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# The Making of New Orleans on the North Coast of the Caribbean

## La construcción de Nueva Orleans en la costa norte del Caribe

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**Resumen:** Actualmente, las ciudades estadounidenses más estrechamente vinculadas con la cuenca caribe hispanoablente son Miami y Nueva York. Sin embargo, históricamente, la ciudad norteamericana más estrechamente vinculada habría sido Nueva Orleans, la ciudad portuaria más importante sobre el río Mississippi. Su posición y ubicación en la costa norte del Caribe funcionó como la principal puerta de pasaje entre la gran cuenca del Caribe y el continente norteamericano. Este estudio explica los momentos más prominentes en la historia de la “Nueva Orleans latinoamericana” desde la fundación de la ciudad hasta después del huracán Katrina, al tiempo que explora por qué algunos legados han sido dejados fuera de la historia o subvertidos de alguna manera en las narrativas heredadas sobre la identidad cultural francesa de la ciudad. Teniendo en cuenta que el primer libro académico sobre dicha historia salió hace pocos años, este artículo busca profundizar la exploración de la presencia latinoamericana en la Nueva Orleans “francesa”.

**Palabras clave:** Nueva Orleans, Caribe norte, Haití, Honduras, Cuba

**Abstract:** Today, the two cities most closely allied to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean Basin are Miami and New York. Historically, however, the most closely allied US city would be New Orleans, the most important port city on the Mississippi River. Its position on the North Coast of the Caribbean served as the primary gateway between the Caribbean Basin and the North American continent. This study explains the most salient moments in the history of “Latin American New Orleans,” while concurrently exploring why certain legacies have been written out of history or otherwise subverted in the received narratives about the city’s French cultural history. With the first scholarly book of this history appearing only a few years ago, this article seeks to add to the exploration of the Latin American presence in “French” New Orleans.

**Keywords:** New Orleans, North Caribbean, Haiti, Honduras, Cuba

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This issue of *Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos* primarily focuses on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, with the most closely allied US cities economically, culturally and demographically to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean Basin being Miami and New York. Historically, however, the most closely allied US city would have been New Orleans, with its being the most important port city on the Mississippi River. Its positionality on the North Coast of the Caribbean served as the primary gateway north between the greater Caribbean Basin and the North American continent. This study seeks to explain the most salient moments in the history of “Latin American New Orleans” as well as why the city evolved away from being a recognized hub of exchange with the Spanish Caribbean.

The only comprehensive study of New Orleans’ links to Latin America, *Hispanic and Latino New Orleans: Immigration and Identity since the Eighteenth Century*, states:

Through much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, New Orleans served as the self-proclaimed gateway to Latin America. That relationship took many forms, including trade, embarkation port for military expeditions, and home to political exiles such as Benito Juárez, who later became president of Mexico. Products, people, ideas, and invasive biota consequently flowed between New Orleans and ports such as Veracruz, Mexico, and Havana, Cuba. A series of Spanish-language periodicals turned the Crescent City into a northern outpost of Latin American literary culture, beginning in the early nineteenth century with *El Misisipi* and continuing through *El Mercurio* and *El Lucero Latino* in the early twentieth century. Latin American travelers in the United States invariably arrived or departed through the Crescent City and reflected on its liminal personality: in their view, one side of the city represented a vision of possibilities for the modernization of their own republics while the other side represented a contaminated version of modernity, corrupted through lengthy contact with the ports of the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean, and South Atlantic. Three commodities—sugar, coffee, and bananas—came to dominate the networks that emerged to link New Orleans to Latin America and the Caribbean over the nineteenth Century and into the twentieth. (15-16)

Clearly New Orleans and Latin America have for centuries been part of a transnational network, reinforcing points made in an earlier study by Kirsten Silva Gruesz entitled “The Gulf of Mexico System and the ‘Latinness’ of New Orleans.” In her article, Gruesz calls New Orleans a “liminal zone between the Anglo and the Latin worlds” (469) and a “locus of power from which US hegemony over much of Latin America has been extended, and an abjected place within the national body of the US—particularly after Reconstruction and the establishment of neo-colonial relations of dependence on Northern capital” (470). This begs the question of how and why the links between New Orleans and Latin America have disappeared.

There are many reasons why New Orleans has been displaced as the gateway to Latin America. The Crescent City has not played a major role in the “New South” as Houston, for example, has done. Also, while the sugar industry has linked New Orleans to the Latin Caribbean Basin, especially to Cuba,

Puerto Rican sugar was imported to New York and Philadelphia. The authors of *Hispanic and Latino New Orleans* posit,

New York and Philadelphia rather than New Orleans became major boricua communities because after the Spanish-American War, sugar refineries in Brooklyn and along the Delaware River became the principal importers of Puerto Rican raw sugar. The associated shipping and commercial linkages facilitated the settlement of large numbers of Puerto Ricans in the Northeast. (Sluyter 145)

The economic pathway created routes of migration and immigration with lasting consequences for New York, in particular. While today New Orleans no longer enjoys the same importance relative to the Latin Caribbean as other US cities, the Spanish colonial legacy in New Orleans remains unique, fascinating, and ultimately paradoxical. In North America, it serves as a notable example of the kind of fusion that happens in a cultural contact zone and a liminal in-between space, one that has been written out of history. *La Luisiana*, territory stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, and from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, was a Spanish colony from 1762 to 1803, an unwanted gift to Carlos III from his cousin French king Louis XV. The sentiment in its capital city of New Orleans was reciprocal. Local New Orleanians felt betrayed by France and antagonistic toward Spain. This led to the Rebellion of 1768 against Spain, an unsuccessful attempt for independence pre-dating the American Revolution by eight years. Ultimately, New Orleans was under Spanish rule for about as long as it was under French rule, with the Spanish giving New Orleans exceptional status relative to its other colonies and investing more heavily in the city than the French had done. While there was not wholesale migration from Spain to New Orleans during that period, there are two distinct markers in South Louisiana denoting the Spanish colonial period.

These vestiges of communities built during the Spanish colonial period are found outside of New Orleans proper: Malagueños founded the town of Nueva Iberia in southwest Louisiana, and Los Isleños, from the Canary Islands, settled outside of New Orleans in neighboring St. Bernard Parish. The latter community serves today as the most recognizable and distinct link to the Spanish colonial period, retaining cultural and linguistic traditions through their geographic isolation and rural socio-economic ways of life. Notwithstanding a general resistance to assimilation, the Isleño Perez family has been among the most politically powerful in St Bernard Parish for several generations. Los Isleños of Louisiana represent an important strand in the larger fabric of Spanish colony building,

The strategy of encouraging Spaniards from the Canary Islands to settle in the Americas became quite general throughout Spain's colonial empire, with that archipelago off the African coast serving not only as a strategic outpost from which to control Atlantic shipping, and as a place to prototype colonial institutions, but also as a convenient source of impoverished farmers willing to settle newly acquired territories and serve as frontier militias. (Sluyter 24)

The paradox today is that these marginalized Spanish subjects have emerged as the most recognizable marker of the Spanish colonial period in Louisiana.

Spanish colonists generally assimilated into local French Creole Louisiana, with *Nueva Iberia* becoming *Nouvelle-Ibérie*, family names such as Domínguez becoming Domingue, Rodríguez becoming Rodrigue, and Spanish expressions such as *banquetas* becoming *banquettes*, designating sidewalks.

The Malagueños and the Isleños were of course not the first Spanish colonists to the area. Spanish exploration of the region dates from the early sixteenth century. It was over a century later when the French claimed the vast territory as *La Louisiane* in 1682, covering about one-third of the current United States. A fusion of French and Spanish was present at the founding of the colony for France when the Canadian Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, his younger brother Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville and their party set sail from Brest. It was a motley crew of "pirates, and Spanish deserters, Spanish-speaking Frenchmen and several Canadians" (Powell 12). This multicultural, multilingual cohort represented the first colonists France sent to build its colony *La Louisiane* in 1698.

It did not matter that the first colonists were a multicultural and multinational cohort. The colony was designed as "purely" French, an imprint of this "civilized" metropole on the "savage" North American continent, an anchor in the "New" World. As an example of the cavalier disregard that Manichean colonialism had for this particular enterprise, French policies purposefully undermined established north-south traditions and hemispheric practices of this area. However, French colonists locally relied on these north-south trading pathways and built on these cultural practices because they were necessary steps for survival, especially for the founders of *La Louisiane*. Were it not for local Creole Caribbean dynamics and the north-south transnational economy of colonization to sustain the colony, it would have collapsed.

As I argue in my recent book, *The Story of French New Orleans: History of a Creole City*, from its founding New Orleans has existed as an "In-Between" space between France and the Caribbean Basin, emerging as an "imagined" community. Mythmaking has reinforced that New Orleans is French in its history, its architecture, and its people despite little evidence to support this claim. Historically, New Orleans has not been "French" since 1762, the number of French buildings that remain from the French period is one, The Ursuline Convent, and French has not been the *lingua franca* in the city for nearly a century. This same French hegemonic mythmaking created *la Nouvelle Ibérie*, families of *Domingue* and *Rodrigue*, and helped erase traces of Spanish presence.

As part of *La Luisiana*, the local "imagined" community reinforced a French colonial imprint, rather than Spanish, with local Creole Caribbean dynamics. Borrowing from Glissant's notion of *créolité*, New Orleans can be understood throughout its history as a "Creole" place, in the sense of blending peoples, languages, and customs to create a distinct New World of relation. A place where colonists reinvented themselves, around a common French language and culture, regardless of their origins. Creolization in this French colonial context refers to the rapid transformation of native land and people in the Americas due to the arrival of Europeans and Africans, who were implicated in colony-building of slaving societies in the Caribbean Basin in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The

unscripted dynamics of colonialism allowed for local agency that played out differently, through different relations and relationships, across the Americas.

The *terroir* of New Orleans has a rich historical and cultural archeology, founded on the relation with indigenous Nations. In 1718 early French colonists founded New Orleans, building on the high ground of the Quinipissa Indians, who along with other First Nations provided a north-south model for trade throughout the Caribbean Basin. This allowed for the survival of the colony which would have perished if it had followed the mercantilist prohibitions under French and then later Spanish rule:

Despite prohibitions on commerce with Spanish colonies, the French traded with the ports of New Spain, Florida, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Cuba during the early eighteenth century. That contraband trade proved so essential to the establishment of New Orleans and profitable to its residents that the official records probably obfuscate the nationality of many vessels entering the Mississippi River. (Sluyter 41)

Shannon Dawdy in her important work on the founding of New Orleans, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*, explains:

The founding generation of Louisiana lived on intimate terms with Native Americans who were oriented toward a quite different Mississippi-Caribbean world. Their knowledge informed the selection of the site of New Orleans which, though soggy, had the advantage of being a major crossroads of the New World. (134)

Privateering, smuggling, and contraband were necessary to colony-building. Ties to Saint-Domingue, Havana, Veracruz and elsewhere in the Caribbean proved far more important than any east-west connection to Europe, wracked by war and ensuing crises in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because the legacy of local agency operating along the north-south axis was necessary for avoiding famine and total ruin throughout its history, locals were all the more anxious when becoming a Spanish colony. Spanish mercantilist policies were stricter than French, fueling the profound resistance in New Orleans to being ruled by Spain (see Dawdy 131-132). The north-south axis was not simply economic, but also meant socio-cultural routes for migration, artistic creation of music and food pathways.

The most important socio-economic factor, at the very core of the colonial machine in New World societies, was of course the institution of slavery and the plantation society built on it. Throughout the greater Caribbean Basin, building slaving societies necessitated a kind of pragmatism belying Manichean ideologies where colonists depended on a swift, profitable transformation of native land. The forced cooperation for building these societies crossed racial, social and cultural boundaries, thus creating multiracial and multicultural communities born from what Glissant refers to as relation. In his text *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans*, Daniel Walker draws parallels between this multiracial Creole city of New Orleans and Havana:

In these cities, the enslaved came in contact with a host of Europeans and Euro-Americans, a diverse mix of native Africans, free black and mulatto populace, and, in the case

of Havana, Chinese laborers and others imported from the Yucatán Peninsula. When one adds the significant numbers of Native Americans still residing in close proximity of New Orleans throughout this period, it becomes clear that slave life in these areas was much more complex than what is generally proposed. In contrast to the relative isolation of the outlying plantations, urban slaves participated in mutual-aid societies, conducted large public festivals, engaged in organized African and Afro-Christian religious practices, and like their rural counterpart, at times threatened the institution of slavery through their violent resistance. (ix)

In comparison to other North American colonies, this urban slaving society in New Orleans distinguishes itself from other plantation societies elsewhere in North America. The multiracial, multicultural New Orleans' population was composed of a tripartite social make-up, consisting of Whites, Free People of Color, and Slaves. Under the Spanish rule of the late eighteenth century, the population of Free People of Color grew due to the self-manumission policy that allowed more slaves to buy their freedom than the French policy allowed. This helped Spain counter the hegemony of elite French Creoles and their collective resistance to Spanish rule. During the Spanish period New Orleans became the most African of North American cities demographically, economically and politically because of this policy. It was also occasion for the reinstatement of practices of enslaving East Africans and bringing them to New Orleans.

In contrast, regarding plantation societies of the Southern colonies, racial identity operated along the White-Black binary. As we have already seen, in New Orleans represents a French Caribbean *créolité* where French language and culture, along with the Catholic Church served as the most binding social glue, stronger than racial identifiers. These socio-cultural affiliations continued to be all the more important after New Orleans was no longer French.

During the Spanish period, the mythologizing of the "Frenchness" among New Orleanians, served as an act of resistance toward an unwanted colonizer. This semantic space of resistance served to unite the somewhat disparate, diverse population of the city against a common enemy. The semantic space, as we have established, incorporated mythmaking and illusion as a means of cultivating a sense of shared identity fueled by an antipathy toward any colonizer. Through their own agency, New Orleans Francophone Creoles were able to shift their hemispheric allegiance without appearing to do so. It was the Spanish colonizer who assimilated into New Orleans French Creole society, inverting the dynamics of colonialism.

Census records during the Spanish period contextualize this through the demographics of Spanish *Nueva Orleans*:

In the eighteenth century, most of the non-Isleño Hispanics lived in the French Quarter, which at the time comprised the entire city of New Orleans. A 1791 census enumerated 4,816 inhabitants: 2,065 whites, 1,889 enslaved blacks and mulattos, and 862 free people of color. The majority of the whites were of French origin but with substantial Germanic and Hispanic minorities. The Hispanics included the governor, many of the other public officials, the troops, and urban Isleños, possibly 'as many as four hundred.'

**The last wills and testaments of some of those Hispanics reveal how they married into and integrated with the majority-French community.** As the colonial period

drew to a close in the opening years of the nineteenth century and the Spanish authorities and troops withdrew, **the Hispanic community established in the city during the last half of the eighteenth century dissipated amid the influx of other groups.** (Sluyter 26; emphasis added)

The exceptional status given to New Orleans and *la Luisiana* by the Bourbon dynasty kept the colony in a silo of sorts, an insignificant, ancillary cog in the Spanish colonial machine of the Americas.

As the 18<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close, the little interest that Spain had in continuing to rule Louisiana began to wane. Any strategic benefits the territory offered Spain could not offset the cost and challenges of governing it. So, the Spanish readily gave Louisiana back over to France by the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800. Physical vestiges of that colonial period in New Orleans history include roughly thirty surviving buildings in the French Quarter, with the iconic Presbyter and Cabildo that flank St. Louis Cathedral being the most notable structures. Perhaps today's most obvious vestige of the Spanish period are the tile street Spanish names found on many corners in the French Quarter, yet they are a fairly recent addition to the cityscape. Little else remains. The self-fashioned "Frenchness" in New Orleans proved successful since it limited how the Spanish governed the colony. It overshadowed Spanish investment and inroads in the urban development of New Orleans, causing a dissolution of the Spanish imprint in the city's collective imaginary, just as happened later when the city became part of the United States.

With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, New Orleans became the most important city in the Antebellum South. At the same time that the city became an American Territory, Francophone New Orleans doubled in size with the arrival of refugees from the Haitian Revolution. These refugees were known as Dominguan, having hailed from pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue. These Dominguan Francophones reinforced the tripartite racial composition of the city as they consisted of about one-third White, one-third Free People of Color and one-third Slaves. Furthermore, they brought a literate population, the likes of which New Orleans had never before seen. Dominguan created newspapers, literature, theater, and perhaps most importantly fueled political activism. Consequently, New Orleans Creoles produced the earliest examples of African American literature, unique literature that has no equal in North America, although it remains virtually unknown to contemporary readers. Local Creole musical expression evolved into Jazz, while the political activism became proactive rights for People of Color during Reconstruction, and engineered the landmark case of *Plessy v Ferguson*, challenging encroaching Jim Crow laws.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the case known as *Plessy v Ferguson*, the United States Supreme Court in 1896 upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation. The resultant "separate but equal" laws that defined this system of segregation throughout the Southern United States are commonly referred to as Jim Crow laws.

In the early nineteenth century, however, the arrival of such a large number of French-speaking immigrants from a home country that had experienced a successful slave revolution terrified the government of President Thomas Jefferson, just as it had terrified his Spanish predecessors, and added to the anxiety that the US felt with the French language in Louisiana. In Caryn Cossé Bell's introduction to *Rappelez-vous concitoyens!* she gives the following account of the fear of Spanish and later American administrators to revolutionary ferment:

The outbreak of revolution in Europe and the French Caribbean produced considerable repercussions in Spanish Louisiana. Spanish authorities could not insulate free people of color and slaves from events underway in France and the Antilles. The ideal of racial equality, given political expression in the French Convention of 1794, and the realization of national independence in Haiti in January 1804, presented a radical challenge to slavery and racial oppressions. (24)

The unrest in pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue and post-revolutionary Haiti countered the institution of slavery in New Orleans, serving as an ongoing threat to the status quo there. With the thousands of refugees that immigrated to New Orleans, the revolution was literally brought to US shores, to the most important city in the Antebellum South.

As we have established, during the French and later Spanish periods, Francophone Creoles in New Orleans identified as speaking French and practicing (some form of) Catholicism. They did not view race as a "Black-White divide" with both Whites and Free People of Color being slaveholders, although Whites generally enjoyed more privilege than People of Color. However, after the Louisiana Purchase and throughout the nineteenth century, New Orleans became more Americanized and assimilated into the Antebellum South. Not only did its Anglophone population grow, but its notions of race became more assimilated to the prevailing Black-White binary of the segregated South. Its People of Color consequently lost more and more of their privilege. Ultimately defining race along the Black-White binary prevailed. Nevertheless, "Creole" continued to evoke the specter of being black. Creole could not be erased as a signifier for the city's unique history and culture, with enduring links to Africa and thus to being of African descent. The distinctive history and culture of the city made for its not fitting into the prevailing Anglo-American narrative for the United States, especially around American notions of race. Racism and Colorism in the US threatened all French-speaking Catholic Creoles, culturally displaced once their city became an American territory.

Out of this history emerges a Creole identity that is hyperlocalized especially as it concerns race. Elite White Creoles seeking to integrate into American society fueled rewriting New Orleans' history as being French. Considering New Orleans as a French space eliminates blackness, being a Eurocentric rather than an Afrocentric term. White Creole identity was self-fashioned and the concept of the "White New Orleans Creole" invented, a blend of French and Spanish heritage. In this way, Spanish heritage served as a substitute for African heritage, as a trope that ultimately reinforced French identity and the distinctiveness of New Orleans.



This city's fluid identity while never fitting into a discrete American narrative, has also distanced itself from its historic connections with the Caribbean Basin. Whereas early in its history, New Orleans represented a crossroads for economic and cultural exchange, as the city assimilated into Anglo-America, New Orleans became a place where US neocolonial attempts at dominating the Caribbean Basin played out. The city served, as Gruesz posits, as a locus of power from which US hegemony over much of Latin America has been extended (see Gruesz 470): "Over the early nineteenth century, for example, New Orleans entrepreneurs promoted filibuster campaigns in Central America, climaxing with occupation of Nicaragua from 1855 to 1857 by William Walker, formerly the editor of a New Orleans newspaper called the *Daily Crescent*" (Sluyter 139). The Mexican-American War is an important period of this type of imperialism:

The city served as the main port for marshaling and embarking troops for the beachheads at Veracruz, Tampico, and Matamoros. Federal funds flowed into the Crescent City to pay military wages, purchase supplies, and hire troop transports. In December of 1846, General Winfield Scott departed New Orleans, landed with ten thousand troops at Veracruz the following March, and occupied Mexico City six months later. As a condition for withdrawal of the occupying army, Santa Ana ceded to the United States a portion of Mexican territory stretching from Texas to California. (Sluyter 95)

Later the successful overthrow of Santa Ana was plotted from within the community of Latin American exiles, most notably Benito Juárez, living in New Orleans:

While working in a French Quarter cigar factory, Juárez conspired with Mexican and other exiles, like the Cuban nationalist Pedro Santacilia, to establish republics in Latin America. From their base in New Orleans they supplied arms and ammunition to rebel troops, ousting Santa Ana in 1855. Juárez participated in drafting the new Mexican constitution and became president. (Sluyter 96)

From a pan-Caribbean perspective, New Orleans had not ceased to function as a north coast of the Caribbean, as the home for exiles.

Cubans have had an especially important place in New Orleans history, as we have noted. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, there were more Cubans living in New Orleans than anywhere else in the US, continuing the privileged relationship that developed most notably during the Spanish colonial period where Havana served as a model for urbanization for New Orleans (see Sluyter 42).

The Cuban-New Orleans connection was reinforced by their being major exporters of sugar after the Haitian Revolution (see Sluyter 43). This market meant that an economic and agricultural highway further connected Cuba to New Orleans, a route of migration and immigrations:

New Orleans had become one of the two principal Cuban communities in the United States. The 1850 Census recorded 1,056 US residents who claimed Cuban birth. [...] The only other US place that rivaled the New Orleans Cuban community in size in 1850 was New York City, with 211 residents of Cuban birth. The relationship that

developed between New Orleans and Havana over the first half of the nineteenth century also catalyzed musical innovations that became an essential characteristic of the Crescent City's sense of place, its *genius loci*. (Sluyter 45)

Further implications connecting Cuba to Louisiana through sugar happened in surprising arenas:

Sugar linked New Orleans to Cuba more than to any other place in Latin America or the Caribbean. The Audubon Sugar Institute at LSU [Louisiana State University] became an international leader in sugar research and education, and LSU's football team traveled to Havana to compete in a series known as the Bacardi Bowl. Cuban producers, including LSU alumni and United Fruit subsidiaries, shipped millions of tons of raw sugar to refineries along the lower Mississippi River. And hundreds of thousands of tons of food, lumber, and other products flowed to Cuba through the port of New Orleans. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the US trade embargo that followed radically transformed that relationship but did not end it. (Sluyter 17)

It was not until the mid-twentieth century when the situation of New Orleans declined as Houston surpassed New Orleans in population and became the dominant metropolis of the Gulf Coast (see Sluyter 41). Another chapter in Latin New Orleans was about to begin.

In the twentieth century of all Latin American countries, it is Honduras that represents the most important socioeconomic link between New Orleans and Latin America. Since the 1930s, Honduras has enjoyed a privileged status of being the most powerful and the most identifiable Latin American community in the Crescent City, enjoying hegemony over all other Spanish-speaking cohorts. The reason for this is the importance of banana trade, and the ensuing wealth and power of the United Fruit Company. One individual looms large in this chapter of New Orleans history: Samuel Zamurray, "Sam the Banana Man," who owned what became the United Fruit Company and moved it to New Orleans:

By moving United Fruits headquarters from Boston to New Orleans in 1933, Zemurray placed the Crescent City at the epicenter of the hemispheric banana trade. Bananas from United Fruits' plantations in Honduras and elsewhere in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America arrived aboard the freighters of the company's Great White Fleet at the Banana Warf at the foot of Thalia Street, were transferred to refrigerated boxcars, and ended up on breakfast tables and in lunch boxes across North America. Zemurray had expanded his original plantation in Honduras to an archipelago of industrialized production that encompassed approximately 1.4 million hectares (3.5 million acres) that he purchased and leased throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. (Sluyter 66)

The economic power that Zemurray wielded served as yet another example of flexing a US neocolonial arm for political power throughout the region influencing the 1954 coup that overthrew Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán and the 1961 attempt to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs (see Sluyter 66).

Resulting from the extraordinary commercial importance of bananas to US markets, Hondurans came to enjoy hegemonic privilege in New Orleans—where they were believed to have their largest US community. "New Orleans

thereby came to have a strong Honduran sense of place in the same way that Miami has a Cuban one, New York City a Puerto Rican and Dominican one, and Los Angeles and San Antonio a Mexican one” (Sluyter 66). While more Hondurans in the early twentieth century lived in New Orleans than elsewhere in the US, by the 1970s this was no longer the case. However, the reputation that New Orleans enjoys as having the largest Honduran population in North America endures although it is not based on fact. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this population was the sixth largest out of US cities (see Sluyter 78).

That this reputation persists can be understood as another chapter in the self-fashioning and mythmaking that has operated in New Orleans since its founding, where identity is fluid and hyperlocalized: “Newcomers typically re-define the identity they arrived with in order to integrate with the established categories of their new place. The process of negotiating such new identities in order to function socially can yield distinct outcomes for the same ethnic group in different places” (Sluyter 6). In terms of community building, the consequences of individual self-fashioning on a collective scale are profound, all the more in the city of New Orleans.

Identity markers are established, serving as a nexus for exchanges of all sorts and recognizable beacons that become a rallying point for others: “Even as the Crescent City’s Honduran population went into decline over the 1990s, it remained so much a part of the identity of many *catrachos* that the Honduran ambassador could ingenuously claim that ‘about 100,000 Hondurans’ lived in the city” (Sluyter 79). This exaggeration was believable because of the importance of Hondurans in minds of New Orleanians (see Sluyter 66-67).<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, this type of recasting of identity has been emblematic of New Orleans since its founding. From its colonial history to the present day, this cultural contact zone and liminal space have allowed for a unique elasticity in self-fashioning identities.

While Hurricane Katrina transformed much of the New Orleans landscape, many things have not been fundamentally altered. For example, in Post-Katrina New Orleans, although New Orleans remains “the sixth most populous Honduran community in the nation, that community’s relative dominance over the city’s other Latino communities had doubled. Katrina, in that sense, certainly consolidated the status of New Orleans as the Honduran capital of the United States” (Sluyter 92-94). While there were some demographic shifts, Latin New Orleans remained fundamentally the same. The demographic shifts stemmed from the clean-up and rebuilding efforts after the storm, led by Latin American laborers, especially Honduran and Mexican men. Regarding the migration of Mexican workers, since Katrina the population has almost doubled to 15,000 according to the 2010 census (see Sluyter 108). According to that same census, the Hispanic population of New Orleans remains less than ten percent (see Sluyter 158). Honduran hegemony remains, and there are several thousand more

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the importance of the Honduran population in New Orleans in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Elliott and Ionescu.

Mexican-born New Orleanians. However, this has not recast the Latino population, nor has it made New Orleans a primarily Latino space.

In conclusion, from a pan-Caribbean perspective, New Orleans has not ceased to function as a north coast of the Caribbean economically, culturally or iconically. The many profound consequences of rescripting of the city's cultural history in the context of both North America and the Caribbean Basin problematize received notions of identity and place in the Americas. *Hispanic and Latin American New Orleans* concludes as follows:

As this book details, Hispanics have been settling in New Orleans since the eighteenth century and Latinos since the nineteenth, but they form such a minor percentage of the population of New Orleans, not even 10 percent in 2010, that the city will not soon become majority Latino nor even join the New Latino South. Nor will it become anything like San Antonio, Miami, or Santa Fe. Instead, what has emerged is *pure New Orleans*. It is a place with an identity as difficult to define as the jazz that originated in the city. But, like that musical genre, it indubitably involves the hybridization of eclectic elements, including Hispanic and Latino ones. It changes through collaborative improvisation. It relishes extemporaneous performance. And it remains open to still unimagined possibilities. (158)

The subjectivity of self-fashioning in this cultural contact zone and liminal space allows an elasticity in identity formation today, just as it has for three hundred years. The boundless creativity is unique and unscripted. It has kept New Orleans "French," in spite of little historical connection. It assimilated the Spanish colonizer during the Spanish Period, while the city emerged as the most African of all cities in North America. It assimilated into southern US's notions of race, while it also stoked resistance to the Black-White binary helping to shepherd the Civil Rights movement. It allowed the city to be both a crossroads for socio-cultural exchange between North America and the Caribbean Basin, and at the same time a bastion of US neocolonial imperialism in Latin America. Today it allows Latinx New Orleanians a transnational self-agency in ways we are only beginning to understand.

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