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City of Exiles: Unstable Narratives of New Orleans in George Washington Cable's *Old Creole Days*

Near the beginning of “‘Posson Jone’,” the fourth story in George Washington Cable’s 1879/81 collection *Old Creole Days*, the “elegant little heathen” Jules St.-Ange and his “yellow body-servant” Baptiste are discussing the upcoming bullfight in Place Congo, when they encounter a growing commotion:¹

Two or three persons ran to the opposite corner, and commenced striking at something with their canes. Others followed. Can M. St.-Ange and servant, who hasten forward – can the Creoles, Cubans, Spaniards, San Domingo refugees, and other loungers – can they hope it is a fight? They hurry forward. Is a man in a fit? The crowd pours in from the side-streets.²

When the hopeful multitude finally discover the cause of their thronging, they are disgruntled to discover only that a man’s hat has blown into the gutter. Furthermore, the man is, in the words of one onlooker, “Humph! an *Américain* – a West-Floridian; bah!”³ Notwithstanding this particular American being gigantic and quite literally having a roll of banknotes on his newly-uncovered head, he is not so exciting as a fight would have been. Happily, he will later make up for this deficiency by playing a leading role in a spectacular riot at the bullfight. In the meantime, this initial appearance is nicely indicative of Cable’s depiction of the attitudes and tensions in New Orleans in the years following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The disparate population groups of the city are here united in their apparent desire for conflict, or at least their relish for the perpetual possibility of one; they are also united in their separation from the ‘*Américain*,’ Parson Jones, rendered here an utter outsider. In this way, Jones is actually much closer to other inhabitants of Cable’s New Orleans than he may initially appear, an exile of sorts in a place at once sympathetic and dangerous. The narrative voice is both with the crowd and making

them the real object of study, a phenomenon which frequently occurs in Cable's crowd scenes. Most of all, we get a sense here of the sheer diversity of New Orleans life, the instability of its identity as an American city.

From its earliest days as a precarious colonial settlement, New Orleans has been a place in constant dialogue with itself and with the various local, regional, national, and international contexts that have contributed to its development. As the city approaches its three hundredth anniversary overall, having had three sometimes less-than-careful owners, it is still defined by its assumed and perhaps actual uniqueness. For whatever the validity of New Orleans' claims to singularity, it is perhaps its plurality which is its most constantly dynamic quality, the factor which most contributes to its asserted special status: its cultural identity is as unstable as its swampy foundations. Indeed, the very reasons variously put forth for the city's difference are frequently at odds with each other, and sometimes directly contradictory – all of which, of course, makes for a rich, beguiling dialogic realm, a place of transition, translation, and transfiguration. If the status of New Orleans as an 'American' city is problematic in the United States' sense, then it is surely a fascinating paradigm of 'America' when we think more openly, continentally and transatlantically. Cable's tales in *Old Creole Days*, and their relations to each other within the volume, offer vivid glimpses of the city's transient, dialogic quality.

New Orleans was founded in 1718 as an outpost of the French empire in the Americas. Swamps notwithstanding, its site between the Mississippi in its closing stages and Lake Pontchartrain clearly stands out as a valuable conduit between the vast North American interior navigable via the great river, other North American coastal regions and colonies, the lands to the south in Central and South America accessible by sea crossing, and the many islands of the Caribbean Sea. The colonial patchwork of the Americas at this time was, of course, dense and complex, and New Orleans stood to benefit from the trading possibilities suggested by its position within this tapestry. It was also subject to threats posed by rival colonial powers, notably the Spanish and the British, and by the Natchez, Choctaw and Chickasaw nations that inhabited parts of the sketchily defined Louisiana. Not least, it was also to be vitally informed by immigration from all of these various sources as well as from France itself and other French colonies and former colonies in the region. In 1762, Louisiana was rather reluctantly acquired by Spain, and New Orleans was therefore part of

the Spanish empire for nearly forty years – almost as long as it had belonged to France. By the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the youthful United States found itself faced with the apparent prospect of the now weakened Spain returning Louisiana to a reinvigorated France (in fact, this had already taken place, by secret treaty in 1800), and President Thomas Jefferson wrote: “There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans . . . France placing herself in that door assumes to us the attitude of defiance.”⁴ Dispatching James Monroe to put in an offer for Louisiana, Jefferson was to discover that Napoleon Bonaparte had already had a similar idea and was offering the whole territory for the princely sum of \$15 million. Deal done, New Orleans became a U.S. city in 1803, in a deal which effectively doubled the size of the United States overnight.

So before it was even a hundred years old, New Orleans had gone through at least three changes of identity even on the broadest level of ownership; it had also burned down, been destroyed by hurricanes and been rebuilt. On demographic and cultural levels, of course, the situation was much more complex even than this: the rapid and massive movement of *‘les Américains’* into the city after 1803 was hugely important, but only one factor among many in its ever fluctuating, diverging and merging population. What is actually meant by ‘New Orleanian,’ or ‘Louisianian’ (or ‘American,’ for that matter), has never been straightforward, and the term ‘Creole,’ by way of indication, has a complex, shifting usage in this context. Originally applied to and by people born in the territory itself, to distinguish them from immigrants, administrators and soldiers from first France and then Spain, and in some ways at least blind to racial distinction, the increasingly complex racial make-up of New Orleans led to changes in its meaning, its use in part dependent on who was speaking and listening. Depending on who you were, in the nineteenth century particularly, to call oneself Creole might be to distinguish one from French people, Spanish people, the so-called ‘Foreign French’ (broadly speaking, exiles from the Haitian revolution and other French colonial episodes and places in the Caribbean), white people and/or black people (and any variations thereof), and, increasingly and particularly, Americans. Or indeed, all or none of these. We should add to this picture notable numbers of people of German, Irish, and other European origins, the huge numbers of slaves involuntarily present in and passing through the city, as well as the presence of a free black community.⁵

George Washington Cable does little to resolve any of these matters, and can himself be quite free and easy with his usage of ‘Creole,’ for instance. Accordingly, *Old Creole Days* is a book full of stories being told and retold, of stories not being told, and of stories effectively telling other stories. As such, and in spite of the nostalgic tone implied by the collection’s title, a neatly bounded historical New Orleans steadfastly refuses to cohere. Cable’s own problems with the Creole population of the city as a result of his writing are well documented, but such critique or parody of Creole life as he offers is actually only one facet among many in his work. The administration and citizens of the United States – explicitly in the period following the Louisiana Purchase, and implicitly in the time of writing during Reconstruction and immediately after – also come in for sharp analysis, and there is ample representation of various colonial influences in the wider Caribbean region: French, Spanish, British, as well as people from these colonies themselves. Indeed, although Cable’s ostensible focus in this book is almost entirely on the period following the city’s coming under U.S. ownership in 1803, he really looks both forward to its role and status in the sectional crisis to come later in the century, and back to the network of influences that have shaped it. New Orleans is regularly viewed as an anomaly within the U.S. and within the South, but Cable’s stories in part show how it is, if anything, the *Américains* who are anomalous in the region that New Orleans might most appropriately be identified with, the wider ‘plantation America.’

The increasing critical tendency to consider the South in terms other than just its relationship with the rest of the United States is important both in removing it from a falsely restrictive U.S. nationalistic historiography and trying to grapple with its complexity. Barbara Ladd, in her contribution to Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith’s collection *South to a New Place*, suggests that the perennially central place of the Civil War in Southern studies inevitably skews the discourse by subordinating all Southern history and culture to the region’s eventual role in the national crisis.⁶ Furthermore, she argues, the South’s status as a site of multiple cultural influences is ‘not new:’

rather, its long history has been obscured by the nationalism that has structured American historiography. American history in the Deep South, many people assume, begins with the Louisiana Purchase and the coming of U.S. citizens into the region. What precedes that migration is held to be marginal to the inevitable nationalistic narrative in one way or another, but however marginal in

the nationalistic stories themselves, the impact of colonial experience in the Deep South has been and continues to be experienced, precisely because it leaves traces . . .⁷

In the specific case of New Orleans, such U.S.-centric assumptions might seem particularly perverse, if only because its other cultural 'traces' are so overtly crucial to its identity. The tourist-board presentation of New Orleans as a uniquely 'European' jewel in the American crown is a gross over-simplification of colonial influences on both the city and indeed the United States itself. Viewing it thus ensures that its 'Europeanness,' in various forms, is necessarily subordinate to its 'Americanness,' a marketable quirk of local demographic history that precedes its inevitable coming into the U.S. fold, or at the least the Southern one. But New Orleans refuses to be forced into this nationalistic straightjacket. To conceive of its identity as somehow inevitably American in the U.S. sense is to underestimate severely the importance of European colonial influences in the South and in the wider Gulf and Caribbean region. Indeed, even calling this place 'the South' (particularly the *Deep* South) necessarily places it in the U.S. context: as George B. Handley and others have noted, in the broader context of 'Plantation America,' this is the 'north.'⁸ Nor is this simply a case of inappropriately lumping a fixed identity onto a place of shifting character according to its latest and continuing national ruler. In trading, legal, communication and cultural senses, post-Purchase New Orleans continued to operate as a regional nexus far beyond the still-expanding borders of the United States: in these crucial ways, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz discusses, "[m]idcentury New Orleans was thus, fundamentally, a *Caribbean* city."⁹ Indeed, the huge growth of the city in the decades leading up to the Civil War, which Cable vividly portrays in "Jean-ah Poquelin," could hardly have happened without this being the case. Even as a U.S. 'American' city, New Orleans is still a fully functioning and vital part of 'America' more generally. *Old Creole Days* is charged with the dynamics of these complex, dialogic interchanges in the very period where the increasing 'Americanisation' of the city in some senses served to emphasise just how *otherwise* 'American' it already really was.

Some stories in *Old Creole Days* engage with 'American' characters and themes overtly, particularly in terms of their always contentious relations with other sections of New Orleans society, much of which seems to become more self-consciously 'European' when faced with encroaching Americanisation. "Jean-ah Poquelin" opens with a won-

derfully acerbic account of Creole hatred of “such vile innovations as the trial by jury, American dances, anti-smuggling laws, and the printing of the Governor’s proclamation in English.”¹⁰ Its sometimes-absent centre, Poquelin himself, appeals to the Governor against the commandeering of his property as part of the city’s inexorable expansion, but is immediately put at a disadvantage by the Governor’s requiring their conversation to be conducted in English. Poquelin’s frustrations grow as his adherence to French models of rule and process are rendered irrelevant by American bureaucracy, which he seems incapable of understanding.¹¹ This story charts the increasing ‘Americanisation’ of New Orleans in the early decades of the nineteenth-century at the same time as it portrays mutual and sometimes wilful incomprehension between Creoles and the as-yet nascent ‘Anglo-American flood’ beginning to change the city’s dynamics forever.¹² The pointedly reversed terms (from the perspective of the wider U.S.) of this particular immigration debate in themselves are an indicator of the entrenchment of ‘European’ self-identities in this now officially U.S. city. The narrator is crucially ambivalent, as is often the case in Cable’s stories, at times cutting about Creole intolerance and conservatism, whilst maintaining a forceful cynicism with regard to ‘American’ reforms and intentions. The intertextuality of the stories of *Old Creole Days* also comes into important effect: we might compare the assumed moral superiority and permanence of (assumed) French custom in “Jean-ah Poquelin” with the moral corruption implied from the beginning of French colonial involvement in Louisiana shown in the De Charleu dynasty’s bigamy and exploitation of Choctaw Louisianians in “Belles Demoiselles Plantation.”¹³ Cable here implicitly posits the French settling of Louisiana in an effectively similar mode to the “Anglo-Saxon” settling of other parts of the South: in relation to such Americans of far longer standing, *Américain* and European distinctions in the regional context perhaps become rather difficult to assert.

In “‘Posson Jone’,” with which I opened, *Américain*-Creole-European relations are given broadly comic treatment, becoming more separate and yet more confused in the process. Parson Jones, the West-Floridian exile in New Orleans, and Jules St.-Ange cheerfully go through their religious and other cultural differences, Jones seeming more ‘American’ and Jules more ‘French’ through their interaction with each other.¹⁴ At the bullfight scene, the “rude amphitheatre” plays host to New Orleanians of segregated layers of class and ethnic-

ity who assert their difference(s) in more dangerous ways.¹⁵ “The sport” – a bullfight crudely arranged to replace the usual circus, washed out by a hurricane the previous night – is interminably delayed, and the crowd begin to seek alternative entertainment in each other:

The *Américains* grow derisive and find pastime in gibes and raillery. They mock the various Latins with their national inflections, and answer their scowls with laughter. Some of the more aggressive shout pretty French greetings to the women of Gascony, and one barge-man, amid peals of applause, stands on a seat and hurls a kiss to the quadroons. The mariners of England, Germany, and Holland, as spectators, like the fun, while the Spaniards look black and cast defiant imprecations upon their persecutors. Some Gascons, with timely caution, pick their women out and depart, running a terrible fire of gallantries.¹⁶

The bull not being forthcoming, the various residents of the city put on another performance for its multinational visitors, the ‘Americans’ taking the aggressive role, goading the ‘Latins’ specifically for being all sorts of things that they are not. The representatives of other European nations – specifically, northern European nations with strong presence in the wider region – look on with delight as the demographic superpowers of New Orleans exchange verbal shots. Most notably, the *Américain* abuse takes the form of broad lampooning of Creole manners, and is in part provoked by the delay in the promised Creole spectacle. When an apparent master-of-ceremonies attempts to explain the delay and calm things down, “the Latins raise one mighty cry for silence.”¹⁷ There are interesting layers of carnivalesque subversion here. The bullfight is already a ramshackle version of the usual circus, but the ‘Latins’ appeal on behalf of the legitimacy of its representative, drowned out by the even more ramshackle circus of the *Américains’* joyous disrespect. Authority is multiply undermined and confused, carnival transplanting carnival transplanting carnival, to appropriate Bakhtin. As circus animals are discovered, uncaged and killed by the mob, and the riot spills out into the city’s streets, all is turned upside-down. By this stage, all parties seem similarly complicit in the carnage, all gleefully partaking of the chaos. What began as division and discord on the basis of difference has apparently resolved – or dissolved – into a somehow affirmatively inclusive orgy of violence. In the grander scheme of the story as a whole, this bizarre episode actually has little relevance, really serving only as a backdrop to Parson Jones’ temporary fall from his notion of grace. But if a more straightforward morality is perhaps surprisingly reinstated at the end, with the American parson seemingly the moral arbiter, it is

surely this far more subversive scene that remains the most striking, the most compelling in its portrayal of European-American nuances in New Orleans.

To my mind, the story in the volume which most evokes this complexity is one that has received less direct attention than others such as “Jean-ah Poquelin,” “Belles Demoiselles Plantation” and “‘Posson Jone’.” “Café des Exilés” is, however, a particularly effective example of Cable’s sharp, satirical use of ‘local color’ methods, and I concentrate on it here partly because of this relative neglect, and partly because it registers the city’s international significance in more dialogically charged fashion than some of those depicting Creole-American relations more overtly. The story is narrated by an anonymous and unspecified outsider, fascinated by the tale of romance and intrigue he has himself been told by one of its protagonists many years after the facts. Everything about the tale and its telling is unstable, despite the frequent protestations to the contrary. It begins:

That which in 1835 – I think he said thirty-five – was a reality in the Rue Burgundy – I think he said Burgundy – is now but a reminiscence. Yet so vividly was its story told me, that at this moment the old Café des Exilés appears before my eye, floating in the clouds of reverie, and I doubt not I see it just as it was in the old times.¹⁸

For every assertion of certainty there is a qualifying implication of narrative doubt: ‘reality’ is undermined by “I think” and “but a reminiscence,” “just as it was” by “the clouds of reverie.” These shaky foundations are undermined even further by the revelation that the “reminiscence” is not even the narrator’s own, but a vividly told story – at this early stage we do not discover who has done this earlier telling, and we never actually hear any of the tale from this original teller himself. Paradoxically, it is perhaps the phrase “I doubt not” that most strongly registers the levels of doubt in this introduction, as it invites us to consider, at our own even further remove, how unlikely the narrator is to be so firmly attuned to historical actuality, if he feels the need to express his certainty so strongly – there are shades, here, of Mr Compson’s famously doubt-inducing “doubtless,” which peppers his narrative contributions to Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*¹⁹ Alice Hall Petry provides a useful account of how this particular Cable narrator figure is himself created through his wilfully romanticised visions of the café, which continue into opulent biblical symbolism and ever more reverent depictions of the daughter of the house, Pauline.²⁰ This is all gloriously, horrendously overwritten,

of course, but Petry demonstrates convincingly how the distance established between the narrator and Cable makes this a skilful narrative device in itself: because we encounter a narrator so clearly in thrall to what he narrates, we must thereby recognise his own probable mythicisation – or further mythicisation – of the café and its inhabitants. But whereas Petry feels that we are eventually swept along with the narrator's passions to such an extent that "our reactions to the exiles themselves . . . are determined by how the narrator personally – and often prejudicially – responds to them," I would suggest that something more complex and constructive occurs: only two or three pages into the story, we are already engaging with so many layers of storytelling that we surely see the narrator's editorial control as creative in itself, and suspect as such.²¹ To my mind, the very doubts and prejudices that the narrator is almost comically prone to lessen his authority, while at the same time effectively strengthening his own part as a character in the story he tells, through so telling it. Through recognising the idiosyncrasy of the narrator, we are bound to reflect on the different versions of the story we might have had if, for instance, a different character had told it to a different narrator, genteel or otherwise, perhaps Creole or even French rather than American, with different foibles and inclinations – these possibilities are effectively infinite. The story that we get, including its telling, far from insisting on its own veracity, rather points to its place among myriad other potential tellings. From the beginning, we are fully immersed in a heteroglot narrative situation, to follow Bakhtin again.

Within the story, the café plays host to exiles who talk of "dear home – that is to say, of Barbados, of Martinique, of San Domingo, and of Cuba," each with their story to tell, each contributing to the narrative fabric of the city they now inhabit.²² For the most part, however, it is this process of contribution that we encounter rather than their tales themselves. When we hear that "some old man would tell his tale of fire and blood and capture and escape, and the heads would lean forward from the chair-backs and a great stillness would follow the ending of the story," it is the speech event of telling and reception that forms part of "Café des Exilés," rather than the substance of what is told in that event.²³ We are given small details and intimations of horrors: the family of "Martinez of San Domingo," for instance, "had been massacred in the struggle of '21 and '22; he alone was left to tell the tale and told it often, with that strange, infantile

insensibility to the solemnity of his bereavement so peculiar to Latin people.”²⁴ This, then, is an oft-told tale that for us remains untold, and the same may be said of the other stories the regulars tell. However, through remaining tantalisingly unspecific, they allude to the scale and the horror that were part of Caribbean colonial and colonised experience, as well as the beauty, the implied perfection of ‘dear home.’ As Gruesz notes, such exiles in New Orleans “identified nostalgically with a homeland that for them froze in time at the moment in which they left it.”²⁵ So even these stories, whose telling constitutes much of the emotional environment of the wider story, are infused with possibility and alternate interpretations: they are reminiscences of exiles who have suffered, idealising ‘homes’ which no longer exist, if they ever did. But this does not prevent New Orleans also being a nexus of current news: one night at the neighbouring Café des Réfugiés, “[t]here was much free talk going on about Texan annexation, about chances of war with Mexico, about San Domingan affairs, about Cuba and many et-ceteras.”²⁶

What we gain through all of this is a tremendous sense of how important these tales are to the psychological fabric of New Orleans, and that they are allowed to go largely untold at the final narrative stage if anything increases their own richness, their own plenitude. They serve to emphasise how entrenched New Orleans is in the colonial experience of the whole region, its European influences coming not just from its own periods of rule by France and Spain but also through the cultural impact of its exiles from other European-ruled colonies in the Caribbean. If the stories bring the Caribbean into New Orleans, then they also make clear that New Orleans is part of the Caribbean sphere of experience. When we are told that “there was much that [D’Hemecourt] could tell of San Domingo, whither he had been carried from Martinique in his childhood, whence he had become a refugee to Cuba, and thence to New Orleans in the flight of 1809,” we are reminded of how such places are so crucially interlinked with each other, separate and yet linked by discourse and global politics.²⁷ These links are perceived by the storytellers themselves, for while “they would pass the evening hours with oft-repeated tales of home:”

... the moon would come out and glide among the clouds like a silver barge among islands wrapped in mist, and they loved the silently gliding orb with a sort of worship, because from her soaring height she looked down at the same moment upon them and upon their homes in the far Antilles.²⁸

Even allowing for the narrator's romanticism, this is a telling passage. Firstly, the moon is described using a simile that vividly recalls the island relations between the exiles' disparate homelands and their own journeys from place to place; then it is figured as providing a form of cohesion to their scattered greater world. This gives a real hemispheric identity to the field of play here; the same moon is shining on New Orleans as on Martinique, how ever distant they may feel to the exiles at times. New Orleans itself is effectively figured as another island in this chain of cultural influence, which brings to mind Edouard Glissant's notion of the archipelagic nature of the Americas, with distinct but mutually constitutive island spaces within this.²⁹

So much for the narrative layers of "Café des Exilés" – what of the action? For most of the piece, its actual story, as such, seems much inferior to the manner of its telling, consisting by and large of a love triangle centred on Pauline, daughter of the café's owner. The rivals for her affections (discounting here the smitten narrator) are the shifty Manuel Mazaro, who has "a heart full of Cuban blood, not unmixed with Indian,"³⁰ and "Major" Galahad Shaughnessy, an affable Irishman who is essentially the hero, and, we discover at the end, the source of the story for our narrator – hence, probably, his heroic status. The love story is shamelessly melodramatic: enjoyably diverting, perhaps, but seemingly unworthy of the dialogically complex environment that has been built up to deliver it. This said, its climax does serve as the site of some nicely Bakhtinian confrontations and tragicomic misunderstandings. In the back room of the café, Pauline is hidden in a closet listening as Shaughnessy and her father D'Hemecourt discuss her and the conduct of both the "Major" and Mazaro. Each has an entirely different understanding of the situation, and each is "unconscious that every word that was being said bore a different significance in the mind of each of the three."³¹ Each unwittingly speaks a different story, which come together with our greater knowledge of the wider situation: their accumulation in the mind of the reader provides such impetus as the love story has. When Mazaro's entrance forces Shaughnessy to hide, ending up inadvertently sharing the closet with Pauline, we might say that their interpretations of events also now start sharing common ground. In a sense, the actuality, as such, now begins to come closer to the accumulation of fictions, which are now affected by being intertwined like this in this chronotopic closet. One could argue that the 'real' story, as such, is something other than any of those actually being told through this scene: I would extend this

principle to the tale as a whole, and even, to an extent at least, to the entire volume.

This is made evident, I think, when things turn out as we know they will. Shaughnessy declares his love, and “[t]hereupon, sure enough, both M. D’Hemecourt and his daughter, rushing together, did what I have been hoping all along, for the reader’s sake, they would have dispensed with; they burst into tears . . .”³² One senses here, perhaps, that a little of Cable’s own sensibility is infusing that of his narrator, who deliberately points to the melodrama of his own tale, mocks it, and then blames the characters. Given this, the melodrama itself is surely a deliberate ploy, here comically shown up as the froth that it really is. But it is froth with a purpose, for this is not the end of “Café des Exilés”: the love story is shown effectively to be the sappy cover on a more hidden story of somewhat more regional significance and gravity. The two rivals for the love of Pauline are also members of a society established to ensure the safe transport of any of their bodies, should they meet with misfortune, back to their respective ‘homes’ away from New Orleans. This burial society’s somewhat secretive meetings are mentioned early on, “though, after all, what great secrets could there be connected with a mere burial society?”³³ At this point, the narrator’s question seems to fit in with his affectionately condescending view of Creole behaviour. But it is also a signpost indicating that all may not be quite as it seems, and it transpires that it is the burial society, rather than its secrecy, that is the sham. When two of their number are “summoned” by “the great Caller-home of exiles,” it is only through the treachery of Manuel Mazaro, who is also the treacherous defeated in love, that the gaping public, including the reader, discovers that their coffins contain “not dead men, but new muskets.”³⁴ As it becomes clear that the burial society was a cover for a Caribbean gun-smuggling operation, so we also see how the fairly unsubstantial love story has been used to smuggle in the ‘real’ story of complex regional relations: as such, it is a much more dangerous narrative than it has seemed, and the reader must now re-evaluate what he or she has read up to this point. Cable’s story (or Shaughnessy’s, or the narrator’s) wears the veneer of a melodramatic love-conflict, but through such carefully placed and understated details evokes not only a version of the French Quarter as it might have existed or been imagined in the first decades after the Purchase, but also the complex political and cultural dialogues New Orleans has with itself and with other sites in the Caribbean sphere.

Indeed, 'Americanness' in the U.S. sense is notably absent, with not a single character identified individually as '*Américain*.' We might immediately add a caveat to this: the narrator, while he does not identify himself, seems clearly of the genteel variety, which in this context renders him an American outsider even if he has lived in New Orleans all his life. Nonetheless, the narrator's perspective, particularly given his inclinations and prejudices as discussed earlier, is important in this regard, as it registers the sole presence of U.S. participation in the story, arguably a form of increasing imperialist control over the city's multinational heritage that is indicative of such tendencies more generally as the nineteenth century progressed. But if this story of stories ultimately brings even these under a kind of U.S. narrative administration, then this is only of the most fragile kind. Just as each narrative presence is in some ways undermined by others, so the authority of the narrator and even, ultimately, Cable is always subject to the subversive activities of the perpetually talking characters – characters and cultures talking with and against and through each other. The New Orleans of "Café des Exilés" and *Old Creole Days* as a whole is, then, a place steeped in the ongoing colonial history of the Caribbean, revealed as continuing to play an active part in the story of European presence in the New World some time after its coming under U.S. rule. In turn, the European influences on New Orleans are constituted not just in its own colonial periods of French and Spanish rule, but also the human consequences and discourse of such rule continuing elsewhere in the Americas. "Café des Exilés," while perhaps not being the Cable story to most explicitly chart European-Southern relations, is perhaps all the more revealing for that, registering them in terms of dynamic dialogic exchange occurring in a single problematic Southern, American, Caribbean and, yes, European place. In the space both city and story provide for hidden tales, alternative histories, and subversive endeavours, the plurality which renders them vital also undermines any sense of fixed identity. An unstable narrative of unstable narratives of an unstable New Orleans, we are eventually left with the possibility that even this instability is a potential fiction, as the ending reveals the story's unreliable source:

Only yesterday I dined with the Shaughnessys – fine old couple and handsome. Their children sat about them and entertained me most pleasantly. But there isn't one who can tell a tale as their father can – 'twas he told me this one, though here and there my enthusiasm may have taken liberties. He knows the history of every old house in the French Quarter; or, if he happens not to know a true one, he can make one up as he goes along.³⁵

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Notes

- ¹ George Washington Cable, "'Posson Jone'," *Old Creole Days* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1991) 149. The profusion of punctuation in this story's title is not, it should be noted, a typographical error: Cable's title consists of quoted dialect, requiring yet further punctuation when citing accurately. While this is unwieldy to transcribe, it in itself emphasises the linguistic layering at work in the New Orleans of Cable's writing.
- ² *Ibid.* 151.
- ³ *Ibid.* 152.
- ⁴ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Robert Livingston, 18 April 1802, *Literary New Orleans*, ed. Judy Long (Atlanta: Hill Street Press, 1999) 21-2.
- ⁵ The complex demographic development of New Orleans is discussed in detail in Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); see especially Paul F. Lachance, "The Foreign French" 101-30 and Joseph G. Tregle, Jr., "Creoles and Americans" 131-85. See also Barbara Ladd and Karl F. Zender's essays in the present volume.
- ⁶ Barbara Ladd, "Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places – Past, Present, and Future," *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 53-4.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 53.
- ⁸ George B. Handley, "A New World Poetics of Oblivion," *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 25. Handley acknowledges the work of Rex Nettleford and Vera Lawrence Hyatt in emphasising this point.
- ⁹ Kirsten Gruesz, "Delta *Desterrados*: Antebellum New Orleans and New World Print Culture," *Look Away!* 53.
- ¹⁰ George Washington Cable, "Jean-ah Poquelin," *Old Creole Days* 179.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 186-87.
- ¹² *Ibid.* 179.
- ¹³ George Washington Cable, "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," *Old Creole Days* 121-45. For compelling discussions of the consequences of the corrupting influences of early European settlement of the region as portrayed in this story, see James Robert Payne, "Emergence of Alternative Masculinity in George Washington Cable's 'Sieur George' and 'Belles Demoiselles Plantation,'" *American Literary Realism* 32.3 (Spring 2000): 244-55, and Susan Castillo, "Violated Boundaries: George Washington Cable's 'Belles Demoiselles Plantation' and the Creole Gothic," *Litteraria Pragensia* 14.28 (2004): 50-6.
- ¹⁴ Cable, "'Posson Jone'" 155.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 163.

¹⁶ Ibid. 163-4.

¹⁷ Ibid. 165.

¹⁸ George Washington Cable, "Café des Exilés," *Old Creole Days* 85.

¹⁹ As discussed in Owen Robinson, *Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 106.

²⁰ Alice Hall Petry, *A Genius in his Way: The Art of Cable's Old Creole Days* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1988) 49-53.

²¹ Ibid. 53.

²² Cable, *ibid.* 87.

²³ Ibid. 92.

²⁴ Ibid. 87.

²⁵ Gruesz 56.

²⁶ Cable, *ibid.* 99.

²⁷ Ibid. 88.

²⁸ Ibid. 91.

²⁹ As discussed in J. Michael Dash, "Martinique/Mississippi: Edouard Glissant and Relational Insularity," *Look Away!* 94-109. See also Barbara Ladd and Paul Giles's essays in the present volume.

³⁰ Cable, *ibid.* 89.

³¹ Ibid. 103.

³² Ibid. 110.

³³ Ibid. 94.

³⁴ Ibid. 114, 116.

³⁵ Ibid. 116-7.

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