NEW ORLEANS

New Orleans is an indispensable element of America's national identity. As one of the most fabled cities in the world, it figures in countless novels, short stories, poems, plays, and films, as well as in popular lore and song. This book provides detailed discussions of all of the most significant writing that this city has ever inspired – from its origins in a flood-prone swamp to the rise of a Creole culture at the edges of the European empires; from its emergence as a cosmopolitan, hemispheric crossroads and a primary hub of the slave trade to the days when, in its red light district, the children and grandchildren of the enslaved conjured a new kind of music that became America's greatest gift to the world; from the mid-twentieth-century masterpieces by William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Walker Percy to the realms of folklore, hip-hop, vampire fiction, and the Asian and Latinx archives.

T. R. JOHNSON is a professor of English and Weiss Presidential Fellow at Tulane University. He has written books about Lacanian psychoanalysis, the teaching of writing, and about prose style. He has also taught at Boston University and the University of Louisville. For the last two decades, he has lived near the Mississippi River in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans and hosted a contemporary jazz radio program.

NEW ORLEANS

A Literary History

EDITED BY

T. R. JOHNSON

Tulane University

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For all New Orleanians,
whether here now, long gone, or yet to come

Contents

Contributors

THOMAS BONNER, JR., Professor Emeritus at Xavier University of Louisiana, has recently written *Parterre: New and Collected Poetry and Prose* and co-edited William Spratling and William Faulkner's 1926 *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*. His books include *The Kate Chopin Companion with Chopin's Translations of French Fiction* and *William Faulkner: The William B. Wisdom Collection.* Editor Emeritus of *Xavier Review* and its press, he has published articles in academic journals on American literature, including the *Double Dealer*, and book reviews in the New Orleans *Times Picayune.*

WILLIAM BEDFORD CLARK serves as Professor of English at Texas A&M University. He has published widely on American literature and served as General Editor of the six-volume *Robert Penn Warren Correspondence Project.*

THADIOUS DAVIS, a New Orleans native, is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor of American Social Thought and Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Gender, and Region*; *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's* Go Down, Moses; *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled*; and *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*.

RICHMOND M. EUSTIS, JR., is an assistant professor of English, Spanish, and comparative literature at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. He has also taught at the University of Jordan in Amman as a Fulbright scholar. He also is an instructor for the National Outdoor Leadership School. He teaches and publishes most often in the fields of world literature and literature and the environment. His work has appeared in *Salon.com* and elsewhere.

RIEN FERTEL has published in *Oxford American, Garden & Gun, Southern Living*, and numerous other publications. Hurricane Katrina exiled him to New York City, where he began to write about food, but he returned not long ago to his native New Orleans to complete a doctorate in History at Tulane University. His books include *Imagining the Creole City*, *The One True Barbecue*, and, most recently, *Southern Rock Opera*.

ED FOLSOM is the Roy J. Carver Professor of English at the University of Iowa. He has written, edited, or co-edited more than a half-dozen books on Walt Whitman and is the editor of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*.

TARA T. GREEN is a professor and former director of African American and African Diaspora Studies at University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of, most recently, *Reimaging the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*. She also wrote the award-winning book, *A Fatherless Child: Autobiographical Perspectives on African American Men*, and edited two others, *From the Plantation to the Prison* and *Presenting Oprah Winfrey*. She grew up in New Orleans.

ERIN GREENWALD is Vice President of Content at the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. She has served as curator of programs at the New Orleans Museum of Art and as senior curator and historian at the Historic New Orleans Collection. She curated the traveling exhibition, *Purchased Lives: The American Slave Trade from 1808 to 1865,* and currently serves as the chair of the New Orleans Slave Trade Markers and App Project, an initiative of the 2018 New Orleans Tricentennial Commission. Greenwald holds a PhD in history from Ohio State University.

KIRSTEN SILVA GRUESZ is Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she teaches the comparative literatures of the Americas, including Latina/o/x literature. She is the author of several essays on the Spanish-language print culture of the early United States as well as two books: *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* and the forthcoming *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons: Language, Race, and American Memory*.

TAYLOR HAGOOD is Professor of American Literature at Florida Atlantic University. His publications include *Faulkner, Writer of Disability* (2015), winner of the C. Hugh Holman Award for Best Book in Southern Studies, and *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in*

Southern Literature and Culture (2015), co-edited with Eric Gary Anderson and Daniel Cross Turner.

JARROD HAYES is Professor of French Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (2000) and *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree* (2016). His current project is titled *Reading across the Color Line: Racialization in the French Americas.*

HOLLY HOBBS is an ethnomusicologist who founded the NOLA Hiphop and Bounce Archive, a digital archive of rap and bounce music and oral history housed at the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University. She has served as a consultant for film and music projects, including the Santuri Project based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She currently serves as a fieldworker for the State of Louisiana, researching instrument-making traditions throughout the state for the Department of Tourism. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Music Rising*, the *KNOWLA Encyclopedia of Music and Culture*, *Smithsonian Folkways, Southern Spaces, Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, *Uproxx*, and more.

T. R. JOHNSON is a Professor of English at Tulane University. He is the author of, most recently, *The Other Side of Pedagogy: Lacan's Four Discourses and the Development of the Student Writer* (2014). He has hosted a contemporary jazz radio program at WWOZ 90.7 FM in New Orleans since 2001.

CORY MACLAUCHLIN is the author of *Butterfly in the Typewriter: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of* A Confederacy of Dunces (2012). He teaches writing and literature at Germanna Community College in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

MILENA MARINKOVA is a teaching fellow at the University of Leeds, UK. She is the author of *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing* (2011), and the co-editor (with Catherine Bates, Graham Huggan, and Jeffrey Orr) of *Visions of Canada: Canadian Studies in Europe* (2007). Her research on contemporary literature – informed by broader debates about identity and representation, the intersection of the aesthetic and the political, and the role of affect in creative practice – has been published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Moving Wor(l)ds*, *Third Text, Contemporary Women's Writing, European Journal of English Studies*, and *The British Journal of Canadian Studies*.

MONICA CAROL MILLER is an assistant professor of English at Middle Georgia State University. She has authored numerous articles, reviews, and book chapters, and her first book – *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion* was published in 2017.

MARGUERITE NGUYEN is an associate professor of English at Wesleyan University, where she teaches and researches American Literature, Asian American studies, and refugee cultures. She is author of *America's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of U.S. Literature and Empire* (2018) and co-editor of *Refugee Cultures: Forty Years after the Vietnam War* (*MELUS* 41.3).

KEVIN RABALAIS is the author of the novel *The Landscape of Desire* and co-editor of *Novel Voices, Conversations with James Salter*, and *Sacred Trespasses.* A Louisiana native, he teaches at Loyola University New Orleans.

KALAMU YA SALAAM was born in New Orleans in 1947 as Vallery Ferdinand III. He is an activist, educator, filmmaker, writer, editor, and poet who has authored numerous books and pamphlets. His latest publications are *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* (2016), *New Orleans Griot – The Tom Dent Reader* (2017), *Be about Beauty* (2018), and *Go to Jail – Confronting a System of Injustice* (2018). His recordings include the CD *My Story, My Song,* and his films include *Baby Love*. He is also a music producer and music critic.

CALVIN SCHERMERHORN is Professor of History in Arizona State University's School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies. His books include *Unrequited Toil: A History of United States Slavery* (2018), *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860* (2015), and *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (2011).

HENRY I. SCHVEY has been Professor of Drama and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis since 1987. In addition to his scholarly work on American drama, he is a stage director, playwright, and essayist. In 2005, he discovered Williams's previously unknown poem "Blue Song" in a New Orleans bookstore. He has lectured on Tennessee Williams in the United States and abroad, and published numerous essays on Williams, most recently "After the Fox: The Influence of D.H. Lawrence upon Tennessee Williams" (*Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 2018). Currently, he is writing a study of Tennessee

Williams's turbulent history with St. Louis, and a book about Williams's paintings and their relationship to his plays. Schvey's own coming-of-age memoir, *The Poison Tree*, was published in 2016.

MATTHEW PAUL SMITH is a postdoctoral teaching fellow at Tulane University. A native of New Iberia, Louisiana, his research interests include nineteenth-century American literary regionalism and the literature of New Orleans.

S. FREDERICK STARR has written a half-dozen books on Russia, and has written or edited four books related to New Orleans, including *New Orleans Unmasqued*, *Southern Comfort*, and *Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*. He has served as Vice President of Tulane University, President of Oberlin College, President of the Aspen Institute, and also as an advisor on the political culture of Russia and Central Asia to three US presidents. He currently chairs the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at the American Foreign Policy Council. A jazz clarinetist, he co-founded the Louisiana Repertory Jazz Ensemble, the first jazz group to win the Smithsonian's Doubleday Prize. He recently completed an award-winning restoration of an early nineteeth-century home in what is now the 9th Ward of New Orleans, where he lives a good part of each year.

DANIEL STEIN is Professor of North American Literary and Cultural History at the University of Siegen, Germany. He is the author of *Music Is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz* (2012) and, most recently, co-editor of the forthcoming *Nineteenth-Century Serial Narrative in Transnational Perspective: Popular Culture, Serial Culture*.

EMILY TOTH has written or edited eleven books, including five related to Kate Chopin. Her articles, reviews, and talks each number in the hundreds. She has appeared in four documentary films. For more than twenty years, she has published a monthly column for the Career Network in the *Chronicle of Higher Education.* She is the Robert Penn Warren Professor of English at Louisiana State University.

BRYAN WAGNER teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. His books include *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* (2009), *The Tar Baby: A Global History* (2017), *The Wild Tchoupitoulas* (2019), and *The Life and Legend of Bras-Coupé: The*

Fugitive Slave Who Fought the Law, Ruled the Swamp, Danced at Congo Square, Invented Jazz, and Died for Love (2019).

ANTHONY WILSON is Associate Professor of English at LaGrange College. He has written extensively about southern literature and culture, including two books: *Shadow and Shelter: the Swamp in Southern Culture* (2006) and *Swamp: Nature and Culture* (2018).

Preface

"There is on the globe but one single spot," wrote President Thomas Jefferson in April of 1803, "the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans." Almost exactly two centuries later, President George W. Bush appeared on live television with the empty, dark, and silent city behind him, and intoned, "There is no way to imagine America without New Orleans." That latter remark, made in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, echoes the first in uncanny reversal: New Orleans, for the many generations that followed Jefferson, would be cast in a special role in the nation of which it seemed, at times, only nominally a part, an other within, the embodiment of all that the larger national mythology would disavow. As such, the city has become indispensable, a kind of linchpin to the United States's national identity and ethos, a singular, seductive third dimension to what might otherwise seem a flat expanse of vague platitudes about striving, progress, equality, and decency.

How then to presume to detail the extraordinary meaning of New Orleans in the literary imagination of the United States, and, for that matter, the world? The city is a kind hero – and perhaps an antihero – in countless novels, short stories, memoirs, poems, histories, plays, and films, to say nothing of its presence in popular lore and highbrow journalism and song. And the years since Hurricane Katrina have seen a considerable outpouring of interest in the city, as scholars and tourists alike, to say nothing of natives, have been newly curious about how the city came to be and whether and how it might move beyond its most recent trauma to prepare for the next one.

Books about the books of New Orleans abound, but the present volume takes its cue from Violet Harrington Bryant's *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature* (1993) and Barbara Eckstein's *Sustaining New Orleans: Literature, Local Memory, and the Fate of a City* (2005) and, in a different way, Susan Larson's *A Booklover's Guide to New Orleans* (1999). Like Larson's, it offers a comprehensive survey of the totality of the city's literary legacy in all

of its astonishing riches, and, like the books by Bryant and Eskstein, it seeks to grasp fundamental meanings of key works in that legacy. This book, however, reaches beyond those earlier ones in range and depth, offering not a single-voiced approach but a diverse array of perspectives on a more fine-grained history. The special value of this approach: it enables the reader to contemplate the implications that arise when one draws different essays in the book from ostensibly quite different contexts and eras into dialogue with each other. Consider, for example, the reflections that might emerge when one reads the final essay in the book, which is about the literature of Hurricane Katrina, in the context of the first essay in the book, which is about the role of the swamps in the early imagining of the city. Or what about reading the essay on the role of Tom Dent in the emergence of African American literature in the city through the lens of the essay on Louis Armstrong's autobiography or using both together as a framework for thinking about the essay on hip-hop or the slave markets? How does the essay on Faulkner shift slightly when juxtaposed with the essay on the Gothic tradition, or how might that essay on the Gothic tradition shift in the light of the one on Alice Dunbar Nelson or Lafcadio Hearn?

Given the book's internal echoes, a word, before we begin, on arrangement: the essays that follow are sequenced, for the most part, chronologically, according to the historical setting of the particular pieces of literature each essay addresses and also in the order these works were authored. Such tidiness, however, is hardly absolute, for the essay on Michael Ondaatje's and Natasha Trethewey's visions of Storyville, both set within the red light district at the dawn of the twentieth century but written several decades after it was shut down, comes between two essays on memoirs by the earliest generations of jazz musicians to underline the fractured, folkloric, even fictive quality of any attempt to grasp the explosive origins of the city's greatest gift to the world. And the essay on Robert Penn Warren's novel of the Civil War is positioned to reflect the fact that it was written during – and thus in a profound sense is also subtly *about* – the dawn of the Civil Rights Era, regardless of its well-realized vision of the city of roughly a hundred years prior. One other complication of strict chronology: the essay on the Spanish-language tradition in the city touches on a few wholly distinct periods in the city's history and thus offers a miniature parallel to the broad arc of this history as a whole, and so I've positioned it near the center of the book. These few dislocations of simplest chronology will, I hope, spur the reader to undertake much broader reflections and to trace subtler and more complex historical arcs and thematic clusters among these essays, allowing them to bump into and bounce off each other in original ways that lay the groundwork for future literary engagements of the city of the sort I outline in the book's Afterword.

Finally, a word, too, about what's *not* here.

New Orleans has long been an important destination for visitors from the North, beginning with the flatboats of the 1790s that navigated the river to reach the city from the backwoods that stretched from the western slopes of the Appalachian mountains to the Mississippi River, an early wave of proto-tourism that continued well into the nineteenth century and included a young Abraham Lincoln; and, ever since, a steady flow of visitors have logged at least a few months, or even a few years, in the city, whether to gawk at the slave market or the devastation of Hurricane Katrina or any of the spectacles that unfolded in between. And within this heavy flow of visitors are far too many important literary figures to cover in this book, for the list of those who spent time in New Orleans might be longer than of those who didn't. Such literary visitors are only discussed in this book if their experiences in the city were especially and explicitly important to their later work.

Likewise, those writers who were born or died in New Orleans or largely grew up here or stayed here long enough to claim it as a home don't appear in the book unless they met my single principle for inclusion: to warrant at least a passing mention in these pages, the writer had to make a sustained, unique, imaginative attempt to contemplate the meaning of the city in ways that continue to reward close attention. And so a considerable array of celebrated writers that are associated with the city, whether as natives or "transplants" – Anatole Broyard, Charles Bukowski, Truman Capote, John William Corrington, Andre Cordrescu, Dorothy Dix, Peter Feibleman, Richard Ford, Lee Meitzen Grue, Lillian Hellman, George Herriman, Brian Keith Jackson, Bob Kaufman, Michael Lewis, Everett Maddox, William March, Seth Morgan, Katherine Anne Porter, Sister Helen Prejean, Tom Sancton, Robert Tallant, to name the first that come to mind – aren't discussed here, because they either never engaged the topic of New Orleans at all or didn't do so in imaginative ways that transformed well-established understandings of the place.

What the book does engage, then, are those writers who offer essential guideposts for contemplating the character of the city – the city-as-character – in the larger drama of the history of the United States and, for that matter, of the world. Questions of racial identity, historical memory, and the natural environment, of course, loom large in the coming pages, for New Orleans has long been a stage for playing out various dimensions of these themes with utmost complexity and urgency – their dueling ground, parade route, or dance hall – as lush in possibilities of meaning as a swamp.

T.R.J

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