In its exotic city, there is always the threat of the dissolution of boundaries, the transgression of the Eurocentric self into the space of the other that is characterized by a descent into madness, the possession by the exotic other. Counterbalancing this threat is the potential for empowerment, which could result from the successful conquest of the other that defines the Eurocentric self via a hierarchical position of opposition capable of reinforcing colonial stereotypes. In either strain of development, the possibility for transgression relies on the creation of irreducible differences between the observer and its designated other. The difference is magnified through exoticism, which reacts to the unknown entity by creating within it the simultaneous existence of contradictory possibilities. In the exoticized vocabulary describing New Orleans, the jungle metaphor often designates that othered sphere which offers passage, transgression, or the threat of consumption to the venturing Eurocentric imagination. As a dialectical colonial construction assimilating exoticized interpretations of both the landscape and the area’s hybrid cultural bases, the jungle metaphor fuses colonial ideas of place
and race, which are coordinately imagined as locations for the suggested possibilities of darkness.

According to Morrison’s construction, the white American literary imagination has consistently posited that opposition and transgressive possibilities are enabled through contact with blackness. The role of blackness is often assumed by a character whose identification with the possibilities of darkness facilitates, for the white American, “the process of entering what one is estranged from” (4), which then effects a transformation. Morrison’s theory is also applicable to a larger field, in which New Orleans can work as an entire city assuming the role of blackness for the American literary imagination. Represented as a jungle which only thinly masks the frequent reliance of the metaphor on race, the idea of New Orleans depends upon an exotic element often infused with racialized themes. These may be explicit, as in Faulkner’s New Orleans, where miscegenation within the plaçage system contributes to exoticism; plaçage sustains the simultaneous existence of whiteness and blackness, which are set up in Absalom, Absalom! as explicit contradictions in the Sutpen-based narrative that identifies blacks as animals. Racialized themes may also be implicit, as they appear in William’s work, where the performance of whiteness relies upon an element of threatening blackness created to offer a counter-narrative to whiteness. Maintaining the tension of coordinate contradictions often underwritten by race is also necessary to sustaining the thrill of the Eurocentric idea of New Orleans. In the exotic city, the possibility of transgression into the jungle allows the Eurocentric observer the sport of his vexation with the place; narratives constructed from this rich field of tension focus on the possibilities of movement toward and within the jungle. Imagined blackness moves within the city on shifting grounds; it can pervade the entire city for the entering, threatened white American stranger, becoming the decentered and unmanageable, unlocatable threat to the pursued white characters. It can also be present yet sublimated, as
revealed within deconstructions of the performance of whiteness. It is animalistic – bestial, ravenous – as befits the American imagination.

The ambiguity of the colonial playground – the rich unknown of its sustained contradiction – is maintained as an imaginative resource. It is a place of continued colonial sport, where hierarchies are maintained through the differentiation of self and other allowed by exoticism. It is also masked as a last unconquered space, a destination for escape into a unique urban wildness within the confines of America. This is one reason why the idea of New Orleans is problematic: the mask is marketable. It sells not only the continuing exoticized representations of the city (including the vampire niche, where liminal space opens up between the contradictory spaces of living and dead), but also its cultural performances. Mardi Gras is often called “the greatest free show on earth.” For those who use New Orleans as a place of sport or escape, the imagined city becomes utilitarian, and the accuracy of the mask is not questioned. It does, however, occlude the conditions of social and economic groups for whom the city is, traditionally, less a place of escape than a place of constriction that is represented visually in the slave-bricked sidewalks and audibly in surrounding place names, but is forgotten in popular representations of the city. Forgetting and often false remembrance are essential to the city’s vocabulary of Eurocentric representation, which often describes a complex field of fantasy informed by, yet also masking, historical and social conditions. In order to determine the ways in which various writers approach the mask, I will now return to the literary works of Tennessee Williams, Brenda Marie Osbey, and Joy Harjo to show how the popular representational vocabulary of New Orleans is encountered by writers creating site-specific literature.
Navigating the Jungle: Tennessee Williams, Brenda Marie Osbey, and Joy Harjo

Tennessee Williams’ dramas consistently portray New Orleans as a locus of depravity. While Williams’ fascination with the jungle dynamic is apparent in his initial scene notations for *Suddenly Last Summer*, his use of the jungle landscape in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is even further intensified, exoticizing the city as an alien land capable of inducing madness in the entering stranger. Williams’ approaches contribute to the creative imagining of the city as part of a dialectic that identifies the city’s population as deranged. In fact, New Orleans’ historical roots indicate its colonizers’ persistent identification of the area with madness. During its initial years of French colonization, New Orleans existed as a dumping ground for persons rejected from French society. In 1717 and 1718, condemned French prisoners were re-sentenced to Louisiana for a term of three years labor, after which time they could claim status as property owners who acquired a portion of the land they had worked. Deserting soldiers, prostitutes, the poor, beggars, and persons who had been convicted of murder and other violent acts also comprised the list of the exiled. Charles Dufour writes in “The People of New Orleans” that “France was purged of its human dregs and worst derelicts, as prisons, detention houses and hospitals were emptied and denizens of the streets were rounded up and shipped to Louisiana” (25). By 1720, deportation had become common. Families requested the relocation of sons and daughters, and according to African studies scholar Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “comments found in police files included, ‘Here is a true subject for Louisiana’ and ‘A very bad subject who deserves…to be among those who are destined for the new colonies’” (6). The deportation process was neither calm nor well organized. Persons were kidnapped from Paris streets, and riots often erupted among prisoners marked for deportation to Louisiana. The colony was universally detested, and officials remarked on the deterioration of the moral character of persons sent to the colony.
This faction of Louisiana's population did not successfully root and endure. Many colonists escaped and returned to France or died, leaving Louisiana open to settlement by voluntarily immigrating German and Canadian groups. However, resonances from this initial populating tactic and the concordant stigma relegated to the city as a site of moral depravity can be heard in Williams' representations. The insistence upon the city's perversity is written into performance literature in a move that successfully executes several tasks. By creating dramatic literature, Williams incites the possibility of the continued imagining of New Orleans as a locus of madness; the ensuing popularity of his work has affirmed the possibility, also proving that the niche of the American jungle is marketable. In identifying New Orleans as this jungle, Williams also demonstrates that the city's unique colonial history and it lush geography can align to create a literary site ripe with possibilities for imagined darkness and exoticization of events. He uses this rich backdrop as a dramatic landscape upon which he can begin to map race and class relationships, Southern identities, and the collapse of various chaotic relationships.

Williams works within the liminal spaces of the city to form the rich texture of his imagined site. In *Streetcar,* he exoticizes the elements of death and pleasure by sustaining their contrary co-existence through the mouthpiece of Blanche, the entering stranger. She responds to a woman asking whether she is lost by saying, "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields!" (15). The exchange indicates the city's lack of navigability; Blanche's orientation, upon entering New Orleans, is confused since she can progress through sites of sensual pleasure, death, and elysium – in itself a mixing of both elements – without much interruption. Her confusion increases as she continues to observe the co-mingling of categories she considers discrete. She demands of her sister Stella Kowalski, "Explain this place to me!" (19) She then immediately degrades "these conditions!" in which Stella lives. A study of Williams' scene
notations reveals that the Kowalskis live in an impoverished neighborhood that has a “raffish charm” as a section of “a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town” (13). The “music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner” also accompanies the scene. Blanche’s aversion to the co-existence of folks of varying races reveals her carefully constructed performance of whiteness, which appeals to her self-suggested morality, aristocratic separatism, and superiority. Stella, ambiguously positioned between participation within Blanche’s performance and her own identification with the city, both defends and mystifies its cultural hybridity. “New Orleans isn’t like other cities” (20), she explains to Blanche.

Like Stella, Williams constructs a way of thinking about New Orleans that remains complex. Although his description of “the relatively warm and easy intermingling of races” abstains from privileging whiteness, the jungle construction in *Streetcar* is based on racial implications and hosts at least one consuming beast. Stanley Kowalski is initially introduced via Stella’s descriptions of him to Blanche. Stella is simultaneously enchanted and repulsed by Stanley. She and Blanche are amused that his Polish descent identifies him as ironically “not so highbrow” as the Irish (25). Stella then intimates his animalistic nature, describing him as “a different species” (24) and admitting that she nearly goes “wild” (25) when he travels without her. Her position toward him reveals his identity as the beast, irreducibly different from her because of his ability to effect her transgression into the space of savagery that he constantly occupies. Her vexation with him, sustained through her awareness of her own classist superiority and her incompatible yet uncontrollable desire to be with him, in his own space, indicates Williams’ reliance on colonially-based constructions of blackness, especially those described by Morrison. Stanley admits Stella’s passage into estranged territory; he later effects Blanche’s consumption by madness.
The jungle metaphor becomes the vehicle for Blanche’s criticisms of Stanley, which include both classist reproaches such as “he’s common!” (71) and more vehement, exoticized characterizations of Stanley as “downright – bestial” (71). Using the jungle, Williams is able to mystify condemnations revealing race and class bias through Blanche, whose performance of whiteness directs her intense opposition to Stanley:

There’s even something – sub-human – something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something – ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I’ve seen in – anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! (72)

Of course, Blanche’s invective gestures toward her own fall in the play, since the prize born home from the kill in the jungle suggests the sensual undoing of the victimized body at the hands of the beast. In this gesture, as in the unraveling of the rest of the play, Williams’ jungle metaphor again acts as the exotic backdrop texturing the plot activity with a sense of violent primitivism based on desire and savagery.

Blanche, whose names translates as “white,” cannot sustain her performance of whiteness throughout Streetcar, and the performance which appeals to virtue is revealed as a mask for a sublimated drive seeking pleasure through vice. Blanche’s alcoholic dependency increases while she remains in the city; her vice – another construction of pleasure and death, in which the two collide with negative effects – begins to break the veneer of her whiteness. As the contradictory elements remain sustained, the irreconcilability of their coexistence begins to undo Blanche’s character. When Stanley rapes her, the act represents the jungle’s ultimate consumption of Blanche; she descends into madness. Her final gestures, which are performed with polite and gay gentility throughout most of the scene leading toward her seemingly composed last line, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (142), resemble those of the genteel Southern lady whom she has imagined herself. However, the act is ventriloquism. Her whiteness masks nothing once the blackness has ravished her; only madness
lies beneath. Blanche is deluded throughout the final scene, relying on the false gaiety of her aristocratic manner and unaware of actual events. Through Blanche’s performance, Williams critiques the mask of whiteness as a social veneer, but any attempt at class-based criticism is undermined by his construction of Stanley as the jungle’s consuming beast. The flaw is inherently site-specific; while many of Streetcar’s narrative events could have been set outside New Orleans, the rich vehicle of the jungle metaphor allows the play the essential intensity of its drama. Its themes of violence, sensuality, and madness are culled from the sustained tension of contradictions and the possibilities for movement within the city’s lush landscape that in return continue to construct the idea of New Orleans as America’s singular site of exotic depravity.

In Suddenly Last Summer, set in the Garden District area of American settlement, Williams critiques the performance of whiteness by removing the jungle from its association with wildness and marginalized groups and mapping it onto the garden of an affluent citizen, Mrs. Venable. Venable orders a lobotomy for her niece Catherine, who has witnessed the cannibalistic consumption of her cousin Sebastian Venable (the matriarch’s son) during a vacation spent on a tropical island. As in Streetcar, Williams does attempt to undermine the performance of whiteness, but his approach is undercut by his continued reliance on the jungle metaphor. In a move that transfers notions of savagery onto the aristocratic Americans – themselves responsible for the creation of that idea as part of an oppositional binary construct designed to emphasize their civility – Williams places Mrs. Venable as the savage beast of the Garden District, motivated by greed to enact her own consumption of others. Her insistence that Catherine’s memory be forcibly forgotten is a performance of whiteness motivated by the fear that the Venable reputation will be tainted by the remembrance of acts of cannibalistic darkness. Williams makes the performance transparent, however, when Venable assumes the role that she denies by advising the dismembering of the witness to Sebastian’s murder.
Through Venable's transparency, Williams critiques the performance of whiteness, but his attempt is thwarted as it simply equates Venable with the play's other beasts, the exoticized children of the tropical island. Although the approach is problematic in its tendency both to undermine and to maintain colonially-founded stereotypes, Williams' attempt to critique the performance of whiteness necessitates further discussion.

Through Mrs. Venable, Williams subverts the pleasure-through-virtue dynamic of whiteness. While the matriarch assumes her own virtue in ordering Catherine's lobotomy, thus attempting to distance herself from primitivism, the only pleasure available through the death-like sentencing of the lobotomy is in Venable's retained social status. As in Streetcar, the performance of whiteness that appeals to virtue is revealed to be a mask for the sublimated drive of pleasure sought through vice, in this case through a killing that will allow the continued pleasure of wealth and aristocracy. By rewriting Venable's pleasure as greedily desirous rather than virtuous, Williams is able to offer site-specific class criticism that uses ideas of New Orleans-as-jungle to undermine the ideologies of a wealthy and separatist aristocratic group largely responsible for the development and maintenance of that idea. Mapping two seemingly contradictory representations of New Orleans onto a single plane, Williams reveals that the Garden of Eden is merely a mask for the City of Sin. The linking of the two indicates that the existence of both relies on the performance of whiteness, which emphasizes the existence and wretchedness of the cultural baseness that the performance attempts to oppose and deny. In Williams' work, whiteness is performed by the careful forgetting and falsification of real memory. It is a construct, imagined and dependent on performance for the careful maintenance of its veneer. Using an approach apposite to Williams' critique of whiteness as a veneer based on forgetting, Brenda Marie Osbey's poetry relies on the reconstruction of historical narratives that have been carefully forgotten. Her work, which employs some elements of the city
representational vocabulary without exoticizing them, emphasizes the solidity and solidarity of the African-American community in New Orleans.

Osbey is a contemporary New Orleans writer whose poems return to figures in New Orleans’ colonial history, including Luis Congo and Juan San Malo, whom she engages in conversation as an act of re-membering that privileges the dead as active members of the community. The integration of the categories living and dead, as well as the emphasis on community, necessitate that Osbey’s poems be read as a culturally significant alternative to the standpoint that engages elements of New Orleans’ representational vocabulary in an exoticizing manner. By integrating Eurocentrically discrete categories and constructing themes such as the death and pleasure dynamic to preclude the contradictions of these elements, Osbey’s work invests the vocabulary with possibilities for alternate imaginings that elude colonial hierarchies and affirm the solidarity of otherwise marginalized communities. Like Williams’ work, Osbey’s poetry is site-specific, but its relevance to the city is based less on metaphorical imagining than on the unique history of African-American resistance to colonization in New Orleans.

Many of the poems in Osbey’s *All Saints* work out of a syncretic tradition that merits an investigation of the cultural and historical background informing the book’s title. In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach compares the cultural differences that allow for the exclusivity or integration of the categories living and dead. Roach’s research indicates that exclusivity is largely a modern European concept, and its practice in New Orleans paralleled the evacuation of five hundred-year-old church tombs and charnel houses in Paris. A plan of New Orleans dated 1731 maps the placement of the cemetery outside the boundaries of the city proper, a move that “effectively masked the dead…from the daily experience of the living” (Roach 54). The city’s African-American community did not wholly subscribe to the practices of an increasingly modern European power, but instead invested their funeral rites with a fusion of
African belief systems and the Catholicism forced upon them by strictures in the Code Noir. According to Roach, Catholic practices such as feast days and burial rites provided the framework through which a syncretic tradition could emerge, including “celebrations of death inspired by apparently orthodox belief in the participation of ancestral spirits – call them ‘saints’ – in the world of the present” (Roach 59). Osbey’s poetry urges the enactment of syncretic tenets by calling for the participation of ancestral spirits whom she deems “saints.” Prefacing the first section of her poetry in All Saints, she writes, “Live among your dead, whom you have every right to love” (1).

Osbey’s insistence upon the religious prerogative of African-Americans also underscores the cultural affirmation that is necessary to sustain community solidarity. Both the re-formulation of dominant ideologies, which is asserted in the syncretic and subverted Catholicism, and the recognition of authentic rites and values, which occurs in the recognition of ancestral participation, are vital to the continuing creation of a dynamic community by its members. Announcements of prerogative – the right to love and live among the dead – contribute to active re-imagining by emphasizing the validity of community rites and values and by enabling the continued forward thrust of community action. In Osbey’s formulation, the life of the community is sustained through its rightful inclusion of the dead, empowering its thrust with a momentum arising not only from the present moment of the singly proclaimed right, but also from the still-active presence of community members long dead. Community solidarity is thus compelled in Osbey’s preface by the single voice which becomes multiplied by the participation of actors still present to the community. By urging the widened scope of community that includes the dead, Osbey participates in the re-imagining of the group by remembering it, thus celebrating the dead in a dynamic manner that radically opposes the Eurocentric formulation of the death-and-pleasure motif. This dynamic is also informed by the
historically subversive role of funerals in New Orleans to promote solidarity among members of the African-American community.

In order to evade the regulations of the Code Noir that restricted gatherings of slaves, blacks in New Orleans often used the occasion of funerals to assemble. Records from the early nineteenth century confirm consistently well-attended funerals within the black community. Roach states that “the occasion created by death offered this community an opportunity to affirm its semiautonomous but discreetly submerged existence within or against the obligatory rituals of the better publicized fiction called the dominant culture” (60). This history of dynamic subversion has also provided New Orleans with another icon of its cultural singularity, the celebration of the dead that occurs in jazz funerals. In the ritual’s transformative moment of “cutting the body loose,” there erupts “a burst of joyous music, dance, and humor, often ribald, in which there is no impiety” (Roach 62). Roach attributes the lack of impiety to a closer integration of life and death not practiced in European rites; his comment calls attention to the lack of any recognition of contradiction among the elements. In the jazz funeral, the dead are celebrated; in Osbey’s poetry, one can live among them and recognize their own dynamic continuity. Re-membering, rather than impiety, can thus also inform the juxtaposition of two figures whose historical roles initially seem to differ vastly. In Osbey’s poem, “The Business of Pursuit: San Malo’s Prayer,” Juan San Malo, a maroon leader, addresses Luis Congo, a free black man who purchased his freedom by accepting a job as an executioner of runaway slaves.

Historical narratives reveal a seemingly wide divergence between the two men. San Malo, a former slave, led maroon settlements in Bas de Fleuve, the outlying swampland located between the city and the mouth of the Mississippi River. San Malo is remembered for one of his returns to Gaillardeland, a section of Bas de Fleuve, in 1784. He struck an ax into a tree, announcing, “‘Malheur au blanc qui passera ces bornes’ ['Woe to the white who would pass this boundary’]” (Hall 213). Other narratives recount his courage and loyalty to the African-
American community; he freed and armed slaves captured by Americans. Ultimately, San Malo was captured and executed by Spanish authorities. Luis Congo seems to occupy an opposite role in New Orleans history. He was offered the execution job by city officials, who believed the threat of capital punishment would enable them to maintain control over the blacks and the lower classes, factions of the population whom the upper classes feared. In 1725, Congo was approached with the job, which he accepted conditionally, demanding his and his wife’s freedom, as well as a substantial plot of land on which to work for his own benefit, away from the settlers. New Orleans officials granted him freedom and land, and his wife’s labor, retained under the Company of the Indies, was no longer enforced. For his work, Congo was attacked by both blacks and Native Americans, with whom the blacks frequently made alliances. He complained of attacks throughout the more than ten years he served as an executioner (Hall 132). Although Hall records that Congo’s job included executing both white and black citizens (131), Osbey notes that Congo was “the official executioner of slaves escaping New Orleans via Bayou St. John; he is said to have died mysteriously at the hand of slaves” (124).

In the following lines from “The Business of Pursuit: San Malo’s Prayer,” San Malo addresses Congo:

you must have had your vision...
blinded as you must have been...
by the mulata, the first gold piece they gave you...
i say the traitor’s heart is long and wide and deep as any other’s.
i say luis congo looked out from his highest tower and cursed the dark, the land, his own slave-heart....
i say it is no small thing to betray one’s own.
(Osbey 108-114)

“How free can any of us have been?” San Malo asks Luis Congo (114). He argues that Congo initially would have envisioned the execution job as a means toward freedom, the possibility of which is signaled in this excerpt by the acquisition of gold. Congo’s attempt at freedom, however, materializes as another form of imprisonment, since his choice isolates him from his
San Malo locates Congo within a figurative tower, emphasizing his enclosure and isolation; it is a revealing metaphor of place in site-specific literature. The tower maps Congo’s isolation in a Eurocentric space not present in New Orleans’ colonial architecture; its appearance gestures toward its replacement of the site which usually indicates isolation in representations of colonial New Orleans. In this respect, the tower works in opposition to swampland, perhaps the most commonly represented site of seclusion from the colonial city. The replacement indicates Osbey’s refusal of common colonially imagined themes. In this poem, swampland can be re-imagined as the location of freedom, especially as the site of San Malo’s maroon societies, while the tower becomes the model representing constriction or isolation within Eurocentric sites. From this tower, San Malo imagines Congo’s sweeping curse of the dark, likely signifying the shared sense of futility of both men seeking freedom for African-Americans within a white-dominated colonial landscape. While the match of San Malo with Congo initially seems incongruent to Osbey’s recognition of sympathy between the two, both are revealed as seekers of freedom. This convergence of both men’s histories, which re-members both Luis Congo and San Malo as laudable members of the African-American community, is the impetus for the radical charge of the poem.

Juan San Malo’s surname translates as St. Malo, identifying him as one of the saints referred to in Osbey’s title All Saints and suggesting another dimension to the book’s title. While All Saints may allude to a subversive and syncretic tradition which makes ancestral participation appear orthodox, the title may also indicate the necessity of absolving persons such as Luis Congo. It may also allude to the acceptance of a wider definition of community, one that is re-membered through a transformative process that attempts to remove the book’s historical persons from a colonial narrative of domination and persistent forgetting and to reinvest their dynamic memories with reverence. When Osbey urges her readers to live among and love their dead, she encourages an integration of living and dead that re-members the
community radically. Loving the dead must involve investigating potential narratives between colonial figures like San Malo and Luis Congo, as well as imagining movement toward the creation of one’s own sainthood. “And soon/ One day/ May we all be counted among them” (Osbey ix), Osbey writes, emphasizing a collective hope inclusive of all members of the African-American community. Her identification of saint-making as radical cultural re-membering indicates the necessity of understanding New Orleans’ representational vocabulary as a variable set of tropes and metaphors alternately oppositional and congruent, according to use by social groups who employ the vocabulary from varying perspectives. For Osbey, the boundaries between the categories living and dead are malleable, and the transgression between categories elicits celebration rather than threat. The dead are not entombed to be removed from the community; the community solidifies because the dead are not forgotten.

While Joy Harjo’s re-membering does not have the same cultural context as Osbey’s, her recognition of the voices of the dead in her poem “New Orleans” illuminates a Creek tribal history which has been carefully and persistently forgotten in Eurocentric spheres. A selection from “New Orleans” follows, in which a Creek narrator returns to the city to “look for evidence of other Creeks” (3052) in the area formerly the Creek Indians’ homeland, where only the native place names have survived.

There are voices buried in the Mississippi mud. There are ancestors and future children buried beneath the currents stirred up by pleasure boats going up and down.
There are stories here made of memory.
(3053)

The burial of voices in the mud references the history of extermination and removal of the Creek Indians, who comprised a nation of an estimated 11,000 to 20,000 members in the Southeast during the 18th century. The voices also suggest the audible resonance of Native
American languages, parts of which have been appropriated by colonizers and are still extant as local place names.

In Harjo’s poem, colonial eradication of Native Americans from the New Orleans area merits the return of a relocated Creek narrator who struggles to re-member the Creek community in a city where Native American culture and history have been removed and carefully forgotten. The narrator infuses the commercialized setting of the contemporary city with the history that the colonial project has forgotten: the memory of the area as it is identified by Creeks who recognize it as homeland. This memory is used to inform the shops, boats, buildings, and bars of the French Quarter. In one shop, a clerk’s unawareness “that he is inside magic stones” has destructive potential for him. The immense danger of his forgetting indicates Harjo’s critique of the Eurocentric idea of New Orleans, since the constructed and commercialized city is historically incomplete in its unawareness and inaccuracies. Essential to this critique is Harjo’s emphasis on destruction, or the inherent fatality of the colonial project of New Orleans, which fails to recognize the power and memory of the landscape on which the city has been constructed. Harjo’s poem locates the contemporary city as a site of consumerism and passage – indicated by the persistent presence of commercial buildings and moving vehicles in the poem – built upon a living landscape that the colonialized city ignores. This landscape is authenticated by its memory and the memories of the indigenous populations who had preceded and have survived past the colonial project. Referring to elements of the natural landscape, Harjo writes, “These things/ have memory,/ you know./ I have a memory./ It swims deep in blood,/ a delta in the skin” (3052).

After the living landscape is mapped as the foundation for the constructed city, Harjo’s verse regarding the buried voices appears. In this verse, Native Americans are placed within the living, authenticated landscape, and their voices resonate with an ambiguity that allows the narrator both to mourn the decimation of the Creek tribes and to suggest the revitalization of the
Creek community, which will endure alongside the living landscape after the temporal passage of the constructed city. This ambiguity is revealed in the phrase “future children/ buried beneath the currents,” which simultaneously references the destruction of the genealogical lines of ancestors—whose children will not be born—as well as the resurgence of a Creek population born in the Mississippi River area. The pleasure boat in this verse works as a trope from the city’s representational vocabulary, illuminating an explicit colonial relationship between death and pleasure. The pleasure boat is likely a gambling or cruise boat, both of which are singular New Orleans tourist draws. In Harjo’s construction, the pleasure boat alludes directly to the European colonies’ economic success and exploitation, which have relied on the decimation and relocation of Native American tribes. However, it is also important to note the temporality of the boat, which passes repeatedly across the river but never becomes part of the living landscape. The boat, as with all the capitalistic products of the constructed city, is subverted within a hierarchical system in the poem which privileges the endurance of the landscape and thus subtly alludes to the eventual passage of these objects.

The narrator eventually roots her quest in finding the body of Hernando de Soto, the first Spanish explorer to observe Native American populations in the Mississippi River area in the 1540s. Significant not only as an indicator of forthcoming waves of European settlers, de Soto is also remembered for a sixteenth century battle incited by his demand for Choctaw women and men whom he planned to enslave as baggage haulers. Although the baggage train was destroyed, the Choctaw town of Moma Bina was also lost, and de Soto’s band was afterwards able to traverse through Choctaw lands without major confrontation. Harjo writes,

And I know that I have seen DeSoto, having a drink on Bourbon Street, mad and crazy dancing with a woman as gold as the river bottom. (3054)
In the conclusion of her poem, Harjo has de Soto realize, in his drunken pleasure, that the wealth of the Southeast colonies lay in the Native American cultures whose eradication he provoked. Dancing, de Soto has embraced the woman whose skin is simultaneously mud-colored and gold. The value of wealth is thus relocated both in the woman and in the river bottom, the living landscape which functions as the site of tribal generation and endurance. In her construction of de Soto, Harjo returns to the New Orleans vocabulary to reinvent the idea of madness incurred upon the entering stranger. In this construction, the colonist becomes the stranger entering the indigenous culture. His madness is ironic, as it is perceived according to his own limited perspective, one in which his embrace of Native American culture would be considered mad. Within this construction however, de Soto’s reclamation of a semblance of sanity is implicated; the real madness is revealed through irony to be de Soto’s former quest, which he thought was for gold. According to the narrator, de Soto’s quest sought “something his heart wasn’t big enough to handle” (3053); the line intimates that the larger something is the culture later identified with gold, which de Soto finally embraces. Harjo’s poem uses de Soto’s ironic madness to argue against the persistent forgetting of Native American cultural foundations in the New Orleans area; she rewrites the failure to recognize New Orleans’ pre-colonial cultures as the ultimate madness.

The representational colonization of New Orleans includes a localized vocabulary that is formed according to geo-social and colonial histories and that varies in emphasis and meaning according to its use by different social groups active within the city. Contemporary and historical records of political rhetoric, as well as literary and cinematic representations of the city, indicate the variation and recurrence of these themes, metaphors, and tropes, the dynamics of which continue to merit further investigation. The image of New Orleans has been constructed, reconstructed and argued, identifying the city as a place of escape, of constriction, of madness, of nostalgia, and of colonial falsification. The history of the city’s representation is
itself jungle-like, tangled in cultural and ideological debates that contest the idea of the city. Although many Eurocentric thematic currents of imagining have been repeatedly romanticized, aestheticized, marketed and consumed, essential critiques of these representations exist. Demystifying America's jungle is necessary; New Orleans remains an active site for perpetuated colonial ideas, where representations occluding the material and ideological conditions of still-dominated groups continue to be imagined and consumed.
Bibliography


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Basil. Raybert Productions, 1969


Endnotes

1 Population leaped from 8,000 settlers in 1803 to 41,000 in 1840, and to 160,000 in 1860.
2 The campaign was successful. Foster is serving his second term as Louisiana’s governor.
3 Gayarre’s own imaginings of the city follow, from which may be gleaned some potentially accurate
descriptions of the physical state of the city and the colonial attitude regarding it, as well as Gayarre’s
own leanings toward a romanticized portrait of New Orleans:

The whole city was surrounded by a large ditch, and fenced in with sharp stakes
wedged close together. For the purposes of draining, a ditch ran along the four sides of
every square of the city, and every lot in every square was also ditched all round,
causing New Orleans to look very much like a microscopic caricature of Venice.
Mosquitoes buzzed, and enormous frogs croaked incessantly in concert with other
indescribable sounds; tall reeds, and grass of every variety, grew in the streets and in
the yards, so as to interrupt all communication, and offered a safe retreat, and places of
concealment to venomous reptiles, wild beasts, and malefactors, who, protected by
these impenetrable jungles, committed with impunity all sorts of evil deeds. (381)

Gayarre’s descriptions may or may not be indicative of the lens through which early colonists viewed the
city. It is difficult to distinguish clear boundaries in Gayarre’s report between historical evidence and
Gayarre’s own rampant tendency toward exoticization, since he fails to quote or cite the original sources
for these interpretations. However, his dependence on jungle imagery is apparent.
4 The cipriere supplied a strong economical base for the maroons, and proximity to New Orleans allowed
them to trade the corn, squash, and rice they raised, as well as domestic articles they crafted, with the
colonists.
5 In his journals describing the conditions of the Louisiana colony in 1803, Pierre Clement de Laussat
expressed amazement at the effects of humidity upon his clothing, as well as upon human longevity: “A
pair of boots hung up in a clean place became green with mildew within three or four days at most. This
quality of dampness in the air must not be harmful. People have good complexions; septuagenarians,
octogenarians, and nonagenarians are less rare than in most parts of Europe” (41). While the remarks may
not indicate an exoticizing tendency (the mildewing may or may not have been as dramatic a process as
described), the loosening of categories that allows the territory’s unfamiliar climate to increase life span
is certainly fodder for the exoticizing imagination.
6 Notice the explicit identification of irrational and damming passion with blackness.
7 At Mardi Gras, the contradictory elements of death and pleasure can be transgressed. Swamp tours
allow one to experience the exotic local landscape while bordering the threshold between the civilization
of the boat and wildness of the tangled swamp. In both vampire and exoticized voodoo experiences/
representations, the liminal spaces between living and dead are opened.
8 Brenda Marie Osbey explicitly refers to the presence of slave-bricked streets in All Saints. She writes,
“The handiwork of slave ancestors, the bricks are believed to possess spiritual power and are used most
frequently to bless and purify the homes of the faithful by rubbing across steps and doorways” (126).
9 Many Native American place names have survived the colonial experience, although they have been
removed from their cultural context and subsumed within the colonizer culture.
10 L. Ronald Forman, in collaboration with Joseph Logsdon and John Wilds, published a book titled
11 This is a common nickname for the city.

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