Liminale Anthropologien

Zwischenzeiten, Schwellenphänomene, Zwischenräume in Literatur und Philosophie

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Vorwort

Liminalität ist ein Relationsbegriff. Umschrieben wird mit diesem in den 1960er Jahren von Victor Turner in die Diskussion eingeführten[1] und seither vielfach präzisierten und erweiterten Begriff eine Schwelle, eine Zone, ein Übergangsraum, ein ausgedehntes Dazwischen, das sich in drei Dimensionen entfalten kann: zeitlich (zwischen vorher und nachher), systematisch (zwischen dem einem und dem anderen) und räumlich (zwischen hier und dort). Liminalität hat mit dem Denken der Grenze zu tun, wendet dieses aber in einer spezifischen Weise: Ausgangspunkt ist weder ein dialektisches Grenzkonzept, bei dem die Grenze als ortloser Ort eines vermittelnden Umschlags erscheint, noch ein strukturalistisches Grenzkonzept, das die Grenze auf die ausdehnungslose Scheidelinie einer binären Differenz reduziert. Liminale Zonen haben vielmehr eine eigene zeitliche, systematische oder räumliche Ausdehnung und stehen in der Spannung einer doppelten Relation, im widersprüchlichen Bezug auf zumindest zwei heterogene Systeme. Die Grenze erscheint deshalb nicht als eine scharfe und ideale Linie, die einer stabilen und gegebenen Ordnung zugerechnet werden kann, sondern als eine unscharfe, aber konkrete Zone, innerhalb derer Positionen und Relationen stets neu ausgehandelt werden müssen.

Liminale Anthropologien bezeichnen einen zentralen Wirkungsbereich liminaler Strukturen: den Entwurf des Menschen. Denn der Mensch ist vielfältig auf Zwischenzeiten, Schwellenphänomene und Zwischenräume bezogen, und er ist dies, so die These, in einer konstitutiven, ursprünglichen, nicht nur in einer sekundären, abgeleiteten Art. Liminale Anthropologien stellen also die Frage nach dem Wesen des Menschen, wenden diese aber in einer spezifischen Weise: Sie argumentieren weder identitätstheoretisch, also ausgehend von einer vorab gegebenen Eigenheit des Menschen, noch alteritätstheoretisch, also ausgehend von der Erfahrung radikaler Fremdheit. Liminale Anthropologien fokussieren vielmehr diejenigen Phänomene und Prozesse anthropologischer Selbstverortung, die sich im zeitlichen, räumlichen und systematischen Dazwischen ereignen. Der Mensch erscheint so nicht als etwas Gegebenes, sondern als ein Werdendes; nicht als ein Bestimmtes, sondern als ein zu Bestimmendes. Für dieses Werden, dieses Bestimmen bietet die Zone, die Schwelle, der Übergang den paradigmatischen Ort.

Damit ist der Gegenstandsbereich des vorgelegten Bandes bezeichnet: Die hier versammelten Beiträge analysieren philosophische und literarische Geistes- und Kulturbeschäftigungen mit den Phänomenen liminaler Anthropologien. Dabei geht es nicht um die empirische Analyse realer liminaler Phänomene (wie sie etwa von Soziologie, Geographie, Biologie oder Historiographie betrieben werden könnte), sondern um die Frage, wie Liminalität *gedacht, imaginiert und dargestellt* wird, also um *Konzepte, Entwürfe und Inszenierungen* liminaler Anthropologien. Die empirischen Wissenschaften sind in der hier vorgeschlagenen Perspektive allenfalls mögliche Objekte der Forschung, insofern sie ihrerseits den Menschen als liminales Wesen konzeptualisieren, entwerfen und inszenieren; sie sind nicht die Paradigmen, von denen aus geforscht wird.

Damit kreuzen die Beiträge zwei mittlerweile etablierte Untersuchungsperspektiven der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften: Zum einen die Frage nach kulturellen

[1] Vgl. Victor Turner: The Ritual Process. Structure and Antistructure, New York 1969.

Juliane Braun

On the Verge of Fame

The Free People of Color and the French Theatre in Antebellum New Orleans

In 1863, *L'Union*, New Orleans's first black newspaper, reprinted a long serial article entitled *Souvenirs de la Louisiane* or *Memories of Louisiana* that had originally appeared in the Port-au-Prince newspaper *L'Opinion nationale*. In this article, Joseph Colastin Rousseau, free man of color and recent immigré to Haiti, looks back on his life in New Orleans and relates the following incident, taking place at the city's French theatre in 1837:

> In 1837, a group of barbarous, arrogant men went so far as to take away the seats at the Théâtre d'Orléans reserved for people of color. They claimed that the people of color were dressed in too much finery and so offended the dignity of their daughters. But, in speaking with certain white families, we learned the true reason for this insult. Rumor had it that the young white ladies, who were jealous of and intimidated by the beauty and elegance of these daughters of Africa, demanded that they be hidden away so that they, the white girls, would no longer be overshadowed by the beautiful women of color. When they learned of this insult, the fathers of these colored girls [...] quietly abandoned the Théâtre d'Orléans. That same year the hommes de couleur of New Orleans opened the Théâtre Marigny, funded it entirely on their own, and appointed an administration drawn from their own ranks. All the actors who set foot on this stage were people of color, except for a few bit parts, walk-on roles, and maids and servants who were played by whites.[1]

This, according to Joseph Colastin Rousseau, was how the first theatre for the free people of color in New Orleans came into being and operated. In this essay I hope to give a more detailed and perhaps a more differentiated account of the theatrical tradition that emerged from New Orleans's free people of color. When examining the cultural productions of the free people of color in New Orleans in the nineteenth century it is important to recognize what historians Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé

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[1] "En 1837, ces messieurs poussèrent leur barbare méchanceté jusqu'à faire retirer aux familles de couleur la place qu'elles avaient au théâtre d'Orléans, parce qu'elles étalaient trop de luxe, disaient-ils, lorsqu'elles y allaient avec leurs filles; mais, dans les entretiens des familles blanches, nous savions tout ce qui se passait! [...] La chronique disait, qu'elles s'étaient trouvées blessées de la beauté et de l'élégance des jeunes filles de la race africaine et, qu'à force des plaintes, elles étaient parvenues à éloigner d'elles ces jeunes beautés qui les offusquaient. Mais ces pères des familles auxquels on faisait un tel affront tous hommes d'intelligence, et qui avait déjà reconnu que le théâtre est le flambeau civilisateur des nations, se résignèrent sans murmurer et, dans le même année, le théâtre Marigny fut ouvert pour eux et de leurs propres deniers. Ils nommèrent une administration composée par eux-mêmes. Tous les sujets qui montèrent sur cette scène furent pris dans les rangs de leur tribu, à l'exception de quelques comparses, figurants, ou domestiques qui furent les blancs" (Union [Nouvelle-Orléans], May 7, 1863). Trans. Jean-Marc Allard Duplantier: Creole Louisiana's Haitian Exile(s). In: Southern Quarterly 44.3 (2007): p. 68-84. Here: p. 76.

Bell called "a fundamental cultural duality in the city's black community".[2] Indeed, the city's ongoing ethnic strife between the Francophone population and its English-speaking residents after the Louisiana Purchase caused a similar divide within the Crescent City's black community. Francophone free people of color, Logsdon and Bell write, "formally learned French intellectual traditions" whereas English-speaking free blacks who had migrated to New Orleans from the North after the Louisiana Purchase "acculturated to Anglo-American traditions, [and] approached events with strategies derived from their own historical experience in the Anglo-American world".[3] This essay is concerned with the French-speaking contingent of the free black population of New Orleans, the so-called *gens de couleur libres*, or simply, as I will refer to them in this essay, free people of color.[4]

Louisiana's free people of color had emerged under the French and Spanish colonial administrations as a separate group that distinguished itself sharply from the enslaved population, but was denied full equality by the whites that stigmatized them for their skin color. Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, their number had increased steadily through manumission, migration, and natural growth. The practice of plaçage – whereby a free woman of color entered into a long-standing, formalized relationship with a white man – and the arrival of numerous refugees from the turmoil in Saint Domingue accounted especially for the rise of free blacks in New Orleans. Between 1805 and 1810, the number of free people of color in New Orleans more than tripled from 1,566 to 4,950, and continued to increase throughout the antebellum period. The sheer number and relatively elevated position of the free people of color within New Orleans society troubled Louisiana's new American administration. Many free blacks had gained military training in free black militias under the Spanish colonial rule, had acquired property and wealth, owned small businesses and dominated the skilled trades in New Orleans. They worked as carpenters, and shoemakers, tailors, and seamstresses, laundresses and shopkeepers. Some of them even owned plantations and slaves. Free blacks could testify in court, make wills, and were allowed to carry arms. They formed their own congregations, established their own schools, founded neighborhood associations and mutual aid societies. With a literacy rate of 80 percent in 1850 New Orleans's free blacks were extremely well educated, and some of them had attended renowned schools and conservatories in France.[5]

[2] Joseph Logsdon/Caryn Cossé Bell: The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900. In: Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization, ed. by Arnold R. Hirsch/Joseph Logsdon. Baton Rouge 1992, p. 201-61. Here: p. 202.

[3] Ibid. p. 203-04.

[4] Accordingly, most of the original documents that constitute my sources are in French. I present them here in their English translation with the French original in a footnote. Unless otherwise stated, the translation provided is my own.

[5] Joan M. Martin: *Plaçage* and the Louisiana *Gens de Couleur Libres*: How Race and Sex Defined the Lifestyles of Free Women of Color. In: Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color, ed.by Sybil Kein. Baton Rouge 2000, p. 57–70. Here: p. 57-58; Joseph Logsdon/Caryn Cossé Bell: The Americanization of Black New Orleans, p. 204-06; Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868. Baton Rouge 1997, p. 37-38; Kimberly S. Hanger: Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803. Durham 1997, p. 55-87, 109-35, 168-69; Mary Gehman: Visible Means of Support: Businesses, Professions, and Trades of Free People of Color. In: Creole: The History and Legacy, p. 208–22; H.E. Sterkx: The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana. Rutherford 1972, p. 7-10; Marcus

Although the free people of color seemingly prospered in antebellum New Orleans, their unique position within New Orleans society was continuously threatened by increasingly restrictive legislation passed by an American administration eager to impose on Louisiana the dual racial hierarchy that reigned elsewhere in the United States. Spurred by fears of potential insurrections and alliances between the free black and the enslaved populations the new American government of Louisiana passed a series of laws that sought to curtail the rights of the free black population.[6] Nevertheless, until the mid-1840s, the free people of color in New Orleans managed to defend their unique social position. They sustained themselves, as historian Shirley Thompson writes, "in the nebulous realm between free and slave, between black and white, and between French and American".[7] New Orleans's free people of color thus truly were in a position of liminality that cultural anthropologist Victor Turner characterized as "neither here nor there; [...] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial".[8]

As a study of the free black community in antebellum New Orleans, this essay seeks to provide one example of how questions of liminality were negotiated in and around the theatres of the Crescent City. While several book-length studies on the free people of color in antebellum New Orleans have been written, none of them more than mentions their theatrical activities.[9] Studies on the black theatre of the United States

Christian Collection (MSS 11), The Free Colored Class, Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans, p. 30; Roulhac Toledano/Mary Louise Christovich: New Orleans Architecture: Faubourg Tremé and the Bayou Road. New Orleans Architecture VI. 8 vols. Gretna 1980, p. 90-91; Sally Kittredge Evans: Free Persons of Color. In: New Orleans Architecture: The Creole Faubourgs. ed. by The Friends of the Cabildo. New Orleans Architecture IV. 8 vols. Gretna 1974, p. 25–36. Here: p. 27; Mary Gehman: The Free People of Color of New Orleans. New Orleans 1994, p. 52-53, 69-70; Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans. Cambridge 2009, p. 129-38; Michel Fabre: The New Orleans Press and French-Language Literature by Creoles of Color. In: Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature, ed. by Werner Sollors. New York 1998, p. 29-49. For more on individual free people of color, see the community memoir written by Rodolphe Desdunes entitled *Nos hommes et notre histoire* and Edward Larocque Tinker's *Les Ecrits de la langue française en Louisiane au 19e siècle*, as well as Lester Sullivan's essay *Composers of Color* and the works by Michel Fabre. Even though this article treats the theatre of New Orleans's free black population, I will not examine Victor Séjour in depth. He was successful chiefly in Paris and had left New Orleans before he could make a lasting contribution to the theatrical scene of the Crescent City. Three of his works were performed at the Théâtre d'Orléans before 1859: *Diégarias* on Jan. 17, 1847; *Richard III* on May 1, 1853; and *L'Argent du diable* on April 12, 1857. His success in Paris was barely recognized by the (white) newspapers of New Orleans in the antebellum period. For more on Séjour, see O'Neill's extensive study *Séjour: Parisian Playwright From Louisiana*. Lafayette 1995.

[6] For more on Louisiana legislation restricting the rights of free people of color, see Sally Kittredge Evans: Free Persons of Color, p. 25 and Marcus Christian Collection, Attitudes and Acts Restrictive to the Rights of Free People of Color, p. 30-49.

[7] Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home, p. 14.

[8] Victor Turner: Liminality and Communitas: Form and Attributes to Rites of Passage. In: The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure. New York 1995, p. 94-130. Here: p. 95.

[9] Important monongraphs on the free people of color in New Orleans include Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home; Nina Möllers: Kreolische Identität: Eine amerikanische „Rassengeschichte" zwischen Schwarz und Weiß: die Free People of Color in New Orleans. Bielefeld 2008; Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution; Mary Gehman: The Free People; Ira Berlin: Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South. New York 1974; John Blassingame: Black New Orleans, 1860-1880. Chicago 1973; H.E. Sterkx: The Free Negro; and Donald Edward Everett: Free

also only briefly address the existence of separate theatres for New Orleans's free people of color, but a systematic analysis of their audiences, troupes and repertoires has not yet been undertaken.[10] Given the very limited number of materials on the theatre of the free people of color, this is unsurprising. The few existing newspaper articles, playbills and legal documents that constitute my sources are often barely legible. In many cases, it is impossible to uncover today the contributions of the free black population to a society that is long gone.[11] Moreover, achievements by free black men and women were, in the words of Alfred Hunt, "dutifully ignored or purposefully misattributed by unsympathetic whites in the nineteenth century".[12] More often than not, it is by understanding what has been omitted that a coherent picture gradually emerges.

The task at hand in this essay is thus primarily one of recovery. I will start out by tracing the presence of free people of color in the francophone theatres of New Orleans, teasing out their impact on the early formations of a francophone theatrical culture in the Crescent City. Next, I will examine more closely the 1837 breaking point in theatrical race relations and the ensuing foundation of two theatres by and for free

Persons of Color in New Orleans, 1803-1865. Diss. Tulane U 1952. Among the works listed above only Gehman, Blassingame, Sterkx, and Everett allude to the theatrical activities of New Orleans's free black population. Gehman mentions the participation of the free people of color in New Orleans's theatrical life in two instances without yielding any detailed information (p. 53, 69-70). Blassingame's treatment of the theatrical activities of free people of color in the antebellum period is even more limited although this may be owed to his focus on the postbellum period (p. 13). Sterkx discusses the theatre-going practices of black New Orleanians in three brief instances (p. 68-69, 245, 278), whereas Everett erroneously states that free blacks were not allowed to perform on any of New Orleans's antebellum stages (p. 221). Important studies of Louisiana's free people of color in the colonial period include Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century. Baton Rouge 1992; Kimberly S. Hanger's Bounded Lives; and Jennifer Spear's Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans. Baltimore 2009. Hanger mentions the existence of quadroon actresses as part of New Orleans's first theatrical troupe (p. 144).

[10] For the history of the African American theatre of the United States, see Errol G. Hill/James V. Hatch: A History of African American Theatre. Cambridge 2003; Harry Justin Elam/David Krasner: African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader. Oxford 2001; George A. Thompson: A Documentary History of the African Theatre. Evanston 1998. Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch give some basic information on the Théâtre Marigny (p. 47-48, 493). They also mention the existence of a separate theatre for free people of color already in 1830 (p. 47). I have been unable to find any reference to such a theatre in the newspapers and documents I consulted for 1830. In a chapter entitled "The Caribbean Connection" (p. 273-306) Errol G. Hill mentions the relationship between the United States and Jamaica as primary instance of theatrical exchange between the US and the Caribbean thus entirely omitting the close connection between Saint Domingue and New Orleans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its consequences for the black theatre of the United States. George A. Thompson reprints a newspaper article from the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* [Feb. 4, 1838] concerning the Théâtre Marigny (p. 209).

[11] The activities of New Orleans's free people of color are traceable at least to a degree because they were required by law to carry the designation h.c.l, f.c.l., or g.c.l. (homme de couleur libre, femme de couleur libre, gens de couleur libres) or their English equivalents f.m.c., f.w.c, and f.p.c. after their names to indicate their status in all public and legal documents (Law of March 31, 1808 qtd. in Marcus Christian Collection, Attitudes and Acts Restrictive to the Rights of Free People of Color, p. 34). This directive was followed only inconsistently though (Sally Kittredge Evans: Free Persons of Color, p. 25; Roulhac Toledano/Mary Louise Christovich: New Orleans Architecture, p. 85).

[12] Alfred N. Hunt: Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean. Baton Rouge 1988, p.74.

people of color that Colastin Rousseau described in the opening sequence of this essay. Considering the material conditions of the two theatres – including their location and interior layout – as well as their admittance policies, troupes, and repertoire, I assess the function of these playhouses for a population that was bound to remain in a position of liminality throughout the antebellum period. Through an analysis of four of the plays performed at the free black theatres I uncover the relevance of a seemingly outdated and imported repertoire for the day-to-day experiences of New Orleans's free black population. Ultimately, I argue that New Orleans's free people of color developed a distinct theatrical tradition that reflected as well as complicated the specific contours of their liminal position within the city.

I.

Free people of color initially became involved with the New Orleans stage when, in the wake of the slave insurrections in Saint Domingue in 1791, many educated free blacks fled the uprisings to find refuge in Louisiana. Among the first refugees was a Mme Durosier who took over the directorship of New Orleans's first theatre in 1793, one year after its inception. Saint Domingue had been the site of a lively theatre scene since the 1740s, and at least from 1775 onwards the playhouses of Saint Domingue had made provisions for free people of color in the audience, first only in less desirable seats but towards the end of the colonial period also in the first loges. Blacks were allowed to appear on stage, and in some cases, ran their own theatres or managed their own companies. The theatres of Port-au-Prince, Saint Marc and Léogâne especially had been shaped by the contributions of free black theatre owners, musicians, and actors. With Mme Durosier, this Saint Domingue custom was transferred to New Orleans. She introduced to the city's theatre-going public quadroon actresses who were so well received that the former governor of Louisiana, Esteban Miró, feared they "might be encouraged to aspire to greater privileges than good custom dictates".[13]

Despite their initial success, a controversy surrounding another black immigrant actor from Saint Domingue some twenty years later shows how the racial climate in New Orleans's playhouses gradually changed. In 1812, fourteen actors employed at the Théâtre Saint Philippe wrote a letter to acting Mayor Nicolas Girod expressing their unwillingness to appear on the same stage as a black actor. They state:

> We have learned that in the theatre where we give our performances a special production is being prepared in which a certain Dupré, man of color will appear.[14] We have refused to accept this individual among us [...] [and] we would

[13] René Le Gardeur, Jr.: The First New Orleans Theatre, 1792-1803. New Orleans 1963, p. 10. Trans. Kimberly S. Hanger: Bounded Lives, p. 144. For the contributions of free blacks to the theatres of Saint Domingue and New Orleans see, Jean Fouchard: Artistes et répertoire des scènes de Saint-Domingue. Port-au-Prince 1988, p. 84, 91, René Le Gardeur, Jr.: The First New Orleans Theatre, p. 12.

[14] Given the close connection between Saint Domingue/Haiti and New Orleans at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, I believe there is a possibility that the Dupré who hoped to appear on the New Orleanian stage in 1812 is Antoine Dupré, black playwright and actor from Haiti. In 1812 during the siege of Port-au-Prince, Antoine Dupré wrote and composed patriotic songs, then left this city before he returned in 1813 to form a theatre troupe. Nothing is known about his whereabouts during his

> rather renounce the theatre which makes our livelihood than reappear after [him] in this playhouse. We ask you to [...] give the necessary orders to stop a production that at the moment hurts the conventions and could even compromise the tranquility [...] in the theatre.[15]

I have been unable to find out if Dupré did perform, but it is obvious from the letter that the tide had turned against black performers in New Orleans.

Similarly, a more antagonistic atmosphere started to be felt in the auditorium. Although the two French theatres in existence in New Orleans at the beginning of the nineteenth century had made provisions for free people of color in the second tier of loges and had set off sections where slaves could sit, it was not until 1816 that the theatres in New Orleans were legally segregated. The ordinance passed on June 8, 1816 read as follows: "It shall not be lawful for any white person to occupy any of the places set apart for people of color, and the latter are likewise forbidden to occupy any of those reserved for white persons, at any public exhibition or theatre".[16] With this law in place, New Orleans's most prominent white French theatre, the Théâtre d'Orléans, was constructed with an interior layout that differed from that of its predecessors. Upon opening in 1819, the Théâtre d'Orléans featured not two, but three tiers of loges. Free people of color were now to sit in the third tier, their accustomed seats in the second tier being designated for white female patrons. This seating arrangement was met with criticism in the press: "At all time in New Orleans," an article in the *Louisiana Courier* read, "the [second boxes] have been assigned to the colored population, and it [is] a kind of injustice to deprive them of a right which time and usage had secured them".[17] However, the female patrons for whom the second tier was designated did not frequent the theatre sufficiently. The seats stood empty, and John Davis, the director of the Théâtre d'Orléans lost more than $15,000 in revenue in the theatre's first season. Consequently, he changed his seating policy, and from the 1820/1821 season onwards,

absence from Haiti, but he, like so many other refugees, may have come to New Orleans. Born on the island, Dupré toured in France and England as an actor, albeit with only modest success. He was killed in a duel on January 13, 1816. He wrote numerous plays with Haitian themes such as *La Mort de Lamarre*, *Jeune Fille*, and *Miroir* (Robert Cornevin: Le théâtre haïtien des origines à nos jours. Montréal 1973, p. 52-56; Esquisses sur les hommes des lettres d'Haiti: Dupré. In: Revue des Colonies [Paris]. Mai 1837. 3e Année, No. 11, p. 469-72).

[15] Letter from the actors of the Saint Philip Theatre to acting Mayor Nicolas Girod, November 24, 1812, John Minor Wisdom Collection. General Manuscripts, Special Collections Division. Tulane University: "Nous avons appris qu'on préparait, sur le théâtre où nous donnons nos spectacles, une représentation extraordinaire dans laquelle un nommé Dupré, homme de couleur doit jouer. Nous avons refusé de prendre cet individu parmi nous, [. . .] [et] notre détermination étant si formelle à cet égard, et notre volonté si unanime que nous renonçons plutôt à la Comédie, qui fait notre existence que de reparaître après sur le théâtre. Nous vous prions, Monsieur le Maire, de [. . .] donner les ordres nécessaires pour arrêter une représentation qui blesse dans le moment actuel les convenances et qui pouvait même compromettre la tranquillité que vous voulez voir régner au spectacle" (Les acteurs du théâtre Saint Philippe à Monsieur Girod, Maire de la Ville de la Nouvelle Orléans, Novembre 24, 1812. John Minor Wisdom Collection, Tulane University).

[16] Thomas Wharton Collens, comp.: Analytic Digest of the Acts of the Legislature, Now in Force, Constituting the City Charter of New-Orleans. New Orleans 1846, p. 6.

[17] Qtd. in: Roulhac Toledano/Mary Louise Christovich: New Orleans Architecture, p. 98.

free people of color were allowed back into the second tier. Slaves could now legally attend a performance by sitting in the third tier.[18]

This arrangement lasted until 1837. In the summer of 1837, the new directorial board of the Théâtre d'Orléans announced a series of substantial renovations that would "dispose everything for the better." The result of said renovations was advertised in one newspaper as follows: "The condition of the second [tier of boxes] has much improved, and its purpose changed. Families can now secure their seats, either in the first or second [tier] in the same manner, the entrances and the prices being the same".[19] A week later, the same paper praised the transformation this theatre had undergone to become "a true temple of taste and *bon ton,*" suggesting against all contemporary accounts that this theatre had not been a place of elegance, decorum and good manners before its renovation.[20] It is unclear whether the new administration of the Théâtre d'Orléans merely pushed the free people of color out of their accustomed seats in the second tier to sit in the third tier with the slaves, or if both slaves and free people of color were banned from the Théâtre d'Orléans altogether. It probably made little difference to New Orleans's free black population, who worked so intently not to be conflated with the slaves.

II.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Faubourgs Marigny and neighboring Washington complained about the lack of entertainment in their part of town, pointing out the difficulty of getting to the Théâtre d'Orléans in the French Quarter (Vieux Carré) without "driver, coach, and horses at hand".[21] Located outside the city's original boundaries between the Vieux Carré and inhospitable swampland on the Mississippi River, Marigny was developed between 1805 and 1811 on the lands of a former plantation. Although being situated in what Shirley Thompson called a "geographically marginal space of questionable hygiene" Marigny evolved into a bustling hub of residential and commercial activity.[22] While Marigny was never intended as an

[18] For the segregation of theatres in New Orleans and the seating arrangement in the newly constructed Théâtre d'Orléans, see G.P. Whittington: The Journal of Dr. John Sibley, July-October, 1802. In: Louisiana Historical Quarterly 10 (1927), p. 474–97. Here: p. 486; Henry Arnold Kmen: Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years, 1791-1841. Baton Rouge 1966, p. 70-72, 232-33; Prospectus. In: Courrier de la Louisiane [Nouvelle-Orléans], Nov. 11, 1819; James E. Winston: The Free Negro in New Orleans, 1803-1860. In: Louisiana Historical Quarterly, 21.4 (1938), p. 3-13. Here: p. 10.

[19] "A jeudi la réouverture du théâtre Français. On nous promet merveilles. Tout est disposé pour le mieux. [. . .] La Compagnie du Théâtre d'Orléans donne avis que, de grandes améliorations ayant eu lieu au théâtre, le livre, pour la location des loges, est ouvert au bureau du contrôleur, rue d'Orléans. La condition des secondes étant de beaucoup améliorée, et leur destination changée, les familles peuvent maintenant se pourvoir de places, soit au premières, soit au secondes, indistinctement, les entrées et les prix en étant les mêmes" (Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans, Nov. 7, 1837).

[20] "Le théâtre d'Orléans a fait sa réouverture jeudi dernier avec une pompe toute à fait remarquable. L'édifice réparé de la manière la plus élégante, semble s'est métamorphosé en un vrai temple du goût et du bon ton" (Abeille, Nov. 13, 1837).

[21] "Mais je suis peiné de le dire, on ne peut guère aimer le théâtre et vivre au Faubourg Washington, à moins de n'avoir à ses ordres, cocher, voiture et chevaux, ce que malheureusement je n'ai pas" (Abeille, March 8, 1838).

[22] Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home, p. 132.

exclusively black neighborhood, up to 75 percent of the properties there had been owned by a free person of color by the end of the antebellum period. As liminal spaces outside of the old city center Faubourgs Marigny and Washington provided unique opportunities for enterprising free people of color, and it was in Marigny that many of the defining institutions of the free black population emerged.

Although Marigny was still lagging behind the French Quarter in the 1830s, its residents worked hard to turn it into an agreeable neighborhood that included centers of commercial activity and community interaction. Marigny's main artery was Champs Elysées (Elysian Fields), a long street that connected the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain and on which the Pontchartrain Railroad started to operate in 1831, transporting goods and people between the lake and the river. The town square of Marigny was Washington Square, located relatively close to the River on Elysian Fields between Casa Calvo (Royal) and Greatmen (Dauphine). Emerging on the intersection of Frenchman, Victory (Decatur) and Esplanade was a small commercial district where two prominent free black men owned a complex of buildings that housed apartments and warehouses. Julien Lacroix established Marigny's finest grocery store, whereas his brother François dressed the elite of the Marigny and Vieux Carré residents in his capacity as a tailor. Marigny also boasted a very nice hotel, which the *Louisiana Courier* described as "furnished in a new and splendid style, unequalled in this country".[23]

It is not surprising that in this environment the demands for a local theatre grew louder. On February 14, 1838, the city council of the Third Municipality, which included Marigny, accorded to E.V. Mathieu, free man of color, the right to establish a theatre specifically for people of color. Six weeks later, on April 3, 1838 the first playbill of the new Théâtre Marigny appeared in *L'Abeille*. "With the permission of the authorities," Casimir Delavigne's *École des Vieillards* (School for Old Men) was performed on the same day in costumes "newly made" for the occasion.[24] From then on the Théâtre Marigny, located on the corner of Champs Elysées and Bons Enfants (Elysian Fields and Saint Claude Ave.) was open for one night a week, usually on Sunday, with the occasional additional performance either on Thursday or on Wednesday. The new playhouse was, just like the Théâtre d'Orléans and the American playhouses of New Orleans, exempt from taxes, and required to keep at their disposal a box for the mayor and other city dignitaries. The city administration furthermore reserved the right to place a guard in the theatre, should this become necessary and stipulated that the theatre's little bar had to be closed as soon as the theatrical representation was over. Some of New Orleans's most prominent free men of color were involved in running the theatre. Responsible for ticket sales and subscriptions, for example, were Basile Crocker, mathematician and fencing instructor, and Louis Séjour,

[23] Qtd. in: Samuel Wilson: Early History. In: New Orleans Architecture: The Creole Faubourgs, ed. by The Friends of the Cabildo. New Orleans Architecture IV. 8 vols. Gretna 1974, p. 3-24. Here: p. 12. For a description of Faubourg Marigny, see Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home, p. 136-37; Samuel Wilson, Early History, p. 8-13; Benjamin Moore Norman: Norman's New Orleans and Environs. 1845. Baton Rouge 1976, p. 181-82.

[24] "Théâtre Marigny. Avec l'approbation des Autorités. Pour la 1ère fois sur ce théâtre, *L'École des Vieillards*, comédie en 5 actes et en vers de Casimir Delavigne [. . .]. La Direction, jalouse de mériter de plus en plus les encouragements du Public, ne négligera rien pour lui offrir la représentation de ces deux dernières pièces avec tout l'ensemble possible. Les costumes, nouvellement faits sont analogues à l'époque. Dans la première pièce paraîtra une jolie décoration peinte par M. Victor Frémont" (Abeille, April 3, 1838).

father of the famous playwright Victor Séjour, who sold tickets from his dry good store on the corner of Saint Philip and Bourbon Sts. in the French Quarter.[25]

Although founded by a free man of color specifically for free people of color, the new playhouse was well frequented by black and white patrons alike. In 1838 the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* reported not only that the free people of color "flock there [. . .] in great numbers" but also that "[m]any white people [. . .] attend this establishment, the best order being observed".[26] Not only did white people attend, but they were indiscriminately seated among the free blacks. Slaves, on the contrary, were strictly prohibited from entering.[27] This practice was maintained even after the directorship changed in July, when a man named Vitalis took over the management of the Marigny after it had stood vacant and had been up for sale during most of July.[28] While notifying his patrons of the structural changes he made to the building – the Marigny would from now on have ventilation to brave the hot summer days in New Orleans – he went to great length justifying the changes he did not make. Vitalis wrote:

> Considering social conventions and the custom of the country, we would have liked to make some changes to the precedents already established in the Marigny Theatre concerning the seating arrangements. However, since the smallness of the venue did not allow us to favor one category without hurting the other, we had to forgo [these measures]. Let us hope it will be possible for us one day to satisfy all demands regarding this issue in a larger establishment. [. . .] [Meanwhile,] we provide for everyone the possibility to place themselves, the first to subscribe will of course have the best seats.[29]

[25] The resolution, quoted here in full read as follows: "Résolu qu'il doit accordé à M. E.V. Mathieu, h.d.c.l. la permission d'avoir un théâtre dans la 3me Municipalité, pour les personnes de couleur; que le dit théâtre sera exempt des taxes imposées sur les cabarets, auberges ou maisons de bals, mais il est bien entendu, que le régisseur du dit théâtre devra fournir une loge, et ce, sans rétribution pour l'usage du maire, du Recorder, des aldermen, du secrétaire du Conseil de cette Municipalité; que les commissaires de la dite Municipalité auront le droit d'entrer dans le dit théâtre, et que le maire, le Recorder ou les aldermen, s'ils le jugent convenable auront le droit d'y envoyer une garde. Résolu que la buvette du dit théâtre sera fermée aussitôt la clôture des représentations du théâtre ou des bals sous peine d'une amende de cinquante piastres par chaque contravention, recouvrables devant toute cour de juridiction compétente. L. U. Gaiennié, Recorder, 231-14.2.1838" (Conseil de la Municipalité No. 3. Séance du 14 Février 1838). For proof of the involvement of the free men of color listed in the main body of the text, see Abeille, April 7, 1838; Charles Edward O'Neill: Séjour: Parisian Playwright From Louisiana. Lafayette 1995, p. 6; Abeille, Sept. 11, 1838.

[26] Qtd. in Lyle Saxon: Louisiana: A Guide to the State. American Guide Series. New York 1941, p. 206.

[27] See Abeille, April 7, 1838.

[28] See Abeille, July 4, 25, 1838.

[29] "[La nouvelle administration de cet établissement] a fait pratiquer dans la salle des améliorations propres à y favoriser la libération de l'air et que dorénavant on n'aura plus à craindre d'y étouffer, même dans les plus chaudes soirées de l'été. [. . .] Des considérations prises dans les convenances sociales et les mœurs du pays nous auraient fait désirer d'apporter quelques modifications dans les précédents déjà établis à la salle Marigny pour l'ordre des places. Cependant l'exiguïté du local ne nous permettant pas de favoriser une catégorie sans blesser l'autre, nous avons dû nous abstenir. Espérons qu'il nous sera possible un jour de satisfaire à toutes les exigences sur ce point dans un plus grand établissement. En attendant la faculté de louer les loges au mois ou par soirée, fournissant à chacun celle de se classer les premiers inscrits auront naturellement les premières places" (Abeille, July 25, 1838).

Especially in light of the seating controversy at the Théâtre d'Orléans in the previous year, Vitalis's choice to maintain the mixed seating – against, as he says, all current social conventions – is remarkable. Vitalis's casual and somewhat vague phrasing does not, however, imply that he seriously intended to make the expected changes. Rather, the lack of space seems to have served as a mere pretext to forgo any alterations he might have been pressured to make. Despite Vitalis's brave attempts to preserve the Marigny announcements for only three more shows appeared in the newspaper after he assumed directorship. After one last performance "on popular demand" on September 23, 1838 the Théâtre Marigny disappeared.[30]

A second theatre for the free people of color was proposed a little more than a year after the end of the Marigny in September 1838. On January 11, 1840 three men, Mssrs. Géniers, Eude, and Letermelier received permission from the city council to establish a theatre and ball room on the corner of Grands Hommes and Champs Elysées (Dauphine St. and Elysian Fields). This location was in the heart of Faubourg Marigny, adjacent to Washington Square, three blocks closer to the Vieux Carré than the Marigny Theatre and in the place where a former amateur troupe, the Théâtre des Elèves, had once given its performances.[31] Appropriately, the new theatre was named Théâtre de la Renaissance. Its opening took place on January 26, 1840, after it was postponed three times because the scenes had not been finished.[32] From then on it ran two regular performances a week, one on Sunday and one on Thursday, with the occasional exceptional show on Wednesday or Friday. The space serving as a theatre and ballroom did not seem to have been originally designated as a playhouse but was probably a larger private dwelling that had been repurposed. Despite these spatial constraints, the Théâtre de la Renaissance seemed to have been a bigger enterprise than the Marigny. It featured a designated ballroom, a bar, and above all, a resident orchestra. This orchestra was conducted by a M. Constantin, who in all likelihood was M. Constantin Deburque, eminent free black violin teacher and director of the Negro Philharmonic Society that at the time had more than one hundred active members.[33]

[30] "Cette représentation est à la demande générale du public, [. . .]." (Abeille, Sept. 18, 1838).

[31] The Théâtre des Elèves operated in this location from mid-May to the beginning of July 1838. Along with numerous unnamed amateur performers, some of the Théâtre d'Orléans's most popular dramatic actors like M. Astruc, M. Notaire, M. Félicien, Mme Lussan, Mlle Eugénie, and Mme Meyret appeared on a regular basis on the stage of the Théâtre des Elèves. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported on May 22, 1838: "We 'dropped in' at [the Théâtre des Elèves] on Sunday evening, and were much pleased with the manner in which some of the lighter French vaudevilles are brought out. The theatre is at the corner of Champs-Elysées and Rue des Grands Hommes, and boasts the attractions of one or two very pretty women and good actresses, besides Mons. Victorin, the best eccentric comedian who has ever appeared upon the boards of a French theatre in this city" (qtd. in Lyle Saxon, Louisiana, A Guide to the State, p. 206). Giving an average of two performances a week (Sundays and Thursdays) it ran in direct opposition to the Théâtre Marigny until both theatres almost simultaneously ceased to operate at the beginning of July. As Vitalis took over the directorship of the Marigny he announced that his new troupe would be composed of "the elite of the actors of the Théatre des Elèves, distinguished talent from the Théâtre d'Orléans, and the best artists of the former Marigny troupe," a statement that further corroborates the assumption that the troupe of the Marigny consisted of both black and white actors (Abeille, July 25, 1838). Information on the Théâtre des Elèves is very scarce beyond what is given here, and there is no evidence that free people of color were involved in its operations.

[32] See Abeille, Jan. 18, 22, 24, 1840.

[33] See Abeille, Jan. 15, Feb. 10, April 5, 1840; Henry Arnold Kmen: Music in New Orleans, p. 234-36. The resolution pertaining to the founding of the Théâtre de la Renaissance read as follows: "Résolu que la permission est accordée à Mssrs. Géniers, Eude et Letemelier, d'établir un théâtre et une salle de bals, à l'encoignure des rues Grands Hommes et Champs Elysées, pourvu qu'ils se conforment strictement aux règlements de police, maintenant en force relativement aux établissements de ce genre; et pourvu aussi, que la buvette ou l'endroit où l'on fournit les rafraîchissements soit fermé après la représentation ou le Bal, sous peine d'une amende de cinquante piastres par chaque contravention, recouvrable pendant tout tribunal compétent. Recorder 380 – 11.1.1840" (Conseil de la Municipalité No. 3, Séance du 11 Janvier 1840).

Since neither the founding documents nor any subsequent correspondence relating to the Théâtre de la Renaissance display any mention of free people of color (including the designating initials h.c.l. required by law to appear in official records), I believe it unlikely that the theatre's three founders were free men of color. Similarly, there is no evidence that this playhouse was initially established to cater specifically to New Orleans's free black population. Quite to the contrary, the Théâtre de la Renaissance seems to have been founded with the specific intention of providing inclusionary entertainment. Detailing their motivations for opening a new theatre, the three founders wrote: "New Orleans has lacked a theatre open to all social classes. It is the goal of the directors of the Théâtre de la Renaissance to step in by forming this establishment, thereby providing for the general public, without exception, some moments of recreation".[34] This tolerant admission policy was soon to be tested and rigorously curtailed. Barely a month had passed since the theatre's opening when the three directors of the Théâtre de la Renaissance deemed it necessary to remind their patrons that "in order to comply with the instructions of the authorities, [. . .] [people of color] will be admitted exclusively." By way of explanation, the newspaper advertisement carrying the notification simply stated: "This establishment has been designated for people of color".[35] By law, the Théâtre de la Renaissance had been turned into an institution only accessible to the free black population of New Orleans. Whites and slaves were no longer allowed to attend.

Nowhere in any of the sources I have been able to consult could I find any further references to this decree, nor is it possible to assess today to what extent it was enforced. It was common practice for slaves to accompany their masters to the theatre. Some also passed as free men and attended on their own. Even in 1840, New Orleans's racial make-up was so complicated that it was impossible to draw a sharp color line along the traditional black/white dichotomy. The unreliability of phenotype as a distinguishing feature made this law practically unenforceable. It is thus reasonable to assume that the Théâtre de la Renaissance continued to cater to both black and white patrons, albeit unofficially.

These considerations might also help explain the somewhat surprising presence of white actors in both theatres that were operated by and for free people of color. The acting personnel at the Marigny and the Renaissance theatres were essentially the same because many of the Marigny performers simply carried over to the Renaissance after the former had suspended operations. Both theatres' acting troupes were comparatively

[34] "Un Théâtre ouvert à toutes les classes de la société, manquait à la Nouvelle-Orléans. Les administrateurs du Théâtre de la Renaissance, ont eu pour but d'y suppléer, en formant cet établissement, et de procurer au public en général, sans exception, quelques moments de récréation" (Abeille, Jan 15, 1840).

[35] "L'administration du dit théâtre vient de rappeler au public que pour en conformer aux Instructions de l'autorité, cet établissement étant destiné aux personnes de couleur, ces derniers y seront exclusivement admises" (Abeille, Feb. 27, 1840).

small, and chiefly composed of amateurs. The most famous black actor to appear on the stages of the Marigny and the Renaissance was a man named Edmond Orseaux. In remembrance of the great French tragedian, he was lauded as "the Talma of our [. . .] theatre," and accordingly usually cast in the male lead.[36] At the Marigny, he was supported by Armand Lanusse who is remembered today chiefly for his contributions to *Les Cenelles*, the first American poetry anthology to feature works by black writers.[37] Several other members of both troupes however were almost certainly white. Originally recruited in France to appear on the stage of the white Théâtre d'Orléans, these actors had been engaged by the director of the Marigny in 1838 to strengthen this troupe.[38] Among them was M. Victorin, the "best eccentric comedian who has ever appeared on the boards of the French theatre in this town".[39] Initially one of the stars of the Théâtre d'Orléans, Victorin had spectacularly fallen out with that theatre's director in 1836.[40] Victorin and his colleagues from the Théâtre d'Orléans acted alongside Edmond Orseaux and other black performers in both theatres. Later, Victorin even took over directorial duties in a joint appointment with Orseaux at the Théâtre de la Renaissance.[41] In 1840, the troupe at the Théâtre de la Renaissance was further strengthened by two new acquisitions from the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin in Paris. M. Dorsay rivaled Edmond Orseaux for the male lead, and Mlle Marie usually played the principal female role.[42] Dorsay was so successful that a newspaper writer suggested he might soon appear on the stage of the white Théâtre d'Orléans in front of New Orleans's "true [theatre-going] public".[43] Black and white actors alike thus performed at both the Marigny and the Renaissance, but it was in the repurposed Théâtre de la Renaissance that white actors continued to be allowed on the stage even though white spectators were officially banned from that theatre's audience. Defying city regulations and customs established at the white theatres of New Orleans the free black theatres continued to be focal points in the social life of the Third Municipality and provided a unique venue for the interaction between black and white theatregoers, actors, and directors.

[36] Union, May 7, 1863; Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes: Nos hommes et notre histoire: Notices biographiques accompagnées de réflexions et de souvenirs personnels. Montreal 1911, p. 32. Edmond Orseaux was sometimes also billed as Edmond Orso, or simply as M. Edmond.

[37] Rodolphe Desdunes writes of Armand Lanusse's involvement with the theatre. He was usually simply billed as M. Armand (Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes: Nos hommes et notre histoire, p. 32, 138; Abeille, April 21, 1838).

[38] See Abeille, July 25, 1838.

[39] Qtd. in Lyle Saxon: Louisiana: A Guide to the State, p. 206.

[40] See Abeille, Nov. 24, 1836.

[41] See Abeille, March 14, 1840.

[42] See Abeille, Feb.1, 20, 1840.

[43] "[Q]uand [. . .] le vrai public de la Nouvelle-Orléans pourrait-il entendre M. Dorsay? [L]es couronnes du Théâtre de la Renaissance lui suffisent-elles? [. . .]. [Signé] Un abonné du Théâtre d'Orléans" (Courrier de la Louisiane, March 4, 1840).

III.

Like the acting personnel, the repertoires of the Marigny and the Renaissance were also remarkably similar, at times even overlapping. While the plays produced at all French theatres in New Orleans almost exclusively consisted of French imports, the fare offered at the Marigny and the Renaissance differed considerably from the repertoire of the Théâtre d'Orléans, a playhouse that showed predominantly opera, usually double-billed with a short vaudeville. Sometimes the Théâtre d'Orléans also offered contemporary drames, but only rarely scheduled classical comedies or tragedies. Neither the Marigny nor the Renaissance produced opera, primarily for budgetary reasons.[44] Their emphasis clearly lay with comedy and vaudeville, but their repertoire also included tragedies and drames.[45] A closer comparison between performance listings reveals that the two theatres operated by free people of color devoted considerably more attention to seemingly outdated plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth century than the Théâtre d'Orléans. With its adherence to authors like Corneille, Racine, Beaumarchais and Voltaire, the repertoire of New Orleans's free black theatres bears a much closer resemblance to the repertoire of the theatres in Saint Domingue before the slave insurrection than to the repertoire of its French competitor in New Orleans.[46] This programming choice is remarkable, although the directors of New Orleans's free black theatres did not by any means exclude contemporary pieces from their repertoires.

At both theatres for free people of color, plays revolving around marriage and its challenges dominated the repertoire. Particular favorites included Delavigne's *École des Vieillards* (School for Old Men, 1823), Beaumarchais's *Barbier de Séville* (Barber of Seville, 1775), Scribe's *Le Mariage de Raison* (The Marriage of Reason, 1826), and Alexandre Dumas's drames *Teresa* (Theresa, 1831) and *Antony* (Anthony, 1831). Arguably, plays about the challenges of love and marriage have always been wildly popular on both sides of the Atlantic. However, I contend that the programming choices at both New Orleans theatres catering to free people of color not merely imitated the theatrical repertoire of the métropole, but were instead powerfully inflected by the local experiences of New Orleans's free black population. In France, the first decades of the nineteenth century saw the gradual erosion of the traditional conception of marriage as arranged ('marriage of reason', 'marriage of convenience') in favor of a more modern understanding of marriage as based on mutual attraction ('marriage of inclination'). Potential candidates were thus, at least in theory, free to select their spouse

[44] The founders of the Théâtre de la Renaissance did initially promise comic opera, but not once was a performance of this genre billed in the newspaper. Before the theatre's opening, the authorities also seemed to have been suspicious about the kind of spectacle that would be presented at the Théâtre de la Renaissance and consequently made the theatre's managers wait for more than a month before they granted them the usual tax exemption reserved for "high" art deemed worthy of municipal support (Abeille, Jan. 15, 1840; Conseil de la Municipalité No. 3., Séance du 7 mars 1840, New Orleans City Archives).

[45] See Abeille, July 25, 1838; Jan. 15, 1840.

[46] Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French plays that appeared both in Saint Domingue and in New Orleans's free black theatres include Voltaire's *Alzire ou Les Américains* (1736), *Mahomet ou le Fanatisme* (1741), and *Zaïre* (1732), Racine's *Andromaque* (1667), Corneille's *Le Cid* (1637), Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1770) and *Oedipe* (Jean Fouchard: Artistes et répertoire des scènes de Saint-Domingue, Port-au-Prince 1988, p. 67-194).

irrespective of adherence to a specific social class.[47] By contrast, in the same time period Louisiana law regulated its population's marital alliances more strictly than ever. After marriages between slaves and free people of color had been declared illegal in 1806, the Louisiana Civil Code of 1808 forbade marriages between free blacks and whites.[48] This decree thus obligated antebellum Louisianians to marry within race, but the widely accepted practice of plaçage offered a possibility to circumvent these regulations.

In the practice of plaçage, a free woman of color was set up by a guardian, usually her mother or a close relative, with a white man in order to enter into a contracted, quasi-legitimate marital arrangement. For all participants, plaçage promised to be an advantageous situation: for the young black woman, life in a plaçage arrangement often meant material and social gain, while the man had a (temporary) companion and was at liberty to terminate the arrangement at any time. Prospective candidates were usually matched at a ball organized by the Société Cordon Bleu, an organization of wealthy quadroon matrons who used these balls specifically to pair their young female protégées with a wealthy white suitor. Participation was by invitation only, and the entrance fee was set high enough to ensure the social standing and material wealth of the prospective white clients. Once a match was made, the guardian of the free woman of color would negotiate a contract with the white man on her protégée's behalf. In this contract, the man typically agreed to provide financial support for his companion and any potential offspring during their life together. In case of separation, he would endow her with a settlement. Sometimes the plaçage arrangement ended when the man legally married a woman of his own race, in other cases the man maintained a plaçage relationship alongside his conventional marriage.[49]

In this environment, the issues of marriage and extra-marital relationships were thus highly charged and held an almost universal appeal. It is thus not surprising that the majority of the plays performed at the Marigny and the Renaissance theatres revolved around the marriage theme. More specifically, most of the marriage-themed plays staged at the free black theatres focused on arranged marriages, illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of such a union and the challenges it inevitably posed to those who were involved. While marriages of convenience closely resembled plaçage relationships in their arranged character, they also differed in two crucial points: aside from financial gain, the main purpose of an arranged marriage was to avoid an improper alliance, a so-called mésalliance[50] where two people from different social classes married despite at least one family's opposition to the degradation of status a union with a social inferior would entail. Plaçage arrangements, by contrast, were established precisely to match members of two diverging groups and thus transgressed social and racial boundaries purposefully. However, unlike the wives who were bound

[47] I adopted this terminology from Patricia Mainardi: Husbands, Wives, and Lovers: Marriage and Its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France. New Haven 2003, p. 3-6, 213-14. For an in-depth study of the institution of marriage and its representation in nineteenth-century French literature and the arts, see ibid.

[48] See Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p. 76; Virginia R. Domínguez: White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana. New Brunswick 1994, p. 25.

[49] For an extensive treatment of plaçage, see Joan M. Martin: Plaçage, p. 57-70; H.E. Sterkx: The Free Negro, p. 250-56; Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p. 112-13.

[50] With this terminology, I follow Patricia Mainardi: Husbands, Wives, and Lovers, p. 119, 214.

to their husbands in a marriage of convenience, women involved in a plaçage arrangement lacked the same legal protection because their union was not officially sanctioned.

The rigid censorship laws and the lack of a native free black repertoire did not allow for an explicit dramatization of plaçage arrangements on the stages of the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance. I argue that imported French plays negotiating the challenges of arranged marriages provided an ideal vehicle to implicitly comment on and critique plaçage arrangements on the stages of New Orleans's free black theatres. Taking two examples from the repertoire of New Orleans's free black theatres, I will demonstrate how plays imported from the metropolitan stages became invested with debates about the plaçage system.

Performed four times at the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance Eugene Scribe's *The Marriage of Reason* was one of the most popular plays on the stages of New Orleans's free black theatres.[51] Scribe's vaudeville celebrates arranged marriages as the only path to enduring marital bliss and indeed a stable relationship. The piece recounts the story of Suzette, a young orphan who was taken in by the aristocratic Brémont family as a child and now works for that family as a chambermaid. She has fallen for Edouard, Count Brémont's son, who reciprocates her feelings. Brémont disapproves greatly of the prospective match and goes to great lengths to prevent Edouard's relationship with Suzette. While locking Edouard into a room, he arranges for Suzette to marry the elderly Bertrand, a retired soldier. Suzette gradually learns to respect, appreciate and even love her new husband and is thus able to resist Edouard's continued advances. At the end of the play, the unrelenting Edouard is revealed as a dishonest fraud that has already courted numerous women before Suzette. He is sent away to fulfill his military duties. Thus the last threat to Bertrand and Suzette's eternal happiness is removed for good.

While Scribe's *Marriage of Reason* clearly functions as an ardent defense of the marriage of convenience, Casimir Delavigne's *School for Old Men* paints a more balanced picture of the advantages as well as the pitfalls of an arranged marriage. Also staged four times, Delavigne's comedy focuses on the marriage of Danville, an elderly widower and retired armaments manufacturer who has recently married Hortense, daughter of an impoverished bourgeois family and more than forty years his junior.[52] Hortense befriends the young Duke d'Elmar who introduces her into the high society of Paris. The increasingly close alliance between Hortense and the Duke arouses the suspicions of Danville, who surprises the couple as his young wife seemingly succumbs to the charms of the Duke. Danville bitterly regrets his decision of having entered an arranged union with Hortense, but as Hortense is able to prove her love for her elderly husband, the spouses reconcile and leave the temptations of Paris for the country. The play ends on an ambiguous note. While Delavigne clearly exposes the challenges of a marriage of

[51] *Le Mariage de Raison* premiered at the Marigny Theatre on September 23, 1838 and was performed at the Renaissance Theatre for its opening night on January 26, 1840. Further performances took place on February 13, 1840, and March 15, 1840. (Abeille, Sept. 18, 1838; Jan. 24, 1840; Feb. 13, 1840; March 14, 1840).

[52] *The School for Old Men* was the first recorded performance at the Marigny Theatre and took place on April 3, 1838. It was staged at that theatre again on April 8, 1838. Performances of Delavigne's comedy at the Théâtre de la Renaissance took place on January 30, 1840, and March 22, 1840 (Abeille, April 3, 4, 1838; Jan. 29, March 21, 1840).

convenience, he also contends that it is not doomed per se, and may, in some cases, even lead to permanent happiness.

Although the pieces by Delavigne and Scribe take a different stance on the marriage theme, they share a concern for questions of class. Both playwrights portray boundaries between different social classes as impenetrable. Relationships that would transcend these boundaries are depicted as impossible, and are consequently never consummated. In Delavigne's *School for Old Men*, for example, it is ultimately the heroine's desire for social ascent that is revealed as the true destabilizing force of her marriage. From the beginning Hortense is portrayed as an ambitious woman who sees more in her husband than just a retired armament manufacturer and pushes him to secure a good government post in Paris.[53] Her husband Danville, by contrast, is very comfortable with his social station. He suspects that Hortense's association with the Duke is a direct consequence of her "need to shine" and tries to bring her to her senses by reiterating how important it is that the boundaries between different social classes remain intact:[54] "To receive in one's home a marquis, a duke, or a duchess/ That is fine, if one is a duke – but I am not," he contends.[55] The reasons he gives against the mingling of the classes are grounded in a healthy sense of self-worth and pride in his own achievements:

> [O]n account of my common sense, I know what I am worth.
> To enjoy, without much ado the fruit of my labors,
> With good people, people that one can understand,
> Who, when they address us, do not seem to be condescending,
> Who do not judge me
> If I speak plainly or laugh too loudly,
> [. . .]
> These are my people, these are the friends that I want,
> Certain that they will be to me what I am to them.[56]

Utterly unimpressed by her husband's attempts to convince her, Hortense continues her quest for social ascent, and becomes increasingly blind to the Duke's improper advances. It is only through his intrusion into Hortense's apartment late one night that Hortense finally recognizes his true intentions and resolutely rebuffs him. Following this almost cathartic moment Hortense acknowledges her unwarranted desire for social

[53] "Danville: Hortense! elle me laisse un pouvoir absolu;/ Mais elle y voit très clair; quand on a ma fortune,/ Une capacité qu'elle croit peu commune,/ Sans prétendre à Paris au rang d'un potentat,/ Dans un poste honorable on peut servir l'état./ L'espoir qu'elle a conçu me semble légitime,/ Et je lui sais bon gré d'une si haute estime" (Casimir Delavigne: L'École des vieillards. Paris 1823 (J.-N. Barba), I, 1, p. 16).

[54] "Danville: Le besoin de briller a tel point vous domine,/ Qu'avec un jeune fou je vous vois de moitié" (ibid., II, 7, p. 69).

[55] "Danville: Qu'on reçoive chez soi marquis, duc et duchesse,/ C'est bien, si l'on est duc, et je ne le suis pas" (ibid., II, 7, p.71-72). Trans. Patricia Mainardi: Husbands, Wives, and Lovers, p. 130.

[56] "Danville: Mais, grâce à du bon sens, je sais ce que je vaux./ Jouissez sans fracas du fruit de mes travaux,/ Avec de bonnes gens, des gens qu'on puisse entendre,/ Qui de leur nom pour nous n'aient pas l'aire de descendre,/ Qui ne m'observent pas pour me prendre en défaut/ Si je parle sans gêne ou si je ris trop haut,/[. . .] Voilà mes gens; voilà les amis que je veux,/ Sûr qu'ils seront pour moi ce que je suis pour eux" (Casimir Delavigne: L'École des vieillards, II, 7, p. 71-72).

ascent and renounces it by definitively committing to life with her husband in the country, far away from any future temptations.

Whereas the ultimate transgression of social boundaries through the consummation of Hortense's relationship with the Duke is averted just in time in the *School for Old Men*, such a contravention remains purely hypothetical in Scribe's *The Marriage of Reason*. The chambermaid Suzette almost immediately relinquishes her feelings for her employer's son Edouard as soon as her employer Brémont expresses his discontent with the prospective match. He cleverly manipulates her into complying by focusing not on his personal fears of social degradation, but instead by illustrating the consequences of their union to Edouard's and Suzette's own happiness:

> A union [between you and Edouard] is impossible. [. . .] There are proprieties that must be respected, and society avenges itself on those who dare to defy them. If my son were to marry his mother's chambermaid, in the world where he would want to introduce you, public opinion would reject you. He would realize this himself, he would be humiliated because of you, and soon he would no longer love you, for unfortunately self-esteem is the primary motive of love. Then, disdained by society, abandoned by your husband, you would only have me [. . .].[57]

In an interesting reversal of perspectives, Brémont does not present himself as the main obstacle to Suzette's and Edouard's union. Rather, he blames society itself, outlining what will happen to those who challenge its conventions. According to Brémont, the future for those who dare to transgress social boundaries is grim. The class difference between Suzette and Edouard would act like a slow poison that destroys their marriage from within. Presented with such negative prospects, it is unsurprising that Suzette relents. In accordance with the play's didactic endorsement of arranged marriages, Suzette is ultimately rewarded for her sensible decision with a happy marriage to a worthy man who came from her own class.

The marriage plays performed at New Orleans's black theatres, then, did not condemn arranged marriages per se. Rather, they focused on relationships that violated or were in danger of violating boundaries between different social classes, highlighting the negative consequences if such a transgression did indeed take place. This condemnation of mésalliances echoes the growing criticism of plaçage arrangements within the free black community. The writings of some of New Orleans's most prominent free men of color appearing in the literary journal *L'Album littéraire: Journal des jeunes-gens, amateurs de la littérature* (1843) and the poetry anthology *Les Cenelles* (1845) especially reflected these concerns. Analyzing the short stories and poems penned by Armand Lanusse and others, historians Nina Möllers and Caryn Cossé Bell describe how free men of color viewed plaçage as a "form of human bondage" and

[57] "Brémont: Une pareille union est impossible. [. . .] Il est des convenances qu'on doit respecter, et la société se venge de ceux qui osent les braver. Si mon fils épousait la femme de chambre de sa mère, dans ce monde ou il voudrait t'introduire l'opinion te repousserait, lui-même s'en apercevrait. C'est dans toi qu'il serait humilié, et bientôt il ne t'aimerait plus; car l'amour-propre est malheureusement le premier mobile de l'amour. Alors, dédaignée par le monde, abandonnée par ton mari, il ne te resterait que moi" (Eugène Scribe: Le Mariage de raison. Paris 1826, I, 11, p. 31). Trans. Patricia Mainardi: Husbands, Wives, and Lovers, p. 134.

"institutionalized concubinage".[58] The contributors to *L'Album* and *Les Cenelles* attacked the ambition of the placée's mother, who in setting up her daughter for a plaçage arrangement traded her daughter's happiness for material gain that was bound to be merely temporary: "[...] a shameless mother/ Today sells the heart of her grieving daughter;/ And virtue is no more than a useless word which is cast aside," an anonymous writer laments in a poem entitled *A New Impression* published in *L'Album*.[59] The writers of *L'Album* and *Les Cenelles* also feared that a woman who lived within a plaçage arrangement was condemned to a state of perpetual mistress that would in the long run impair her moral integrity. In *To Elora*, for example, Armand Lanusse drastically lays out the consequences of a plaçage arrangement gone awry: "But soon, Elora, the giver disappeared;/ A new affair was again quickly arranged;/ Then a few months later, urged by necessity,/ The young girl turned to vice," he explains.[60] According to Lanusse, these "impure liaisons" would induce promiscuous behavior on the young girl's part and society ultimately would have no choice but to denounce her as a prostitute.[61]

Through entering a plaçage arrangement with a white man, a young black woman transgressed the boundaries of her community, and became unavailable to the men of her own race. The practice of plaçage thus established black women in a position where they belonged "neither here nor there," and deprived free black men of their sisters, daughters or potential wives.[62] Especially for black men, then, the stakes associated with keeping their women within their own social realm were high and provide one explanation for the popularity of plays that illustrated the harsh consequences of transgression on the stages of New Orleans's free black theatres. Women in attendance were duly warned: Delavigne's young heroine Hortense barely avoided falling victim to her own ambition. Scribe's Suzette emerges unscathed only because she renounced Edouard and the luxuries a union with him had promised, uncomplainingly recognizing and accepting her rightful place in society.

While the marriage plays can be understood as a commentary on the plaçage system, I argue that a second set of dramatic pieces performed at New Orleans's free black theatres can be read as outlining the psychological and economic repercussions of such relationships on the second generation of free people of color. More specifically, I tease out how plays like Voltaire's tragedies *Zaïre* (The Tragedy of Zara, 1732) and *Mahomet ou Le Fanatisme* (Fanaticism or Mahomet, the Prophet, 1741) invoke themes of cultural uprooting and the problematic of growing up between two worlds. For children born into a plaçage relationship, these questions were part of their day-to-day experience and played out on the stages of the theatres in the Third Municipality. Premiering on May 7, 1840 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, *Zaïre* focuses on the struggles of its eponymous heroine, a young Christian woman who was abducted from her French family and brought to Sultan Orosmane's Jerusalem seraglio as a young girl,

[58] Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p.112. For an extensive analysis of the treatment of plaçage in the writings of New Orleans's free people of color, see ibid., p. 113-17; Nina Möllers: Kreolische Identität, p. 145-52.

[59] Qtd. in Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p. 114.

[60] Régine Latortue/Gleason R.W. Adams, eds. and trans.: Les Cenelles: A Collection of Poems by Creole Writers of the Early Nineteenth Century. Boston 1979, p. 101.

[61] Ibid., see also Nina Möllers: Kreolische Identität, p. 145-52; Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p. 112.

[62] Victor Turner: Liminality and Communitas, p. 95.

only to fall in love with her Muslim keeper.[63] Having grown up as a cultural hybrid and not knowing who her parents are, Zaïre has felt a sense of loss for as long as she can remember: "[D]o I know who I am? Has Heaven ever permitted me to know myself?" she asks her friend Fatime.[64] Zaïre knows that she is probably of Christian birth, but, as "a slave of the Saracens from [her] earliest childhood," she was raised by Muslims. "Habit, and the law," Zaïre explains, "directed me in my first years/ Towards the religion of the fortunate Muslims./ [. . .] It was too late when I became acquainted with Christianity".[65] Yet, the cross she wears has at times sparked a feeling in her that she cannot quite explain: "This cross," she admits, "has often in spite of myself/ Seized my heart and surprised me with respect and reverence".[66]

After Zaïre discovers the identity of her father and brother, her somewhat abstract sense of division between two faiths suddenly becomes very concrete. Her new family demands a clear commitment to Christian values that is irreconcilable not only with Zaïre's Muslim upbringing, but also with her love for Orosmane. Zaïre suddenly not only has to choose between remaining a Muslim or converting to Christianity, but also between her proposed marriage to a Muslim sultan and her allegiance to her Christian family and French heritage. Staying with Orosmane then would signify Zaïre's complete immersion into the Arabic culture and would inevitably alienate her from her European origins for good. Confronted with this choice, Zaïre's previous notions of identity and belonging collapse and leave her in a state of utter confusion: "What will become of me?" she asks desperately. "Am I indeed either French, or a Sultana?/ Lusignan's daughter, or Orosmane's wife?/ Am I a lover, or a Christian?".[67] Zaïre experiences an identity crisis that remains unresolved in the course of the play. When she dies, her "heart is desperate," her "anxious soul does not know what it is owes, nor what it wants." An awful sense of terror is all she feels.[68]

The two young captives in Voltaire's second religious play, *Mahomet ou Le Fanatisme,* face a similar dilemma. Performed three times at the Marigny and Renaissance theatres, *Mahomet* focuses on Palmire and Séïde, who were both abducted from their families as children and grew up together as slaves of Mahomet, founder of Islam.[69] Mahomet seeks to expand his power but is opposed by Zopire, sheriff of Mecca and, unbeknownst to everyone except for Mahomet, father of Palmire and Séïde. During captivity, Palmire and Séïde have developed feelings for each other, but

[63] See Abeille, May 6, 1840.

[64] "Zaïre: [S]ais-je ce que je suis/ Le ciel m'a-t-il jamais permis de me connaitre?" (Voltaire, Zaïre (1732). In: Zaïre. Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète. Nanine ou L'Homme sans préjugé. Le Café ou L'Ecossaise, ed. by Jean Goldzink. Paris 2004, p. 55-131. Here: I, 1, p. 70).

[65] "Zaïre: La coutume, la loi plia mes premiers ans/ A la religion des heureux Musulman./ [. . .] Pour moi des Sarrasins esclave en mon berceau,/ La foi de nos Chrétiens me fut trop tard connue" (ibid., I, 1, p. 71).

[66] "Zaïre: Cette croix, je l'avoue, a souvent malgré moi/ Saisi mon Cœur surpris de respect et d'effroi:/ [. . .] J'honore, je chéris ces charitables lois,/ Dont ici Nérestan me parla tant de fois" (ibid.).

[67] "Zaïre: [Q]ue vais-je devenir?/ Dieu, commande à mon Cœur de ne te point trahir./ Hélas! Suis-je en effet, ou Français, ou sultane?/ Fille de Lusignan, ou femme d'Orosmane?/ Suis-je amante, ou chrétienne?" (ibid., III, 5, p. 99).

[68] "Zaïre: Quel état! Quel tourment! Non, mon âme inquiète/ Ne sait ce qu'elle doit, ni ce qu'elle souhaite;/ Une terreur affreuse est tout ce que je sens. [. . .] Je marche en frissonnant, mon cœur est éperdu" (ibid. V, 5, p. 122-23; p. 127).

[69] Mahomet was performed at the Marigny Theatre on June 3, and June 17, 1838. At the Renaissance Theatre individual scenes were staged on February 27, 1840 (Abeille, June 2, 16 1838; Feb. 27, 1840).

Mahomet also desires Palmire. To rid himself of his rival, Mahomet incites Séïde to kill Zopire, leading Séïde to believe that his murder of Zopire was an act of God's will. Séïde and Palmire learn that Zopire was indeed their father, but Séïde's quest for revenge on Mahomet comes too late. He dies from the effect of a poison that had been administered by one of Mahomet's subordinates.

Séïde is susceptible to Mahomet's manipulative designs only because he "does not have parents, [. . .] only a master".[70] This master has filled the emotional void the lack of parents has caused in Séïde with fanatic ideas to the point where he believes that "everything outside of being a Muslim is a crime".[71] The inexplicable emotions he feels in the presence of Zopire deeply confuse him: "Where am I? Oh heavens! Where am I? And what am I supposed to do?" he asks, torn between Mahomet's orders and Zopire's offer of reconciliation.[72] His sister Palmire attributes similar emotions to a feeling of uprootedness: "We do not know the pride of birth; without parents, without a homeland, slaves from childhood, [. . .] everything is foreign to us, except for the God that I serve," she explains to Zopire.[73] When he suggests that she stay with him, Palmire indignantly asks in return: "How can I belong to you? I do not even belong to myself".[74] Her sense of uprootedness disappears immediately though as soon as she discovers a familial bond to Zopire and Séïde. Without hesitation, she can thus make her final decision and commits suicide to follow the rest of her family into the realm of the dead instead of staying in this world with Mahomet.

The plight of Zaïre, Palmire and Séïde may have resonated with the situation of many of New Orleans's free people of color. They too, found themselves torn between two cultures, and if they were born into a plaçage relationship that ended early, knew little or nothing about the identity of their fathers. Along with this psychologically challenging situation, the economic state of plaçage children was often precarious. In an attempt to provide for the future of their illegitimate children, fathers could have their offspring officially recognized and thus enable them to inherit a portion of their father's estate. However, even official legitimization was no guarantee for a life free from economic concerns. In 1828, a new decree stipulated that children conceived in a plaçage relationship could not be legitimated unless their parents were subsequently married. Since inter-racial marriage was still illegal, this law virtually nullified the right of free black children to inherit property or anything else. Although this regulation was in effect only until 1831, the number of fathers willing to have their illegitimate children legally recognized declined steadily.[75] Plaçage thus increasingly became what Shirley Thompson called "a danger zone that exposed women of color and their children to the harsh consequences of arbitrary affections and loose commitment".[76] Taken together, the two sets of plays I have presented here not only attacked the practice of

[70] "Séïde: Je n'ai point de parents, Seigneur, je n'ai qu'un maître" (Voltaire: Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophète (1741). In: Zaïre, p. 142-210. Here: III, 8, p. 185).
[71] "Zopire: Ton esprit, fascine par les lois d'un tyran./ Pense que tout est crime hors d'être Musulman" (ibid., III, 8, p. 184).
[72] "Séïde: Où suis-je? O ciel! Où suis-je? Et que dois-je résoudre?" (ibid., III, 9, p. 186).
[73] "Palmire: Nous ne connaissons point l'orgueil de la naissance;/ Sans parents, sans patrie, esclaves des l'enfance,/ [. . .] tout nous est étranger, hors le Dieu que je sers" (ibid., I, 2, p. 153).
[74] "Palmire: Comment puis-je être à vous? Je ne suis point a moi" (ibid., I, 3, p. 154).
[75] For more on the legislation of inheritance within a plaçage arrangement, see H.E. Sterkx: The Free Negro, p. 179; Marcus Christian Collection, p. 34; Caryn Cossé Bell: Revolution, p. 76-77, 112.
[76] Shirley Elizabeth Thompson: Exiles at Home, p. 12.

plaçage, but they also illustrated the often tragic consequences for those who were involved.

In the increasingly restrictive atmosphere of antebellum New Orleans, free people of color constantly had to defend their position within society. They responded by crafting their own theatrical tradition that was firmly grounded in a Saint Domingan heritage and rigorous training in the French letters. Although both the Théâtre Marigny and the Théâtre de la Renaissance were comparatively short-lived establishments, the information they left behind about the composition of their troupes and repertoires yields interesting insights into a Francophone theatrical culture that emerged from New Orleans's free black population and came to prosper in the shadow of the famous Théâtre d'Orléans. This tradition simultaneously troubled and reaffirmed the existing racial prejudices that governed antebellum New Orleans society and helped New Orleans's free black population to escape, at least temporarily, from Victor Turner's "limbo of statuslessness".[77] Through innovative seating and admission policies as well as sensitive programming they gradually subverted the practices governing at the white Théâtre d'Orléans and negotiated on their stages and in their auditoriums questions of liminal identity that resonated with their own day-to-day experiences.

[77] Victor Turner: Liminality and Communitas, p. 97.