The Drama of History in Francophone New Orleans

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On January 1, 1824, the English-speaking population of New Orleans celebrated the grand opening of the American Theatre, lauding the advent of “Bards our own” and the rise of “our Drama” in the Crescent City (qtd. in Smither 41). For the city’s francophone residents, this event marked a new stage in the ongoing battle for cultural survival. Until the opening of the American Theatre, French drama and opera had dominated the city. Beginning in 1792, when Louisiana was still under Spanish rule, French theatricals were regularly performed at the Théâtre de la Rue St. Pierre, the Théâtre St. Philippe, and the Théâtre d’Orléans. After the Louisiana Purchase, more and more Anglo-Americans settled permanently in New Orleans and began to compete with the city’s established French-speaking population for political, economic, and cultural sway. The growing influence of the anglophone newcomers alarmed the francophone residents, who feared for the continued existence of their community. Over time, the tensions between the two populations turned into open hostility and came, according to historian Joseph Tregle, “perilously close to armed violence” (153). In 1836, the city of New Orleans was formally divided along ethnic lines to prevent such an escalation.

This article examines how the anglophone and francophone struggles for political influence and cultural sovereignty in New Orleans were transported into the local playhouses. Following Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s conceptualization of the early American playhouse as a “cultural site at which the dynamics of political belonging, modern sovereignty, and aesthetics [were] coarticulated” (21), I consider how drama native to the Crescent City and performed at local theaters at once reflected and helped negotiate continuing tensions between the city’s multiple linguistic communities. I focus in particular on how Louisiana’s French-speaking community used the theater as a powerful weapon in the battle for cultural...
survival. On the stage and in the auditorium, Louisiana's francophone population defined, defended, and disseminated its French identity while simultaneously negotiating its place in the city of New Orleans and the broader American nation. Conceiving of the French-language theater as a site of cultural affirmation, this article explores the relationship between the institution of theater, written drama, and ethnic identity in antebellum Louisiana.

The correlation between theater and identity formation has been studied extensively in recent scholarship on early American theater. Jeffrey H. Richards, for example, has described theater as “[o]ne of the registers and molders of identity” (17). Heather S. Nathans, Jason Shaffer, and S. E. Wilmer, among others, have specifically linked the emergence of theater as an institution to the formation of a national “American” identity (1, 13, 1). In her most recent study, Dillon has pointed to the limitations of using “the familiar narrative of cultural nationalism” to examine early American theater. Instead, she proposes “the study of theatre in Atlantic rather than national terms” as a way to throw “into relief the vitality of theatre as a cultural form in the colonial Americas and the early national United States” (20). While fully agreeing with the necessity to expand any investigation of early American theater beyond the national boundaries of the United States, I turn to a multilingual rather than an Atlantic paradigm in order to tease out the complexities and multifaceted relations of the early American stage.1

Taking as an example the theatrical scene of antebellum New Orleans, this article focuses on the ways in which the drama native to Louisiana and its production in the local theater expressed and shaped the local concerns of the Crescent City’s transnational, polyglot communities. In doing so, I build on the work of scholars such as Werner Sollors, who has highlighted the importance of multilingual sources to the creation of American literature and culture.2 Sollors’s work reveals “how multilingual American literature is part of a transnational world,” as American authors who write in languages other than English “complicate the fit of authorship, citizenship, and language” (introduction 7). Recovering the archive of francophone drama from Louisiana and juxtaposing it to an English-language play, I investigate how a multilingual approach to American literature and culture challenges our understanding of early American theater.

By looking closely at the ways in which three Louisianian playwrights
negotiated their communities’ dilemmas to either assert their own national sovereignty or to rebuild transnational alliances with their former imperial ruler, this article explores the underlying tension between the national and the transnational in early American theater. I begin by tracing the development of New Orleans’s theater scene and the emergent rivalry between the city’s Creole and American populations.³ I then analyze Thomas Wharton Collens’s *The Martyr Patriots; or, Louisiana in 1769* (1836) and Auguste Lussan’s *Les Martyrs de la Louisiane* (1839), teasing out how both plays intervene in debates surrounding the status of New Orleans’s anglophone and francophone communities in the 1830s. Lastly, I examine Louis Placide Canonge’s *France et Espagne ou La Louisiane en 1768 et 1769* (1850), a play that reflects the anxieties of an increasingly marginalized French-speaking citizenry at the end of the antebellum period. While contextualizing each drama with contemporaneous political developments in the Crescent City, I also investigate how each writer reinterpreted one particularly important episode of Louisiana history in order to comment on the current struggles between the anglophone and francophone populations in New Orleans.

Writing between 1833 and 1850, Collens, Lussan, and Canonge each routed their commentary on the situation of their respective community through the dramatization of the 1768 uprising of Louisiana’s French settlers against Spanish imperial rule. In 1762 France transferred the entire colony of Louisiana to Spain, ridding itself of a major financial burden. Initially, the two empires kept this transfer a secret and Spain governed Louisiana through French officials. When, in 1764, news of the cession reached the colony’s francophone community, its members reacted with disbelief to their abandonment by the French Crown. In 1765, community leaders resolved to send a delegation of French Louisianians to France in order to petition King Louis XV to keep the colony. Their mission failed, and on October 29, 1768, an armed mob of four hundred French Louisianians led by Joseph Villeré, Nicolas Chauvin de Lafrenière, Jean-Baptiste Denoyant, and Pierre Marquis stormed the Spanish governor’s mansion in New Orleans and succeeded in expelling him from Louisiana. As a result, Spain dispatched a new governor, General Alejandro O’Reilly, while the French settlers in Louisiana renewed their attempts to convince France to reassert control over its former colony. After investigating the French uprising, O’Reilly arrested thirteen leaders of the rebellion and charged them each with treason. One rebel was acquitted, six were sentenced to
long prison terms, and six, including Lafrenière and Marquis, were sentenced to death.⁴

In the works of Charles Gayarré and other nineteenth-century Louisianian historiographers, the rebels’ fight against foreign rule was portrayed as an attempt to establish Louisiana as an independent republic.⁵ Through these accounts, the rebels came to be known as the martyr patriots, and the story of the uprising inspired several dramas, novels, and tales.⁶ “[P]erhaps more than any other episode in Louisiana colonial history,” historian Jo Ann Carrigan writes, “[the rebellion of 1768] has captured the attention and fired the imagination of Louisiana writers” (611). Collens, Lussan, and Canonge each mapped the 1768 rebellion and the shift in imperial hegemony it represented onto their contemporary contexts, routing the current struggles of their communities through this earlier American revolution. In doing so, these three playwrights used the theater to imagine the national and transnational connections that defined antebellum New Orleans.

Founded in New Orleans in 1792, the francophone Théatre de la Rue St. Pierre was not only the first permanent playhouse in the vast colony of Louisiana but also represented the first theatrical venue in what was then considered the “American West.” Before 1800, theatrical activities were concentrated on the Atlantic seaboard, where dedicated theater buildings had been constructed in Williamsburg (1716), New York City (1733), Charleston (1735), Annapolis (1752), Philadelphia (1749), Newport (1793), Boston (1794), and Baltimore (1794). Over time, theatrical circuits emerged around the larger cities. New England was served by companies that were based in New York City, Philadelphia troupes catered to theater enthusiasts in Baltimore and Washington, DC, and the towns of the Chesapeake region were visited by a troupe that was centered in Charleston. After 1800, the Charleston circuit was expanded to other southern cities like Richmond, Savannah, and Atlanta, but never included New Orleans.⁷ New Orleans, at the time, was still a predominantly francophone city, and the first playhouse there was founded by two French brothers who had fled to Louisiana to escape the repercussions of the French Revolution. Inaugurated when Louisiana was administered not by France but rather by the Spanish Crown, New Orleans’s first playhouse was immediately subjected to strict legislation designed to prevent demonstrations of French patri-
otism or anti-Spanish sentiment. The Spanish governor Francisco Luis Héctor, Baron de Carondelet issued two sets of regulations, one to control the conduct of the theater patrons, the other to monitor the actions of the theater personnel. With these measures, Carondelet succeeded in keeping inflammatory activities out of the French playhouse and cleared the way for its protracted run under Spanish rule.8

After 1803, the American administration, too, regulated the French theater. In the auditorium, patrons had repeatedly demanded that the orchestra play certain patriotic airs and interrupted the musicians when they played those of the rival group. To ensure the continuation of “good order,” an ordinance was passed on November 28, 1804, that prohibited “fanciful demands to play this or that tune” (qtd. in Warner Price 219–20). Tension also built around the French practice of opening the playhouse on Sundays. One New Orleans visitor reported how, under each French playbill announcing a Sunday performance, someone posted a notice in English that “contained appropriate texts from the scriptures,” reminding the New Orleans public “to keep [the Sabbath day] holy” (Flint 307). However, the French reign over New Orleans’s theatrical activities was not seriously challenged until 1818, when the first professional English-language theater company arrived and negotiated with the director of the French troupe to co-use its playhouse. Within a year, English-language performances outnumbered those in French, and the French company only appeared in its own theater three nights a week. This arrangement only increased the existing tension between the two communities and led to several, sometimes violent, confrontations. When, in February 1823, a member of the English-speaking company stabbed the Creole doorkeeper on one of the French performance nights, the director of the American company abandoned the French venue and moved his troupe to a half-finished structure on Camp Street, in the heart of the newly developed Faubourg St. Mary. Upon its formal opening six months later, this makeshift playhouse was transformed into a beautiful theater, sporting a flight of marble steps and, as one of only three playhouses in the entire United States so equipped, gas lighting. Known as the American Theatre on Camp Street, it was the first playhouse in the Crescent City dedicated exclusively to English-language theatricals.9

With the emergence of this new competitor, the Théâtre d’Orléans, New Orleans’s only existing French playhouse, struggled to remain open. Only
six months after the opening of the American Theatre, the Théâtre d’Orléans closed its doors for the first time after an uninterrupted run of almost five years. The rivalry between the anglophone and francophone theaters increased further when, on November 30, 1835, a second American playhouse opened in Faubourg St. Mary. The new St. Charles Theatre was hailed as the most splendid theater on the North American continent. Its interior boasted five tiers of seats, the largest stage of any playhouse in the United States, and a 4,500-pound chandelier imported from London. Theater annalist Francis Courtney Wemyss described it as “a Temple worthy of the Drama in this land of liberty, a Theatre surpassing in elegance any thing of the same description in England, France, Naples, or Russia” (36). The home of the French company in the old French Quarter looked outdated and worn in comparison.10

By the mid-1830s, then, the two anglophone theaters had clearly surpassed the only remaining French playhouse. The decline and temporary closure of the Théâtre d’Orléans demonstrated to even the most optimistic Creole that the francophone community no longer dominated the cultural and intellectual life of the city. Even though immigration from the French métropole and France’s former colony of Saint-Domingue had bolstered the francophone population in the first two decades of American rule, a steady stream of Anglo-Americans arrived and settled in the Crescent City. They gravitated to Faubourg St. Mary, a suburb that had developed adjacent to the French Quarter above Canal Street. This suburb rapidly became the hub of the Anglo-American population, while francophone newcomers settled downriver from the French Quarter in the suburb of Marigny, and between the Vieux Carré and Bayou St. John in the Faubourg Tremé. The Anglo-American migrants quickly became involved in the commercial activities of the city, establishing shops, banks, and insurance companies. Their impact on the economy of New Orleans was so great that, according to Tregle, local newspapers began “to use the terms commercial quarter and American section almost interchangeably” (155, original emphasis).11

However, despite their dominance in the city’s commercial and cultural activities, the anglophone residents remained politically weak. “[N]ationalists of France and San Domingo have a monopoly on the posts of profit and honor” in the city government, one local English-language newspaper complained in 1822 (Niles Weekly Register 17 Aug. 1822, qtd. in Fossier 121).
Another article argued that Americans constituted “a majority of . . . taxable voters [and paid] by far the greatest portion of taxes,” but were not proportionally represented on the City Council. This created a situation where, according to the article writer, a Creole “minority now actually govern[ed] the [American] majority” (Louisiana Gazette 29 Jan. 1825, qtd. in Fossier 123). While these articles only casually invoked the sentiments that had led to the American Revolution fifty years earlier, subsequent coverage in the English-language press established a direct connection between the situation of the thirteen original American colonies at the end of the eighteenth century and the status of the anglophone population in New Orleans in the 1820s, casting Anglo-Americans’ struggle for equal representation as akin to that of the “Patriots of the Revolution” (Louisiana Gazette 29 Jan. 1825, qtd. in Fossier 122–23). A letter published in the New Orleans–based Mercantile Advertiser was even more explicit: “What occasioned the loss of North America to Great Britain?,” the letter writer asked, immediately responding: “Taxation without representation” (25 Jan. 1825, qtd. in Fossier 122). In 1825, the Anglo-Americans in New Orleans, just like their northern predecessors fifty years earlier, began to actively lobby for separation. They campaigned for the division of New Orleans into two separate municipalities, with one half comprising the portion of the city that was populated predominantly by English speakers. Separation, then, would have given to the anglophone population the right to decide its own municipal affairs. Subsequent attempts to establish self-government in the English-speaking sections of New Orleans in 1827 and 1832 testified to the mounting discontent of the city’s Anglo-American residents with their Creole neighbors.12

Written in 1833 and performed in 1836 in the recently opened St. Charles Theatre, Thomas Wharton Collens’s play The Martyr Patriots; or, Louisiana in 1769 speaks to this debate about equal representation in the city government. Like the newspaper writers, Collens addressed the pressing concerns of New Orleans’s anglophone population in the 1820s and 1830s by reverting to the language and rhetoric of the American Revolution. Born in New Orleans in 1812, Collens was originally trained as a printer before he became associate editor of the anglophone New Orleans paper The True American. His “lineage [was] half Anglican and half Gallican” (Davidson 102), but he chose to publish all his writings in English. The Martyr Pa-
triots, a tragedy in five acts and in verse, premiered at the American St. Charles Theater on May 16, 1836. Through his reinterpretation of the 1768 rebellion, Collens imagined Louisiana as a minor site of a broader American Revolution led by Anglo-Americans. As a commentary on his contemporaneous context, the playwright used this history to argue for an antebellum Louisiana ruled by its Anglo-American inhabitants.

In The Martyr Patriots, Collens diminishes the importance of the rebellion for French Louisiana by treating it as a minor site of the American Revolution rather than a fight for French Louisianian independence. Through the character of Lafrenière, the playwright establishes an alliance between the former subjects of the French Crown in Louisiana and the British colonists in the North that subverts the French Louisianian cause and furthers Anglo-American interests. In a speech to local residents Lafrenière references the rise of “[t]he colonies / Of Britain, the thirteen provinces, . . . / ‘Gainst a despot’s tyranny” and prompts his fellow French Louisianians to “mix our blood with theirs” to seal a “sacred pact” (432, original emphasis). Lafrenière here creates an imaginary familial bond—a sacred consanguinity—between the rebels in Louisiana and the rebels in the British colonies, implying that their combined efforts will eventually bring about independence. Charles Gayarré's Essai historique sur la Louisiane (1830), the account that constituted Collens's major source, also includes a reference to Revolutionary activities in the North, albeit with one significant difference. In Gayarré's text, Lafrenière calls on his people to “implore the help” of the residents of the thirteen British colonies so they can support Louisiana in its quest for liberty (144). Collens's Lafrenière, by contrast, subsumes Louisianian liberation efforts under the broader movement of American independence. When Lafrenière sets out to define this new Louisianian people he consequently proclaims, “Frenchmen will now disown us; / Spaniards we can never be, nor Englishmen,” before he concludes: “[L]et our / Country be Louisiana! Let’s be Americans!” (432).

Collens’s emphasis on Louisiana as a part of the United States becomes even more apparent in a dream scene situated between acts 4 and 5. Here Lafrenière, captured by the Spanish and awaiting his trial, falls asleep and in his dream is transported into the future of Louisiana. The dream scene includes a visual diorama that displays a “throne, on which a personification of Europe is seated, holding a scepter, and having a lash and fetters at her feet. A personification of Louisiana sits weeping, chained to the
throne.” The music, according to Collens’s stage directions, is “plaintive,” and pantomimes express “the distress of Louisiana, and the despotism and cruelty of Europe.” Suddenly, a bolt of lightning strikes Europe’s throne and destroys it. Europe is “thrown prostrate on the earth, . . . the music is joyful, and Louisiana exults.” In the background seventeen stars appear, arranged in a circle. A personification of Liberty descends toward Louisiana, “bearing the American flag.” Liberty unchains Louisiana solemnly saying, “Arise, my child, rejoin thy sisters. Thou art free.” At this moment, the “Star of Louisiana” rises and aligns itself with the other seventeen stars in the background. As the dream slowly fades away, the stage curtain displays “a circle of portraits . . . representing the Revolutionary heroes and worthies, with Washington in the centre” (462, original emphasis).

This dream sequence underlines Collens’s claim that Louisiana’s future lies with the United States. Through his direct references to the Revolutionary activities in the North, Collens not only situates contemporary events such as the 1768 rebellion in Louisiana within the context of the American Revolution but also frames Louisiana’s future within the contours of the United States. The seventeen stars Collens places at the backdrop of the dream sequence symbolize the seventeen states of the Union at the time Louisiana applied for statehood. With the rise of the “Star of Louisiana” to “join [its] sisters” after Louisiana was freed from Europe’s chains, Collens references Louisiana’s admission to the Union as its eighteenth state in 1812. The visual integration of Louisiana into the United States is reinforced by a powerful aural effect. When the “Star of Louisiana” has found its place among the other stars, “Hail, Columbia”—the national anthem at the time—“breaks forth” in the theater (462). Collens depicts the transition from monarchy to statehood as immediate and painless for Louisiana. It marks the advent of civilization and the beginning of a period of prosperity. Significantly, when Louisiana was still chained to Europe, the backdrop shows “extensive forests and uncultivated fields” (462). After Louisiana has become part of the United States, the scenery displays how “fields flourish, cities rise, boats and ships ply upon the river, and busy crowds of people thicken on the landscape” (462). These visuals support Collens’s argument that Louisiana will thrive only as an integral part of the United States, as statehood transforms Louisiana from a wilderness into a well-cultivated civilization. Collens reiterates his conception of Louisiana as quintessentially American and inextricably linked to Anglo-American
culture by having Lafrenière narrate his dream in a lengthy soliloquy in
the next scene. In this spoken account Lafrenière paints the predicament of
the chained Louisiana in even darker colors. Louisiana’s back is “marked
with deep and bleeding stripes” and she is “moaning ’midst her sufferings”
as Europe’s prisoner (463).

In The Martyr Patriots, Collens dramatized an episode of Louisiana his-
tory that had traditionally been read as a testimony to French Louisianian
heroism and the colony’s strong allegiance with France. By including sym-
bols like the American flag, the joining of the stars, the national anthem,
and direct references to the American Revolution, the playwright folded
the Louisiana rebellion of 1768 into the larger context of the 1776 Ameri-
can Revolution. Moreover, Collens not only recast an episode of Louisi-
ana’s French colonial history in a manner that clearly privileged an Anglo-
American view but also framed Louisiana’s future within the contours of
the United States. The playwright thereby deprived Louisiana’s franc-
ophone community of its glorious past as well as a future in which it could
maintain political and cultural sovereignty.

In diminishing the importance of Louisiana’s francophone roots, the
Martyr Patriots anticipated the political defeat of antebellum New Orleons’s
Creole community. On March 10, 1836, a new charter divided the city of
New Orleans into three separate municipalities. Each municipality had
its own council, taxing power, recorder, and police force; each carried out
public works, conducted official business in its own language, and had its
own public school system. The three municipalities were virtually autono-
mous, but their governing bodies sat together as a General Council pre-
sided over by a single mayor to decide matters of importance to the city at
large. The First Municipality comprised the Old City (the so-called Vieux-
Carré) and the Faubourg Tremé, and was home to most of the French-
speaking residents in the city. Below Esplanade Avenue was the Faubourg
Marigny, which formed the heart of the Third Municipality, the other
francophone section of New Orleans. The area south of Canal Street, at the
center of which lay Faubourg St. Mary, was turned into the Second Munici-
pality and was dominated by anglophone residents.15

After years of persistent lobbying, then, the efforts of the anglophone
population to attain political agency had finally been successful. Although
they did not achieve the total separation of Faubourg St. Mary from the
city proper, American residents of the upper suburbs succeeded in gaining
a considerable amount of autonomy. The new administrative structure, one resident commented, “enabled the American portion of our population to transact business after their own way, untrammelled by the French legislation; and to expend . . . those taxes which were before exacted without an adequate return” (Durell 21). The effect was almost immediate. Now in “exclusive control of its own affairs,” a contemporary guide book observed, “[t]he progress of [the second] municipality has been greatly increased” (Norman 67). Investors flocked to the Second Municipality and real estate in that part of the city sold “for 30 times what a property cost three years ago” (Bee 21 May 1836, qtd. in Fossier 137). Landmarks like the St. Charles Hotel (1838), St. Patrick’s Church (1840), the Medical College (1842–43), and Gallier Hall (1845–50) rose in quick succession, often surpassing older, similar structures in the First Municipality. Many American-owned businesses that had first operated out of the old French Quarter relocated to Faubourg St. Mary, and the public school system also developed faster and more efficiently in the Second Municipality. Astonished at the rate of growth in the Second Municipality, L’Abeille commented in 1838: “In the Second Municipality, most of the roads are paved. . . . Gas lighting has already been introduced in the entire neighborhood, and will soon expand beyond it” (“Améliorations”). Clearly, then, 1836 division of the city into three municipalities marked a defeat for the francophone residents of New Orleans. While it calmed the ethnic tensions between the two factions, the French-speaking population would “never again . . . hold sway over the American community or the city in general” (Campanella, Time 120).

New Orleans’s division into three municipalities made cooperation across ethnic lines a necessity for the city’s francophone inhabitants. They now had to contend with a General Council sensitive to the interests of the city’s English-speaking population, whose booming Second Municipality threatened to leave the rest of the city hopelessly behind. The francophone playwright Auguste Lussan observed these developments and, with his 1839 dramatization of the 1768 rebellion entitled Les Martyrs de la Louisiane, intervened in the ongoing debate over political and cultural sovereignty. Although Lussan also drew on Gayarré’s Essai historique sur la Louisiane, the francophone playwright’s treatment of this historical event differed significantly from that of Collens. Rather than focusing on a sacred consanguinity between the French rebels and the American Revo-
lutionaries in the thirteen original colonies, Lussan emphasized attempts at cross-cultural collaboration between the French leaders and the supposed Spanish enemy to minimize the damage for Louisiana. Establishing an analogy between the situation of the 1768 rebels and New Orleans’s francophone community after the 1836 division, Lussan celebrated French Louisiana’s glorious past while also proposing a way forward for a francophone community faced with growing anglophone dominance.

Born in France, Lussan arrived in New Orleans in the early 1830s as a member of the Théâtre d’Orléans’s acting troupe. He earned his first merits as a playwright in January 1836 when, for the festivities surrounding the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans, he wrote a short dramatic account of Andrew Jackson’s victory. Following this success, Lussan made a name for himself as a writer of patriotic verse and was considered, according to one newspaper reviewer, among the “ranks of the best littérateurs” in Louisiana (“Théâtre d’Orléans,” L’Abeille).18 Intrigued by the local theme of Les Martyrs de la Louisiane, the francophone press of New Orleans drummed up support for the play’s premiere. The theater critic of the daily L’Abeille urged “everyone who likes the fine verse and the mother country” to attend the play’s premiere on May 5, 1839. He considered support for Lussan’s play a patriotic duty, charging those who remained indifferent to Lussan’s efforts guilty of the “crime of debased taste and debased patriotism” (“Les Martyrs”).19 The newspaper campaign was effective, and the play’s premiere at the Théâtre d’Orléans was a huge success for its author, earning him a repeat performance on May 10, 1839, for his own benefit (“Théâtre: Benéfice”).

The prologue of Les Martyrs, Lussan’s only tragedy and a play in five acts and in verse, is set on the eve of the rebellion in 1768, just after the Louisiana delegation returns from its failed mission in Versailles to petition King Louis XV to keep the colony. Act 1 begins one year after the rebellion with the new Spanish governor O’Reilly’s musings on how to proceed with the rebels. He resolves to arrest all of them but cannot get a hold of Villeré, who has remained in hiding. Act 2 reveals that Villeré has already resigned himself to a Louisiana under Spanish rule and has prepared to leave the country. However, through Mme Villeré’s desperate appeal to Governor O’Reilly in act 3 the audience learns that Villeré did not return to France, but instead has been imprisoned while trying to get in touch with his companions. He is held separately on a prison frigate anchored in the Missis-
sippi. With the help of a Spanish officer Mme Villeré finds her husband on the ship. Their tearful reunion ends violently when Villeré is killed by a Spanish prison guard at the end of act 4. As the other prisoners around Lafrenière learn about Villeré’s death in act 5 they, too, know that their days have ended. Calm and collected, they prepare for their execution. By emphasizing the cooperation between the French and Spanish during the rebellion and its aftermath, I argue, Auguste Lussan hoped to convince his francophone audience to adopt a similar strategy when dealing with their American neighbors after the division of New Orleans in 1836.

In the prologue, Villeré, Lafrenière, and their companions discuss Louisiana’s potential to stand on its own. Dreading “the abhorrence of the foreign” Spanish rule, the rebels also believe that they have been “treat[ed] like outcasts” by the French king (Lussan 11). They consequently withdraw their loyalty from France and feel a sense of obligation only toward their native Louisiana. This newfound allegiance culminates in the last speech of the prologue, when Lafrenière proclaims: “Neither Spaniards, nor Frenchmen! Let us, too, be a people, let us be Louisianians!” (11).

However, the beginning of act 1 conveys how a specifically Louisianian identity cannot be fully separated from Old World influences. Taking place one year after the prologue, act 1 is set in a “richly decorated hall” displaying the insignia of the Spanish Crown and a canopied throne in the center of the room (15). A new Old World power has simply superseded the previous one, and Louisiana is still completely at the mercy of foreign rule. Acknowledging that their vision of a Louisiana uncoupled from any imperial relations is no longer realistic, Villeré and Lafrenière adjust their goals for Louisiana to the new situation. They now try to secure the cultural integrity of the French-speaking population under Spanish rule rather than full political independence. Toward this end, Lafrenière seeks an audience with O’Reilly during which he appeals to the governor to clarify the status of the francophone population in Spanish Louisiana and to “respect their rights” as a linguistic and cultural majority (25). Lafrenière here strongly argues for legal protections for the French-speaking population. Such protections would allow the francophone community to “preserve their laws, their name and their liberty,” and thus firmly establish the French population’s semiautonomy in Spanish Louisiana (18).

Lafrenière knows that in order to achieve semiautonomy he and the other community leaders need to make a number of concessions. He there-
fore points out that there have been numerous demonstrations of loyalty to the Spanish Crown in recent years. By “respecting [Spanish] laws . . . in critical times,” Lafrenière argues, French Louisianians have proven to be “loyal in peace, loyal in the war tents” (24).24 Emphasizing their loyalty in trying times, Lafrenière and his men devise a strategy for interacting with the “foreign” colonial power in a way that gives considerable agency to French Louisiana. Considering Louisiana’s geographic position, its history as a French colony, and its current status under Spanish rule, the former rebels envision Louisiana as a mediator between great powers. Positioned at the crossroads between the Old World and the New, their Louisiana is “neither queen, nor subject” (63). Rather, it is a “beacon of freedom” capable of “keeping the balance between the continents” (63).25 This Louisiana will speak with an “amicable voice” and serve as “interpreter” when necessary (63).26 While formally tied to a European empire Louisiana emerges, in this vision, as a predominantly independent agent in the New World, and uniquely capable of arbitrating between rival powers.

O’Reilly’s reaction to these plans, however, quickly reveals that Lafrenière, Villeré, and their companions have been following a utopian ideal rather than facing the reality after they had instigated a rebellion against their new authorities. The Spanish governor refuses to grant semiautonomy to the francophone population of Louisiana and pursues his initial plan to convict and execute the leaders of the rebellion. Yet even as their fate is sealed the former rebels continue to promote their vision for Louisiana and work to convince others that it will eventually become a reality. They urge their fellow French Louisianians to cooperate with the Spanish and accept their authority. Villeré especially becomes a strong advocate for cooperation, convincing his followers that it is now time “to bow our heads” and “accept the affront.” “We must resign ourselves,” he concludes (29).27

The theme of cooperation dominates the action of Les Martyrs. For example, in the opening sequence of act 1 it becomes clear that in Colonel Galvez, a Spanish official and one of O’Reilly’s closest advisers, the French rebels have acquired an influential ally in the Governor’s Mansion. This is especially obvious when, in a quick aside, Galvez cautions Lafrenière not to be imprudent in his hearing with O’Reilly. Galvez knows that his secret alliance with the French possesses considerable risks for himself, especially after O’Reilly threatens to charge him with treason “should he forget his origins” (16).28 Unmoved by O’Reilly’s warning, Galvez continues his
efforts to help the French: at the beginning of act 3, thanks to Galvez’s influence, a desperate Mme Villeré gets a private hearing with O’Reilly during which she attempts to save her husband from execution. When these efforts fail, it is again Galvez who enables Mme Villeré to see her husband one last time on the prison frigate (23, 42–45, 70).

Galvez is not the only Spanish character Lussan portrays in a positive light. The Spanish commander of the prison frigate is also depicted as sympathetic to the rebels. He concedes that only “by force and against reason” does he accept Villeré as a prisoner on his ship (59). When Villeré hesitates to accept his conciliatory treatment the commander indignantly explains:

Learn that not one in our noble state,
Was willing to accept [O’Reilly’s] terrible order
To sacrifice a pawn in misfortune,
And that we possess decency under our rough exterior! (61)

With this statement, Lussan turns the commander into the mouthpiece of Spanish popular opinion, making clear that the majority of Spaniards understand the intentions behind the rebellion and disapprove of O’Reilly’s treatment of the former rebels. It is not surprising, then, that the commander defies O’Reilly’s wishes and orders that Villeré be left unchained and free to wander while on the frigate.

Yet these very circumstances lead to Villeré’s death since the soldier who kills the rebel leader had not been present to hear the commander’s orders and believes that Villeré is trying to escape. Lussan thus depicts Villeré’s death as a tragic accident rather than as the result of careful scheming on the part of the Spanish. The playwright reinforces this impression with the Spanish commander’s reaction to Villeré’s death, as he denounces the soldier in question as a “murderer” and commands his arrest (66–67). In this respect Lussan’s choice of dramatic genre attains a new significance. For his dramatization of the rebellion in Les Martyrs, Lussan turned to the tragedy and deliberately rejected the drame, the dominant genre of the day among French-language playwrights and the dramatic form he chose for his three other plays. Villeré’s death can therefore be seen as the result of a classical reversal of fortune (peripeteia) caused by the tragic mistake (hamartia) of an otherwise insignificant character. Unwilling to fundamentally change the well-known contours of the 1768 rebellion and its
aftermath, Lussan crafted sympathetic Spanish characters and employed the genre of the tragedy in order to downplay Spanish culpability in the execution of the rebel leaders. Les Martyrs recasts their deaths as the product of chance and an unpopular governor, rather than the will of the Spanish people.

Moreover, although they know that they will be executed, Lafrenière and his companions accept their fate with dignity. They say farewell to the world, neither seeking revenge nor complaining about their fate. “We have to die! . . . And die without revenge! . . . O my land! Adieu! We fall without lament,” Lafrenière exclaims as the time of the execution draws nearer (68). The rebels find comfort in the knowledge that they did everything in their power to bring Louisiana forward and remain convinced that their noble efforts will grant them a place in the annals of their beloved country. Appropriately, the play’s final words, spoken by Lafrenière in his prison cell as he is led to execution, end on a hopeful note:

We are ready, Monsieur! From today, these walls Are famous and sacred to posterity; And, martyrs of duty, formidable chisel Engraves our names on the threshold of immortality! (72)

These final words cement the legacy of the rebels as “martyrs of duty,” thereby validating the men’s heroic deeds while emphasizing their impact on the future generations of French Louisianians. The rebellion may not have succeeded, but the story of thirteen heroic Louisianians who did their best to preserve the cultural integrity of the French-speaking population in the face of Spanish adversity still lives on.

Lussan’s 1839 tragedy, then, asks its audience to consider the parallels between its own struggles and the dilemma faced by the rebels in 1768. His rebels, too, had to relinquish their powers to a new ruler that did not necessarily favor francophone concerns. After initial opposition, they yielded to their new government, knowing that they would have to cooperate with the authorities if they wanted to keep a degree of self-determination. In the face of the growing power of the English-speaking residents, Lussan realized that it was in the francophone community’s best interest to concede to the semiautonomy they were presented with, rather than lose everything by demanding the return to a repressive government system and risking “armed violence” between the different ethnic groups in New Orleans.
Drama of History in Francophone New Orleans

(Tregle 153). Lussan stressed the alliance between the French and the Spanish because he knew that at the time of the composition of his play in 1839, cooperation between the French and English-speaking populations was necessary to ensure the continued existence of the French community. In his dramatization of the rebellion, Thomas Wharton Collens portrayed the struggles between the anglophone and the francophone communities before the division of the city in 1836 from an Anglo-American point of view. Taking into account the changing political and social realities in his reinterpretation of the 1768 events, Auguste Lussan offered a francophone perspective on a now-divided city.

When the third dramatization of the 1768 revolt, Louis Placide Canonge’s *France et Espagne ou La Louisiane en 1768 et 1769*, premiered in 1850, New Orleans had changed significantly from the days of Thomas Wharton Collens and Auguste Lussan. The municipal system of city government was malfunctioning, and the first formal attempts were made to reestablish the original unified city government. In the year Canonge wrote *France et Espagne*, a special election was held to vote on the reconsolidation of the three municipalities, but the measure did not gain a majority. By then the francophone municipalities were hopelessly lagging behind in wealth, population, and municipal infrastructure, and the economic imbalance between the municipalities had started to take a serious toll on the finances of the entire city. Based on the cooperation between the municipalities and the General Council, the tri-municipal system had failed to produce three equally strong, self-sufficient municipalities. The francophone strategy of political and social isolation had accelerated the decline of their community, rather than helping them to preserve their economic and political potency. What is more, the French Louisianians also had to grapple with the erosion of their cultural integrity. By the 1850s, numerous visitors to New Orleans reported that the city was gradually losing its French character. The French philologist Jean-Jacques Ampère, for example, noted in 1852: “The traces of France disappear rapidly in Louisiana and even though one part of town is almost exclusively inhabited by a population of French origin the Americans will not hesitate to efface the rest of this foreign nationality” (154). This seems to have been the case only one year later, when Ampère’s compatriot Elisée Reclus observed: “In fact, the French are only a small minority [in the French Quarter;] most of
their houses have been purchased by American capitalists. . . . The American section, located west [across] Canal Street, [is] the center of political life” (qtd. in Campanella, Bienville’s 267). Commenting on the Americanization of the francophone population, Reclus noted: “It is clear that the French language will increasingly disappear. . . . Soon the Anglo-Saxon idiom will dominate unchallenged, and all that will remain [of the old ways] will be the names of streets” (qtd. 268). From a francophone point of view, the developments detailed in the writings of Reclus and Ampère were alarming. The erosion of the French language and culture seemed imminent, yet the francophone population remained passive. In 1852, the reconsolidation bill finally passed and the city was formally reunited. Even though reconsolidation meant the loss of the little self-determination the administrative separation had accorded to the francophone municipalities, opposition from the French-speaking population was relatively limited. It was, according to Tregle, as if “the will to resist seemed suddenly to have collapsed” (161).

Staged, as noted, in 1850, Canongé’s piece France et Espagne reflects the pessimism prevalent among leading members of the francophone community toward the end of the antebellum period and denounces the apparent indifference of the French-speaking population toward the preservation of their language and culture.36 Louis Placide Canongé (1822–93) was a native Louisianian and descendant of one of the first families of New Orleans. Educated at the prestigious Lycée Louis Le Grand in Paris, he embarked on a career as a journalist, writing for the French-language press of Louisiana with contributions including poetry, feuilleton stories, dramatic reviews, and political essays. He also founded and edited numerous journals, many of which covered theatrical and salon life in France and New Orleans. Between 1839 and 1871 Canongé composed nine plays and three opera libretti. Of his many plays and operas, only France et Espagne revolves around local themes.37 Unlike Collens and Lussan, who chose the literary form of the tragedy, Canongé adopted the genre of the “drame.” Being the most popular dramatic genre among French-language playwrights both in France and Louisiana during the first half of the nineteenth century, the drame emerged as part of the French Romantic movement and explicitly rejects classical conventions. It is characterized instead by the deliberate mingling of genres such as poetry, comedy, and tragedy. According to literary critic Florence Naugrette, the drame “conceived of itself as an elitist art form
for the masses; . . . a democratic practice, profoundly civic because it was accessible to everyone, educated or not” (15). The drame, therefore, was more than just a literary genre. It was a political statement for democratization and change, often accompanied by a call to action designed to incite the audiences. Appropriately, many drames were written in prose rather than in the more elevated verse reserved for classical tragedies. Choosing the form of the drame, I argue, allowed Louis Placide Canonge to fully explore violent confrontation as a strategy to contain the Spanish. In the context of the 1850s, it also enabled him to propose this approach as a means to resist American dominance.

In *France et Espagne*, Canonge closely follows the conventions of the romantic drame. In his account of the rebellion, the historical events of 1768 and 1769 function mostly as a backdrop, with the action focusing instead on the story of a love triangle between a French lady, Léonie de Vaudreuil, the rebel leader Marquis, and his rival, Don José, a Spanish official and personal adviser to Governor O’Reilly. *France et Espagne* opens on the eve of the 1768 rebellion with a duel between Marquis and Don José over Léonie. It is revealed in act 2, set one year after the rebellion, that Don José, jealous of Marquis, is responsible for Marquis’s and the other rebels’ sudden arrest and conviction. In exchange for Léonie’s hand, Don José offers to save Marquis in act 3, but the lovers embrace their fate by marrying each other instead. In the fourth and final act Don José pays a visit to Léonie, discloses that her marriage to Marquis is invalid, and reveals that the rebels have been unlawfully convicted. The letter he produces as evidence is snatched by Léonie’s servant who hurries off to prevent the execution. Upon learning that he did not succeed, Léonie takes poison and dies.

Though the play was not simply a response to the two earlier dramatic pieces written on the rebellion, a crucial episode in Canonge’s drame highlights how the playwright placed his own work in conversation with Luscan’s 1839 tragedy. In act 1, when the rebels discuss their plans to stand up against the Spanish administration, Canonge’s Lafrenière proclaims: “Messieurs, we will set a grand example to the world: we will neither be Frenchmen nor Spaniards, we will be Louisianians, that is to say independent!” (17). Canonge here significantly modifies the corresponding phrase in *Les Martyrs* by including the explanation “that is to say independent.” Through the inclusion of the term *independent* early in the play, the goals of Canonge’s rebels are more clearly defined than those in *Les Martyrs*. The
rebels’ agenda is further clarified later in the same speech: “We will spread this sublime, magical phrase; this phrase whose effect is certain and can be contained no more than our river in its course! Sovereignty of the people!” (17). For Canonge’s men, independence thus means much more than the separation from an imperial center or the casting off of a new ruler. By anachronistically projecting the ideals of the 1789 French Revolution onto 1768 Louisiana, Canonge casts the rebels’ fight as one for full political independence and sovereignty of the people and thus an attempt to completely alter Louisiana’s existing social order.

The battle for Louisiana’s independence takes place offstage, but as the play’s action resumes one year later in act 2 it becomes clear in a conversation between O’Reilly and his adviser Don José that the rebellion has utterly failed. In this conversation, Don José tries to convince O’Reilly that Villeré, Lafrenière, and Marquis must be imprisoned because they are still “propagating their revolutionary ideas, inciting mind and body against Spain” (22). When O’Reilly proves hesitant to convict the rebels on these charges, Don José falsely claims that the men slandered the good name of O’Reilly’s wife. In light of these allegations, O’Reilly finally resolves to convict the men. He organizes a masked ball at the Governor’s Mansion and invites the ringleaders of the rebellion—Villeré, Lafrenière, Marquis, and Petit—hoping to trap them there with the help of Don José. With the exception of Villeré, the rebels accept O’Reilly’s invitation. The ball is a magnificent affair, and the French guests embrace the apparent hospitality offered by their former enemies.

With the scene at the ball, Canonge carefully demonstrates how the rebels’ roles shift from those of being loyal subjects to the French Crown and defenders of an independent Louisiana to those of compliant collaborators with the Spanish regime. The character of Petit exemplifies this transformation. In the opening act, he is the most vocal character to express his hatred of the Spanish and vows never to associate with them except in battle. However, when he arrives at the Governor’s Mansion he is increasingly blinded by the splendor of the ball and the hospitality extended toward the French guests. For him, the former archenemy has turned into “a sensible man” who needs the support of the former rebels (26). Even more importantly, the future of Louisiana is no longer an urgent concern for Petit. He complains to Marquis, who is the only rebel to express some concerns about O’Reilly’s hospitality: “[T]rue for tonight! How can you
talk coup d’état and conspiracy when the orchestra sings, when the women are young and beautiful, when the wines sparkle, . . . for god’s sakes! It is not in between two quadrilles, . . . that we will proclaim the independence of this corner of the world! To everything there is a season!” (26).43 Though expressed humorously, Petit here clearly has been blinded by the splendors of the Spanish Crown. He is willing to suspend, if only momentarily, his resistance to the enemy. By the end of the ball though, Petit has abandoned his animosities toward the Spanish and is even prepared to enter into an alliance with them: “I have reconciled with Spain, . . . [t]he Pyrenees are gone!” he declares (30).44 Petit also contends that the celebration at the Spanish Governor’s Mansion promises a new future for Louisiana under the auspices of Spain, whereas Louisiana’s bond with France represents the past. By embracing his former enemy as a new authority and ally, Petit makes clear that he is ready to sever the ties with his motherland for good.

With the ball’s abrupt conclusion, Canonge underscores the terrible consequences of collaboration. Just as the former rebels are about to raise their glasses to their Spanish host, Léonie rushes in to inform them of Villérè’s imprisonment and murder by one of O’Reilly’s men. Her words function as a catalyst for the rebels, who see in their leader’s death a reflection of the true character of the Spaniards. Incensed, they swear to avenge Villérè’s death and, holding up a handkerchief stained with the fallen rebel’s blood, Marquis exclaims: “Bloody legacy, in the name of this land, I accept you! Banner of vengeance, more important now to us than that of liberty!” (35).45 From now on, Marquis declares, revenge against the Spanish would be their highest priority, taking precedence even over their fight for an independent Louisiana. However, just as the rebels resolve to change their strategy and actively resume their fight, O’Reilly enters the scene and arrests them all on the spot. The rebels’ renewed defiance has come too late. They can no longer avenge Villérè’s death, nor will they be able to continue their fight for “sovereignty of the people” and independence for Louisiana.

The ramifications of the rebels’ arrest for the future of Louisiana are explored in full through Marquis’s musings while imprisoned. Pondering the causes of their defeat, he revisits the rebels’ actions since the rebellion. Marquis bitterly complains about the rebels’ naiveté in dealing with the Spanish, asserting that “[i]f [they] had not fallen for the promises of Spain, [they] would today be French, independent, or dead” (26).46 The sequence in which Marquis here enumerates the choices the rebels could
have made regarding the future of Louisiana says much about his current state of mind. The disappointment he had felt about the abandonment by the French king is now forgotten. In retrospect, even death would have seemed more desirable than accepting the Spanish rule. However, Marquis and his compatriots chose a different path and opted for cooperation with the Spanish. Fully embracing this new alliance, they abandoned their better judgment and walked into the trap set by their former enemy. Marquis recognizes that he and his companions should never have considered cooperation with the Spanish, let alone let their guard down and accepted O’Reilly’s invitation. Facing execution, he realizes the lethal consequences of this decision and concludes: “Forging a pact during a revolution equals suicide” (39).47

Even before his imprisonment, Marquis is plagued by a sense of foreboding regarding the future of Louisiana. While still at the ball, the rebel leader laments Louisiana’s decline under Spanish rule. Likening Louisiana to a young girl, Marquis describes her transformation:

Today, your appearance alone saddens and pains me. . . . I do not recognize you anymore, my beautiful and boisterous girl: In the past, I loved to contemplate you; your limbs were free, your hair was blowing in the wind, your gaze was fiery, you ran across your vast plains, you frolicked in your green meadows, warming yourself in your blistering sun, or throwing your wild waves into the silky breeze! How you have changed now! Your movements are dictated, your head is bent in sorrow, your arms are bruised as if in chains and your eyes can no longer bear the glow of your own sun! Louisiana! Louisiana! Indeed I dreamed of great things for you, and now everything dissolves in the face of reality.” (28–29)48

The young girl Marquis describes here has lost all her former beauty. Not only does her physical appearance seem compromised, her mental constitution also appears to be impaired. It is as if she has been violated. Marquis’s soliloquy arcs from the present to the past and back again, sharply contrasting Louisiana’s situation under French rule with its current status under the Spanish administration. In The Martyr Patriots Thomas Wharton Collens had described Louisiana in similar terms, only in his play its development was exactly reversed. In Collens’s depiction, Louisiana’s entry into the Union marked the beginning of civilization and initiated an era
of growth, progress, and freedom. In Canonge’s play, by contrast, Lafrenière describes Louisiana after the transfer from France to Spain as a violated and beaten woman who has lost her vitality and strength. Louisiana’s glorious days are now behind it. It is regressing, a mere puppet of its new masters, with no hope of ever being free again. With the rebels now imprisoned, Marquis’s and the other rebels’ story parallels the development of Louisiana. They, too, used to be free and wild, but now find themselves in a hopeless situation, their aspirations for a better future crushed. Marquis’s prison monologue ends in the painful admission that Louisiana has been “oblivious of [its] past” (39).

With this statement, Marquis identifies the cause for the rebels’ personal downfall and Louisiana’s current predicament. Embracing their former adversary as their new authority, the rebels betrayed their French heritage and true mother country. This choice not only compromised Louisiana’s current situation but would also affect the future of its francophone population. “Poor land,” Marquis cries, “what will they make of you? Louisiana, . . . what will become of you in the hands of your new masters?” (39).

Awaiting their execution, the rebels’ only consolation is that one day Spain will also be held accountable for its actions. Infusing all his newfound hatred of the Spanish into this last speech, Lafrenière exclaims: “Spain, the day will come when those you oppress will demand an account of the past. The day will come when your colonies, finally tired of your domination, will break this iron yoke with which you crush them. Spain, this is the voice of a dying man crying out to you: For every fallen martyr, many will rise to avenge him” (52–53). Emphasizing Spain’s role as a colonizer and oppressor, Lafrenière renews the rebels’ call for violent confrontation. Though as a “dying man” he will be unable to fulfill this duty, he expresses his confidence that once a new generation of francophone Louisianians has embraced and understood the lessons of their past they will be ready to rise again and secure the future of their people. The next scene, however, quickly reveals the futility of the rebels’ message of continued revolution. The disastrous outcome of the love plot thwarts every possibility of a new generation of revolutionaries descending from the rebels. The play ends with the death of all three lovers, demonstrating that Canonge’s call for open and violent resistance ultimately leads nowhere. After denouncing collaboration Canonge, perhaps inadvertently, demonstrates that confrontation has proven just as futile as a means of survival.
In ending on a note of hopelessness, *France et Espagne* reflects the increasingly tenuous position of New Orleans’s francophone community at the end of the antebellum period. However, in the 1850s one last hope remained. While the American population had clearly surpassed New Orleans’s French-speaking community economically and politically, the francophone residents gradually regained dominance over the city’s theater scene. Having been forced to close in 1836, the Théâtre d’Orléans reopened for the 1837–38 season, after “an almost complete renovation.” Its interior now compared favorably to that of the American theaters. It was “of remarkable elegance. Simple, coquette, graceful, well-lit and harmoniously proportioned” (“Theatre”).52 After the reopening, the artistic quality and execution of the productions mounted at the Théâtre d’Orléans surpassed not only those of the English-language playhouses in New Orleans but also performances elsewhere on the American continent. Joseph Holt Ingraham, who visited the Théâtre d’Orléans on his tour across the Southwest, noted that “in general, strangers consider the *tout ensemble* of [the Théâtre d’Orléans] . . . decidedly superior to that of any other in the United States” (225), and the actor Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro publicly admitted that “our American theatres [we]re a thousand miles behind the little French theatre in New Orleans” (184–86). Drawn by the high-quality performances and the new elegance of venue, many anglophone patrons were attracted to the Théâtre d’Orléans, a group that one francophone critic proudly described as “the fashionable population of the second municipality” (“Théâtre d’Orléans,” *Le Courrier*).53 The anglophone patrons not only attended the French playhouse but also financially supported it (“Théâtre d’Orleans: Ouverture”). In 1850, more inhabitants of the Second Municipality signed a subscription list drawn up to prevent the theater’s bankruptcy than residents of the two francophone municipalities. At the theater, then, Lussan’s strategy of cooperation was finally put into practice, and allowed the Théâtre d’Orléans to stay in business for another decade.

Collens, Lussan, and Canonge each invoked Louisiana’s insurrectionary past in order to comment on the present and future struggles of a multi-ethnic, multilingual New Orleans. Situating their dramatic works within the political and social contexts of antebellum New Orleans reveals how that city’s polyglot communities used the stage to try on different strategies for continued political and cultural relevance. Like that in New Orleans,
theater cultures in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Charleston possessed a multilingual character that deserves renewed scholarly attention. For in turning to drama to negotiate the delicate balance between national aspiration and transnational affiliation, the Crescent City’s francophone and anglophone artists and audiences offer a powerful example of how the theater addressed the concerns of the multiple linguistic communities that constituted not only their city but also early America writ large.

NOTES

1. A detailed account of the connections between Louisiana’s francophone community and the French métropole, or specific sites in the French Atlantic, such as Saint-Domingue, Guadeloupe, and Martinique, is beyond the scope of this article. For more on circum-Atlantic theatrical relations; see Bérard; Camier and Dubois; Clay; Dessens; Fouchard, *Artistes* and *Le Théâtre*; Marshall; Miller; and Roach. The significant theatrical tradition of New Orleans’s free people of color can also not be addressed here.

2. Important scholarly work on multilingual American literature includes Rosenwald; Sollors, *Multilingual America*; and Shell. See also Shell and Sollors, a collection of twenty-nine literary texts written in what is today the United States in languages other than English. Gruesz and Brickhouse constitute two excellent case studies on the multilingual and transnational nature of the early Americas. Levander and Levine provides critical insights into what can be gained from comparativist and dialogical approaches to the Americas.

3. The term Creole has been highly contested and has undergone numerous shifts in meaning. One of the most inclusive and widely accepted definitions is the designation of Creole as native to the New World (see, for example Hall 157). For usage of the term in early nineteenth-century New Orleans, however, Tregle maintains: “To state simply that a person was ‘a creole’ meant that he was native to the state, whether white or black, free or slave, Gallic or Yankee. Reference to ‘the creoles’ implied equation with the ancienne population, the indigenous Latin inhabitants” (141). In accordance with Tregle’s definition and for the sake of distinction from the anglophone residents of New Orleans, I use the term Creole to designate the francophone and hispanophone populations of antebellum New Orleans, be they white or black, free or enslaved. “American” in this context designates English speakers born in the United States but outside Louisiana who became residents in Louisiana and persons born in Louisiana of Anglo-American parentage.

4. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship, the rebellion was often treated as a “forerunner of the American Revolution” (Cummins 72). Going beyond a national frame of analysis, contemporary studies emphasize its importance for
a broader Atlantic context. Powell, for example, describes the revolt of 1768 as “the first uprising of Atlantic World Creoles against imperial intrusions” (159); and Dawdy argues that the ideological arguments used by the instigators of the revolt “became the premise of revolutions throughout the Atlantic” (233). For a recent critical account of the 1768 rebellion, see Dawdy 219–46; Powell 129–63; Brasseaux, *Denis-Nicolas Foucault*; and Cummins 69–75.

5. Early nineteenth-century histories of Louisiana that prominently feature the rebellion are for example Martin and Gayarré, *Essai historique*, and his longer account, *Histoire*. For more on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century accounts of the rebellion, see Brasseaux, *Denis-Nicolas Foucault* 3–6.

6. Dramatizations and fictionalizations include Collens’s tragedy; Lussan’s tragedy; Canonge’s drame; Garreau’s novel; de Bautte’s novel; and the tale by Tujague. In a brief article, Watson has also examined the three plays (among others) that form the core of this essay. Although inspired by his approach, my own reading departs significantly from Watson’s.

7. For more on the geographic distribution of pre-nineteenth-century theatrical activities, see Henderson 373–98; Wilmeth and Curley 20–55; and McConarchie.

8. There are many references to incantations of the “Ça Ira” and other revolutionary songs in the playhouse on St. Peter Street in the secondary literature about the beginnings of theater in New Orleans. After a careful review of all available sources, I could not find any evidence that Jacobin sentiment actually manifested itself in New Orleans’s first permanent playhouse. For more on Spanish attempts to quell French Louisiana Jacobinism, see Liljegren. For more information on the early francophone stage in New Orleans, see Allain and Martin St. Cornay and Le Gardeur, *First* and “Les Premières.”

9. An in-depth discussion of the inauguration and early management of the American Theatre on Camp Street can be found in Smither 14–39 and Dormon 69–71, 78–82. For the stabbing incident, see Kendall 32.

10. For more on the opening of the St. Charles Theatre and the subsequent deterioration of the French playhouse, see Dormon 174–76; Kendall 113–16; and Kmen 103–05.

11. For more on the development of Faubourg St. Mary into the hub of New Orleans’s anglophone population, see Tregle 153–56; Campanella, *Time* 118–19; Wilson 43–48; and Christovich and Toledano 65–71.


13. The parenthetical citations for all three dramas refers to page numbers since the cited editions are, to my knowledge, the only print editions extant.

14. “Au moment où je vous parle, le sang coule peut-être chez nos voisins de la Virginie et de la Caroline. . . . Implorons leurs secours” (Gayarré, *Essai* 144). All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

15. For more on the city’s division into three separate municipalities, see “By Authority”; Gibson 294–300; Tregle 156–57; Campanella, *Time* 117–20.
16. For more on the effects of the division, see Norman 137–38, 168–69; Swanson et al. 201–04; Tregle 159–60; and Devore and Logsdon 17–19.
17. “Dans la seconde municipalité, une grande partie des rues a été pavé . . . . L’éclairage au moyen du gaz y est adopté déjà dans tout le carré, et il s’étendra bientôt encore davantage.”
18. “M. Lussan est un artiste qui se fait distinguer en cette ville non seulement comme acteur, mais aussi comme auteur dramatique . . . [Cela] suffiraient pour placer M. Lussan au rang des meilleurs littérateurs louisianais.”
19. “Tous ceux qui aiment les beaux vers et la patrie, doivent s’empresser de souscrire pour leur part. Agir autrement serait un crime de lèse goût et de lèse patriotism.”
20. Pas de juste milieu, notre route est tracée.

Louis-Quinze, oubliant que nous sommes ses fils,
Vouez nous traiter ainsi qu’on traite des proscrits;
Le souffririez-vous? non! notre unique espérance
N’est pas, comme on le dit, dans l’appui de la France.
Il en est une encore, que rien peut changer,
Qu’un peuple porte en soi: l’horreur de l’étranger!
21. “Espagnols, ni Français! / Soyons un peuple aussi, soyons Louisianais!”
22. Cet état doit cesser: vous nous avez promis,
Rejetant loin de vous tous projets ennemis,
De respecter nos droits; puis d’une voix loyale
De proclamer ici la volonté royale!
23. “Un peuple est-il coupable . . . [d]e conserver ses lois, son nom, sa liberté?”
24. Devenus nos émules,
En respect pour vos loi, quand nous l’aurons prêté,
Demandez compte alors de notre loyauté;
Et vous la trouverez à cette heure, éclatante,
Fidèle dans la paix, fidèle sous la tente!
25. “Ni reine, ni sujet, être la cité libre; / Entre les continents maintenir l’équilibre.”
26. “[U]ne voix amie, . . . / Devant les nations serve un jour d’interprête!”
27. “[I]l nous faut en silence/ Courber la tête, amis, et dévorer l’offense. . . . Il faut se résigner.”
29. “Dites-lui que par force et contre la raison, / Il me change en geôlier, ma frégate en prison.”
30. Apprenez que pas un, dans notre noble état,
Ne voudrait accepter l’effroyable mandat
De jeter au malheur une trompeuse amorce,
Et qu’on trouve l’honneur sous notre rude écorce!
31. “Assassin!”
32. “Et qu’il nous faut mourir!... et mourir sans vengeance! . . . O mon pays! adieu!
Nous tombons sans nous plaindre.”
Nous sommes prêts, monsieur! D’aujourd’hui cette enceinte
Pour la postérité devient illustre et sainte;
Et martyrs du devoir, son burin redouté
Grave nos noms au seuil de l’immortalité!

For more on the various attempts to reunify the city, see Reinders 51–56.

“Les traces de la France s’effacent rapidement dans la Louisiane, et, bien qu’un quartier de la Nouvelle-Orléans soit presque exclusivement occupé par une population d’origine française, la nationalité américaine, . . . ne tardera pas à faire disparaître ces restes d’une nationalité étrangère.”

Canongé’s play premiered on June 1, 1850, at the Théâtre d’Orléans and was again performed there on June 11. Although it was highly acclaimed by the public, the critics gave it only mixed reviews. For reviews of France et Espagne, see Testut 45–46; “Théâtre d’Orléans: France et Espagne”; “Semaine Dramatique.”

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For more on Louis Placide Canonge, see Arthur and de Kernion 137–40; Tinker 66–73; Viatte, “Complément” 19, and Histoire 263–65; Brasseaux, “Canonge”; and King 395–96.

“[L]e drame romantique s’est voulu un art élitaire de masse; . . . une pratique démocratique, profondément civique parce que accessible à tous, lettrés ou non.” For more on the drame, see, for example, Arsac and Ubersfeld. Hugo’s preface to Cromwell constitutes a literary manifesto that defines and theorizes the drame.

“Messieurs, nous donnerons un grand exemple au monde: nous ne serons ni Français, ni Espagnols, nous serons Louisianais, c’est à dire indépendants!”

“[N]ous ferons entendre ce mot sublime, magique; ce mot dont l’effet est sûr, et ne peut pas plus être empêché que notre fleuve dans sa course! Souveraineté du peuple!”

“[I]l vount propageant leurs idées révolutionnaires, ameutant les esprits et les bras contre l’Espagne.”

“Le Comte O’Reilly est un homme de sens. . . . Il a compris que le soutien d’hommes comme nous lui était nécessaire; il craindrait notre opposition.”

“[T]rêve pour ce soir! Comment parler coup d’Etat et conspiration, lorsque l’orchestre chante, lorsque les femmes sont jeunes, belles, lorsque les vins pétillent. . . Et pardieu! ce n’est pas entre deux quadrilles, mon cher, que nous allons proclamer l’indépendance de ce coin du monde! Il y a temps pour tout!”

“[E]t pour ma part, je suis réconcilié avec l’Espagne. . . . “Il n’y a plus de Pyrénées!”

“Legs sanglant, au nom du pays, je te reçois! Drapeau de la vengeance, précède pour nous celui de la liberté!”

“Si nous ne nous étions pas laissé prendre aux promesses de l’Espagne, nous serions aujourd’hui Français, indépendants ou morts.”

“[P]actiser dans les révolutions, c’est se tuer.”

In the original:

Je ne te reconnais plus, ma belle et fougueuse fille: autrefois, j’aimais à te contempler; les membres libres, les cheveux au vent, l’oeil en feu, tu courais dans
tes vastes plaines, tu t'ébattaist dans tes vertes campagnes, te réchauffant à ton brûlant soleil, ou jetant tes refrains sauvages à la brise embaumée! Comme te voilà changée maintenant! Tes mouvements sont commandés, ton front se penche tristement, tes bras sont maculés comme par des chaînes, et tes yeux ne peuvent supporter l'éclat de ton soleil! Louisiane! Louisiane! je rêvais cependant pour toi de grandes choses, et voilà que tout s'efface devant la réalité.

49. “Oublieuse de ton passé, vas-tu courber la tête?”
50. “Pauvre pays, que vont-ils faire de toi? Louisiane . . . que deviendras-tu entre les mains de tes nouveaux maîtres?”
51. “Espagne, un jour viendra où ceux que tu opprimes te demanderont compte du passé. Un jour viendra où tes colonies, fatiguées enfin de ta domination, briseront ce cercle de fer dans lequel tu les comprimes! Espagne, c’est la voix d’un mourant qui te le crie: Pour un martyr qui tombe, bien des vengeurs se lèvent!”
52. “La salle telle qu’elle est aujourd’hui est d’une élégance remarquable. Simple, coquette, gracieuse, bien éclairée et distribuée avec harmonie, elle doit contenler les plus difficiles. C’est une restauration presque complète qui ne peut faire qu’honorer au goût et au talent de M. Develle.”
53. “C’est par le Théâtre d’Orléans que nous attirons parmi nous la population fashionnable de la seconde municipalité.”

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