

University of Massachusetts Boston

ScholarWorks at UMass Boston

American Studies Faculty Publication Series

American Studies

2019

Maroon Colonies and New Orleans Neutral Grounds: From a Protosuburban Past to a Postsuburban Future

Lynnell L. Thomas

University of Massachusetts Boston, lynnell.thomas@umb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/amst_faculty_pubs



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Studies Commons](#), [Human Geography Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Lynnell L., "Maroon Colonies and New Orleans Neutral Grounds: From a Protosuburban Past to a Postsuburban Future" (2019). *American Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 19.
https://scholarworks.umb.edu/amst_faculty_pubs/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Studies Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

Lynnell L. Thomas
University of Massachusetts Boston

Maroon Colonies and New Orleans Neutral Grounds:
From a Protosuburban Past to a Postsuburban Future

Thank you, Roger, for such a compelling and provocative delineation of the central place of suburbanization in urban geography. As someone whose work is not situated in urban theory, your talk has certainly provided an education for me, but also some new ways of thinking about and through my work on New Orleans, tourism, and spatial justice. Until now, my work on race and contemporary tourism in New Orleans has engaged very little with the interrelationship between the urban core and its periphery, but looking at the city's historical development illuminates some of the processes that Roger so eloquently described. I'm thinking particularly of the ways that New Orleans' physical, cultural, and social geographies have been shaped by a constantly shifting tension and reciprocity between the city and its environs.

Beginning in the late 18th century, New Orleans' original suburbs, the faubourgs, emerged: Faubourg Ste. Marie (the current Central Business District, or CBD, where this plenary session is being held), Faubourg Tremé, and Faubourg Marigny were originally plantations subdivided and developed into residential lots, transforming these areas that are now so closely tied to the city's urban identity, from country to city. During the antebellum period, the lucrative sugarcane and cotton plantations situated upriver from the city fueled New Orleans' economic growth and its central place in the domestic slave trade, making New Orleans the largest slave market in the United States. The city's urban geography of slavery produced what the historian Walter Johnson describes as "a pyramidal network of information gathering and slave selling

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 that stretched from the slave pens through the city's hotels and barrooms.... The lively traffic in
8
9 information and influence that joined the slave traders to the hotels and bars where travelers and
10
11 traders gathered and discussed their business suggests that the practice of trading slaves far
12
13 outreached the cluster of pens publicly identified as 'the slave market'" (Johnson, 2001, p. 52).
14
15
16 Slavery was not relegated to the outlying plantations or even the slave pens on the outskirts of
17
18 the city, but insinuated itself into the urban commons.
19
20

21 Plantation slavery's imprint on the urban landscape was also evident in a settlement
22
23 pattern characterized by racial and ethnic diversity – though not equality – in the antebellum and
24
25 postbellum periods, as many black residents in the city lived in slave quarters and domiciles in
26
27 close proximity to whites. As the cultural geographer Richard Campanella documents, the city's
28
29 topography further demarcated the more desirable city center from the flood-prone back-of-town
30
31 where the city's poor and African Americans were often relegated. Throughout the 19th century,
32
33 New Orleans' character and demography continued to change with the reunification of
34
35 municipalities and the annexation of outlying cities that further expanded the urban footprint. By
36
37 the 20th century, new technologies in water management, drainage, and transportation facilitated
38
39 suburban living within the city limits. After World War II, New Orleans' suburbanization
40
41 followed the more traditional North American model of suburban growth from the inner core
42
43 (Campanella, 2007, pp. 705–711). These historical trends belie the oversimplified bifurcation of
44
45 suburb and city that Roger so rightly critiques.
46
47
48
49
50
51

52
53 Yet, whereas Roger turns his attention to postsuburban developments, for me, the New
54
55 Orleans example that aligns most closely with his notion of the suburb as a "place of disorder
56
57 and possibility" might best be viewed as a protosuburban phenomenon, that of New Orleans'
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 neutral ground. In New Orleans parlance, “neutral ground” refers to a street median, a usage
8
9 attributed to the nineteenth-century division of the city into Creole and American municipalities.
10
11 However, the term was first used in southwest Louisiana to designate a disputed colonial
12
13 territory between France and Spain. Campanella argues that in this first usage, “neutral ground”
14
15 denoted “an unusual cultural interstice where isolated Spanish, French, African and indigenous
16
17 peoples interacted in a power vacuum, a space without a hegemon” (Campanella, 2015). Given
18
19 New Orleans’ treacherous topography, political instability, and diverse demography in the
20
21 colonial and territorial periods, such neutral grounds proliferated as Africans, Afro-Creoles, and
22
23 Native Americans sought out and created spaces beyond the purview of slave owners and
24
25 government authorities (See, for example, Bell, 1997; Dawdy, 2008; Hall, 1995; Powell, 2012;
26
27 Scott, 2005, pp. 11–29; Usner, 1992). These protosuburban enclaves anticipated the vibrancy and
28
29 prolificacy of the “global urban periphery” that Roger describes.
30
31
32
33
34
35

36 Maroon colonies epitomized this type of disorderly protosuburban peripheral space. They
37
38 developed throughout the New World as safe havens, cooperative economies, and cultural
39
40 repositories for African and indigenous fugitives from slavery and settler colonialism. The most
41
42 well-known of these colonies in early New Orleans was that of St. Malo, the larger-than-life
43
44 leader of runaway slaves who traversed the Louisiana swamps in the late 18th century. St. Malo’s
45
46 territory encompassed the labyrinthian swamps, lagoons, and trenasses between Lake
47
48 Pontchartrain, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi River on the outskirts of New Orleans.
49
50 Although he was eventually captured and summarily executed for killing white men who
51
52 invaded the territory, St. Malo and his compatriots defended the settlement from invasion by
53
54 white settlers and slave owners for four years between 1780 and 1784. St. Malo and other
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 maroons risked recapture, torture, and death in pursuit of freedom and autonomy in this
8
9 alternative society in the borderland between city and periphery, between slavery and freedom.
10

11 Some of the more commonplace indictments leveled against suburbs that Roger outlined
12 in his talk – geographical inaccessibility, environmental detriment, economic inefficiency – were
13
14 subverted in the maroon settlements. Despite – or more, accurately, because of – the potential
15
16 dangers of the Louisiana wetlands, their isolation and near impermeability offered real
17
18 advantages to maroons and other Afro-Creoles for whom the treacherous terrain served as a
19
20 deterrent for those trying to remand them to slavery. Maroons subsisted, in large part, on the
21
22 natural environment by planting and harvesting fruit and vegetables, fishing and hunting, and
23
24 creating handicraft from the habitat where they lived. The maroon economy served as a direct
25
26 challenge to the slave economy. Maroons traded their produce, fish, game, and crafts in
27
28 exchange for ammunition and supplies. Many maroons supplemented their income by working in
29
30 nearby cypress sawmills for white owners who ignored the law against hiring fugitives to pursue
31
32 their own profit. Unlike the sawmill owners and slave owners, however, maroons shared their
33
34 own profits equally within their community. As a significant numerical minority in colonial
35
36 Louisiana, whites could not contain the system of *marronage*. For the most part, they accepted
37
38 the practice as an inconvenient reality of living in a chaotic, lawless territory where it was often
39
40 difficult to distinguish white from black, slave from free, criminal from colonial official. This
41
42 reality made it easier for maroons like St. Malo to move between plantation, marshland, and city
43
44 without arousing suspicion. These fluid communities were integral in the development and
45
46 sustenance of New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture (Din, 1999, pp. 89–115; Diouf, 2016, pp. 157–
47
48 185; Hall, 1995, pp. 201–236; Powell, 2012, pp. 222–248; Woods, 2017, pp. 12–14; 17–18).
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 Just as Roger has convincingly shown how the study of the postsuburban world is
8
9 integral to understanding the urban condition, I am interested in how the protosuburban maroon
10
11 colony might inform 20th- and 21st-century efforts by black New Orleanians to carve out their
12
13 own urban neutral grounds: cultural, political, and economic spaces resistant to the hegemonic
14
15 forces of neoliberalism and neo-Bourbonism, a term coined by the urban geographer Clyde
16
17 Woods to describe the new power structure that emerged in the wake of the civil rights
18
19 movement. Appropriating largely symbolic tenets of the black freedom struggle, the neo-
20
21 Bourbonist regime “used urban renewal, the War on Poverty, new suburban political allies, new
22
23 policing practices, and other policies to defeat the intensifying movements for sustainable
24
25 development and social justice” (Woods, 2017, p. 180). In opposition to this regime, Woods
26
27 identifies a blues epistemology that animated the resistant cultural practices of New Orleans’
28
29 working-class communities. He suggests that this blues agenda had its origins in the maroons’
30
31 colonial settlements: “Their secret places, religious practices, songs, ethics, and social vision
32
33 became the pillars of a parallel social order” (Woods, 2017, p. 13).
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 These pillars, in turn, have supported the parading, musical, and social traditions of the
42
43 Mardi Gras Indians, jazz funerals, second line parades, social aid and pleasure clubs, Baby Dolls,
44
45 and other grassroots social groups so central to New Orleans’ place identity. Whereas maroons
46
47 staked a claim and forged a community in the hinterlands beyond the city, these modern-day
48
49 practitioners lay claim on the urban commons, transforming city space for their own purposes.
50
51
52 As the anthropologists Helen Regis and Rachel Breunlin explain,
53
54

55 As for as long as black New Orleanians have been marginalized, they have also created
56
57
58 their own organizations that constitute a subaltern mainstream. For hundreds of years,
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 African American communities have organized themselves into social clubs in the
8
9 New Orleans second-line tradition, participating in a long-standing sociopolitical
10
11 tradition of self- help, mutual aid, and resistance to structures of oppression. They also
12
13 publicly register their refusal to be defined by others, by the mainstream media, and by
14
15 the depressing statistics that typically describe their communities. They create their
16
17 own social networks, institutions, and events that provide opportunities for public
18
19 recognition and esteem. Although invisible to other sectors of society, individual and
20
21 larger social identities develop that are nonetheless extremely powerful in their own
22
23 communities.” (Breunlin and Regis, 2006, p. 746)
24
25
26
27

28
29 As these scholars make clear, when black New Orleanians parade in public streets and
30
31 parks, their processions are not simply entertainment and should not be confused with the
32
33 commodified performances stripped of subversive power staged by the tourism industry. By
34
35 taking “collective ownership of the streets,” these marginalized residents create new forms
36
37 of community in opposition to the political, social, and economic status quo (Regis, 2001, p.
38
39 756). Their performances, masking practices, music, rituals, and alternative visions of the
40
41 urban commons disrupts “the domain of the predictable and the controllable” that Roger
42
43 attributes to the modern city. Instead, they invoke the chaos and communalism of the
44
45 protosuburban maroon colonies.
46
47
48
49

50
51 Though guilty of the very city-suburb dualism that Roger cautions against, the
52
53 American Studies scholar George Lipsitz’s description of racially marginalized residents’
54
55 spatialization of the city is strikingly similar to the protosuburban community developed by
56
57 St. Malo and his fellow fugitives:
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 Ghetto and barrio residents turn segregation into congregation. They augment the use value
8
9 of their neighborhoods by relying on each other for bartered services and goods; by
10
11 mobilizing collectively for better city services; by establishing businesses geared to a local
12
13 ethnic clientele; and by using the commonalities of race and class as a basis for building
14
15 pan-neighborhood alliances with residents of similar neighborhoods to increase the
16
17 responsibility, power, and accountability of local government. Black neighborhoods
18
19 generate a spatial imaginary that favors public expenditures for public needs.” (Lipsitz,
20
21
22
23 2007, p. 14)
24
25

26 The irony, of course, is that this spatial imaginary has been thwarted by one of the widespread
27
28 postsuburban developments that Roger alludes to, but doesn’t elaborate on, in his talk, namely
29
30 “the frantic reurbanization, densification and hypercompacting of inner cities, often in line with
31
32 dynamic gentrification and segregation processes.” In New Orleans, the trend toward market-
33
34 based redevelopment was accelerated after Hurricane Katrina, as the suspension of government
35
36 regulations generated profit for the private sector, at the expense of poor and black residents.
37
38 Combined with the displacement of nearly a hundred thousand black New Orleanians, the
39
40 demolition of public housing, and the disproportionate investment in tourism infrastructure and
41
42 marketing campaigns, post-Katrina New Orleans is a richer, whiter, more racially segregated,
43
44 and more economically unequal city (Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED), 2016, p.
45
46
47
48
49
50 3; Krupa, 2011).
51
52

53 Like the maroons who defended their territory from white invaders, Black New
54
55 Orleanians have relied on a range of strategies to resist these policies. Through political protest
56
57 and participatory public performance, they continue the battle between bondage and fugitivism,
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 between enclosure and a new commons. As the success of the recent multiracial grassroots effort
8
9 to remove monuments to the Confederacy demonstrate, sometimes these battles are won, and a
10
11 new generation of maroons seek out modern-day neutral grounds, spaces without hegemons. In
12
13 their “Open Letter to the Residents of New Orleans,” the organization Take ‘Em Down New
14
15 Orleans articulates their vision for the city: “The New Orleans family is defined by the diverse
16
17 and inclusive nature of its culture in spaces both public and private. Public spaces are for all of
18
19 the public and should not be used to promote the abhorrent views of the white ruling class to
20
21 uphold symbols of Black oppression” (Take ‘Em Down NOLA Coalition, n.d.). Despite the
22
23 resonance of this alternative view of the commons, its realization remains elusive.
24
25
26
27

28 In post-Katrina New Orleans, many poor and working-class African Americans,
29
30 including those whose labor and cultural traditions support the city’s dominant service economy,
31
32 can no longer afford to live there. Following the international trends that Roger discussed in his
33
34 talk, African Americans have joined recent Latino immigrants in migrating to neighboring
35
36 suburban parishes. While the black population in the city of New Orleans has decreased, the
37
38 suburbs have diversified (Adelson, 2015; Krupa, 2011). The suburban parishes surrounding New
39
40 Orleans are no Brampton, at least not yet. But, they do recall what Roger refers to as the “real
41
42 and imagined inbetween frontiers of the city and its outside.” The protosuburban maroon
43
44 colonies also occupied an inbetween frontier. Perhaps the protosuburb of the maroon colony will
45
46 reemerge in the postsuburb of metropolitan New Orleans, the neutral ground of the future?
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

References

- Adelson, J. (2015, June 25). Black Share of Population Growing in Suburbs, Shrinking in Orleans Parish, Census Bureau Reports. Retrieved August 30, 2018, from https://www.theadvocate.com/new_orleans/news/politics/article_90b85b9e-217d-5cf8-8796-68e8b83de527.html
- Bell, C. C. (1997). *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- Breunlin, R., & Regis, H. A. (2006). Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans. *American Anthropologist*, 108(4), 744–764.
- Campanella, R. (2007). An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans. *The Journal of American History*, 94(3), 704–715.
- Campanella, R. (2015, September 3). “Neutral Ground.” Retrieved November 4, 2017, from <http://www.knowlouisiana.org/neutral-ground>
- Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED). (2016). *Racial Wealth Divide in New Orleans* (pp. 1–12). Washington, DC. Retrieved from [https://prosperitynow.org/files/resources/Racial_Wealth_Divide_in_New_Orleans_RWD I.pdf](https://prosperitynow.org/files/resources/Racial_Wealth_Divide_in_New_Orleans_RWD_I.pdf)
- Dawdy, S. L. (2008). *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Din, G. C. (1999). *Spaniards, Planters, and Slaves: The Spanish Regulation of Slavery in Louisiana, 1763-1803*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7 Diouf, S. A. (2016). *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (Reprint edition). New
8
9 York: NYU Press.
- 10
11 Hall, G. M. (1995). *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in*
12
13 *the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- 14
15
16 Johnson, W. (2001). *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, Mass.:
17
18 Harvard University Press.
- 19
20
21 Krupa, M. (2011, June 8). Racial Divides among New Orleans Neighborhoods Expand.
22
23 Retrieved August 30, 2018, from
24
25 http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2011/06/pockets_of_new_orleans_grow_fa.html
- 26
27
28 Lipsitz, G. (2007). The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race. *Landscape*
29
30 *Journal*, 26(1), 10–23.
- 31
32
33 Powell, L. N. (2012). *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard
34
35 University Press.
- 36
37
38 Regis, H. A. (2001). Blackness and the Politics of Memory in the New Orleans Second Line.
39
40 *American Ethnologist*, 28(4), 752–777.
- 41
42
43 Scott, R. J. (2005). *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*. Enlarged Edition.
44
45 Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- 46
47
48 Take 'Em Down NOLA Coalition. (n.d.). Open Letter to Residents of New Orleans. Retrieved
49
50 January 3, 2018, from <http://takeemdownnola.org/why-it-matters/>
- 51
52
53 Usner, D. H. (1992). *Indians, Settlers and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*. Chapel Hill,
54
55 NC: UNC Press.
- 56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1
2
3
4
5
6
7 Woods, C. (2017). *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in*
8
9 *Post-Katrina New Orleans*. (L. Pulido & J. Camp, Eds.). Athens: University of Georgia
10
11 Press.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65