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Rag Time: Decadent Textiles in the Louisiana Gothic of the Fin de Siècle

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> When I saw it first – sunrise over Louisiana – the tears sprang to my eyes. It was like young death – a dead bride crowned with orange flowers – a dead face that asked for a kiss. I cannot say how fair and rich and beautiful this dead South is. It has fascinated me. I am resolved to live in it; I could not leave it for that chill and damp Northern life again.
>
> Lafcadio Hearn, 1877[1]

Plaidoyer pour une décadence sudiste

Lafcadio Hearn's fascination with the 'dead bride' of the American South, beginning upon his arrival in Louisiana in 1877, was predicated upon a notion of Louisiana as a locus of cultural and literary production that had been among the richest in America for decades. If we continue Hearn's metaphor of the dead bride, her wedding gown is undoubtedly a rich one, embroidered and bedight with baroque finery. By the time of Hearn's arrival in the late 1870s, Louisiana was adorned with numerous literary journals and a wealth of works written in multiple languages. As Catherine Savage Brosman suggests:

> Thus, crisscrossed for three centuries by competing ethnic, civic, and cultural lines of force, and unique, as the only former French colony in what is now the United States, Louisiana gave rise, unsurprisingly, to a unique cultural patrimony, or what has been termed the state's 'perverse complexity'.[2]

Although the invocation of perversity brings with it a host of complex associations, one that has been underexplored, both in American literature and in literature of the South more specifically, is that of decadence. In *Fears and Fascinations* (2005), Thomas F. Haddox makes a case for viewing works in the tradition of the Southern Gothic, and their antecedent works, through the lens of decadence – far from being a uniquely European phenomenon, he suggests, decadence is to be found in the American South, in 'the spectacle of a South haunted by defeat, by the ghosts of racial atrocities, and by a fantasy of past cultural glory […]. If failure is indeed beautiful to a decadent, then the ruined, faux-aristocratic South becomes a splendid backdrop'.[3] Rather than seeing

Louisiana literature as a regional curiosity, I propose we cease to enshroud ourselves in a parochial view of what constitutes major and minor literatures. As literary scholars, we may ask ourselves: 'In what sort of raiment is Hearn's dead bride clothed?' This article thus proposes to address this question, not through a study of historical dress practices *per se*, but through the ways in which the texts of nineteenth-century Louisiana serve as textiles, revealing in their wear and tear how Louisiana's authors grappled with the concept of decadence in the American South's postbellum years. In other words, this article proposes to observe the wedding gown of Hearn's dead bride and to show the inherent vice of the textile, the decay of the social and literary fabric.

Haddox is not the first to draw such a parallel between the South and decadence; Désirée Martin, in *Veillées d'une sœur* (1877), recounts her impressions of Louisiana's decadence, comparing it to that of Rome. She prays for the burden of postbellum stagnation and poverty to end:

> Ô Seigneur miséricordieux […] Depuis que ta justice a pris les rênes de notre punissable contrée, ta bonté semble nous avoir oubliés. Ah! Pardon, mon Dieu, pardon!… N'es-tu pas un *Dieu bon*!… La Louisiane, autrefois bénie de toi, est devenue un nid d'oppression; les oiseaux de proie la dévorent et l'étranger la délaisse en disant: Pauvre terre!… Sombre pays!
>
> [Oh merciful Lord […] Since Your justice has taken the reins of our punishable country, Your bounty seems to have forgotten us. Oh forgive us, my God, forgive us!… Are You not a good God!… Louisiana, once blessed by You, has become a nest of oppression; the birds of prey devour it, and the foreigner neglects it, saying: Poor land!… Dark country!][4]

She ends her lament with a sentiment that encapsulates the simultaneous feeling of hatred for the institution of slavery and nostalgia for the economic and cultural power that Louisiana had before the Civil War: 'Nous ne te demandons pas pour elle le retour des années 1816 à 1861; ne lui rends jamais de prospérité basée sur l'esclavage; mais, mon Dieu, redonne-lui la liberté et la paix.' [We do not ask You on her behalf for the return of the years 1816-1861; do not ever give her prosperity based on slavery; but, my God, give her back liberty and peace.][5] Vladimir Jankélévitch, in his 1950 study on decadence that has become a seminal work in defining the concept both literarily and philosophically, emphasizes that, 'La décadence pourtant ne se confond ni avec la déchéance théologique, ni avec la dégénérescence biologique, ni avec le déclin individual.' [Decadence,

however, is neither to be confused with theological decay, nor with biological degeneration, nor with individual decline.][6] He continues, saying that decadence is inherently a relative concept, one in which value is shifted temporally to an irrevocable past:

> En d'autres termes, l'acmé est au milieu, entre pente et contre-pente, tandis que l'excellence, dans la chute, est toute concentrée à l'origine; la valeur n'est plus métempirique, comme dans les mythes de l'Age d'or ou du Paradis supralapsaire, mais elle est 'devenue'.
>
> [In other terms, the peak is in the middle, between incline and decline, while excellence in freefall is entirely concentrated at the beginning; value is not so much metempiric, as in the myths of the Golden Age or of Paradise Lost, but it has 'become'.][7]

Instead of functioning as a stable category, decadence is always a statement of loss, a reminder that the present has 'fallen away from' the past.[8] Elsewhere, I have argued for a periodization of Louisiana's literature, but as yet no one has theorized a literary periodization of Louisiana that includes a decadent school.[9] However, spanning the decades from the 1870s to the 1900s, the decadent school in Louisianian letters corresponds neatly with the flourishing of decadent prose in Europe.[10] Thus, this article proposes to bridge this gap by suggesting not only that Louisiana literature has a long heritage of decadence, but also that this literature, when viewed through the lens of representation of textiles and their decay, provides unique insight into the unravelling of the social fabric of the Old South.

As the 1850s drew to a close, the political and economic divisions driving the United States towards its Civil War were omnipresent. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the Supreme Court decision in Dred Scott v. Sandford in 1857, and John Brown's execution in 1859 all bore witness to an increasing tension across the Mason-Dixon line, one which, if we are to borrow Jankélévitch's notion that decadence derives from a deliberate and self-conscious delectation in one's own decay, abounds in many writings from the South in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

> En fait, la conscience qui dégénère prend goût à sa propre dégénérescence et trouve à s'éplucher elle-même une sorte d'amère et morose délectation. La réflexion narcissienne sur le Soi et les sous-produits de la pensée caractérisera donc les époques decadents.

> [In fact, consciousness that degenerates develops a taste for its own decay and finds a sort of bitter and morose delectation in teasing itself apart. The narcissistic reflection on the self and the resulting products of thought thus characterize periods of decadence.][11]

Although comparatively few histories of Louisiana's literature exist, especially ones which periodize it into movements, there exists nevertheless a suggestion that it has its decadent period. Auguste Viatte in his *Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française* considers the years 1840-1860 the 'Apogée' of Louisiana literature, and Bill Marshall suggests similarly that Louisiana's francophone literary scene peaked between 1840 and 1850.[12] And although neither of these critics suggest a period of decadence, such an era is implied in all periodizations of a Golden Age.

Drowned Bodies in Ballgowns: The Spoils of the End of the World

Born in Jamaica to a French family that had fled the revolution in Saint-Domingue, Adolphe du Quesnay moved to Louisiana in 1869 and began a short-lived writing career in his later years, depicting the darker, menacing side of the Gulf of Mexico.[13] His novella *Un été à la Grand'Île* [*A Summer on Grand Isle*] (1892) tells of family tragedy on the eponymous resort island in the Gulf and has been criticized for its moralizing tone and unidimensional characterization.[14] However, the atmosphere of the novella, brooding and disturbing, permeated with nostalgia and lush description, betrays many of the hallmarks of decadent fiction. In her analysis, Brosman has concluded, '[l]ocal color is exploited, as well as the pathetic fallacy, focusing on the ocean and its moods'.[15] The family tragedy at the heart of the story – the loss of a young couple's infant daughter while vacationing on the island – is set against the historical backdrop of a more sweeping natural disaster, the hurricane of 1856, which destroyed the analogous Dernière Isle, a vacation spot for the wealthy who wished to escape the stifling heat of New Orleans.

The sudden outbreak of a storm on Grand Isle, described as a rend in a veil, causes a temporal shift, in which the narration flashes back to the famous disaster of 1856 as a meteorological metonymy mediated through a textile metaphor:

> Nous avancions parfaitement tranquilles, quand soudain, déchirée comme un voile, la nue s'illumina d'une blanche averse, ondée subite qui, suspendue un moment en une écharpe aérienne, creva, une seconde après, sur la mer et l'île, baignant celle-ci en un clin d'œil.
>
> [We were walking along perfectly tranquilly when, suddenly, torn like a veil, the clouds were lit up by a white shower, an abrupt shower that, suspended for a moment like an aerial scarf, broke a second later upon the sea and the island, bathing it in the blink of an eye.][16]

The opening up of the cloud like torn fabric, while functioning as pathetic fallacy for the action that is to come, also serves as the nodal point in the narrative, precipitating the decline of the narrator's family and creating a *mise-en-abyme* with the events of 1856. In a bizarre attempt to cheer up his wife after the loss of their daughter, the narrator takes her on a sightseeing tour of the ruins of Dernière Isle, allowing the narration of the novella to slip into a protracted sequence describing the last hours of the resort:

> Si l'on en croit les souvenirs des autochtones, on donnait ce soir-là un grand bal dans l'île. Le temps, depuis la veille, avait été orageux. C'était un samedi soir, le 13 août 1856 je crois; le vent d'ouest soufflait du large et il pleuvait très fort.
>
> [If one is to believe the memories of the natives, there was a great ball given that night on the island. The weather had been stormy since the previous day. It was a Saturday night, the 13 August 1856, I believe; the western wind blew in from the sea and it rained very heavily.][17]

The last ball on Dernière Isle, drawing on a literary tradition of gayety in the face of disaster, could not be more decadent; Louisiana's elite dance as the waters soak the hems of their gowns.

The luxury of the seasonal inhabitants of the island becomes, in the description of this disaster, a metonymy of the wealth of the state before the Civil War, a lost Golden Age that was to be wiped away as cleanly as the structures on Dernière Isle:

> Cependant le luxe proverbial des dames louisianaises était si somptueux à cette époque, en pleine floraison d'esclavage, l'or abondait tellement sur les plantations, qu'on dépensait beaucoup sans y regarder de bien près, et que l'on courait follement après le plaisir en déployant un faste extreme.
>
> [However, the proverbial luxury of the Louisianian ladies was so sumptuous at that time, at the very height of slavery, and money was so abundant on the plantations that people spent much without looking very closely, and they madly chased pleasure by displaying an extreme splendour.][18]

As the women bedeck themselves in their finery, the threatening storm seems only to add to their feverish search for pleasure.[19] Once the storm breaks, however, this finery only serves to emphasize the helplessness of wealth and fashion before nature's power. In a shift from first person to free indirect discourse, the novella imagines the last hours of the wealthy planters at the ball, casting them as figures variously tragic and symbolic. As Stephanie Boeninger has suggested about death at sea: 'Drowning thus serves an ambivalent function in literature, uniting the human desire for a peaceful death with the equally powerful terror of being forgotten', and the drowning of the society of the last antebellum generation takes this dichotomy from the personal to the sociological.[20] Thus, du Quesnay's narrator imagines trapped women and children who are summarily beaten and stripped by the storm before being drowned: 'Au bout de quelques heures, leurs vêtements, fouettés par les vagues étaient en pièces; ils étaient complètement nus.' [After a few hours, their clothes, whipped by the waves, were in tatters; they were completely naked.][21] Nature, in a symbolic triumph over sartorial decadence and excess, reduces these people to an Edenic nudity that is imposed just before the moment of death, an apotheosis of decadence directly preceding the inevitable fall.[22]

Un été à la Grand'Île not only recapitulates the decadent themes of horrific imagery and societal excess and decline, it manipulates its *mise-en-abyme* structure in order to analyse the consequences of collapse. Thus, after the storm passes, the ruins of Dernière Isle provide, ironically, more fertile soil for an exploration of decadence than did the antebellum resort: 'le sol était jonché de plusieurs centaines de cadavres déjà décomposés sous les rayons ardents d'un soleil splendide' [the ground was littered with several hundred bodies already decomposing under the intense rays of a splendid sun].[23] The carpeting of rotting corpses over what had once been a playground for the rich serves, for the reader of 1892, as an all-too-familiar reminder of the fields of corpses that were to litter the countryside during the upcoming war. The bright sun, which had made of Dernière Isle a resort location in the first place, now hastens the decomposition of its former inhabitants. However, biological decay is not at the heart of this aftermath:

> Encore parées de leurs robes de fête, la plupart des femmes avaient les doigts coupés. Leurs bijoux, bagues de diamants et de rubis, colliers de pierres fines, leurs riches costumes revêtus pour le bal avaient été arrachés, emportés. Cette profanation de la mort fut accomplie, croit-on, par les pêcheurs riverains, sortes de ravageurs et gens barbares qui, habitant les terres hautes d'alentour, purent arriver les premiers à ce banquet de vautours.
>
> [Still dressed in their ballgowns, most of the women had their fingers cut off. Their jewels, diamond and ruby rings, necklaces of fine gems, and their rich ensembles put on for the ball had been stripped and carried off. This profanation of death was accomplished, so it is said, by the coastal fishermen, a type of barbarous scavenger, who were able to arrive at this vulture's banquet first because they lived upon the surrounding highlands.][24]

The very clothes that women had donned for the last ball both weighed down their bodies in the sea and attracted wreckers, who pillaged their jewels and fabrics. The very garb of decadent society leads directly to the profanation of its death: while the same ardent sun shines, the fabric of society is cut up and sold for scrap. Boeninger has suggested that death at sea presents a fundamental problem for the human desire for memory since there is no fixed locus to mourn the dead, but du Quesnay's wreckers add an additional layer of complexity to this analysis.[25] In his novella, the worse alternative appears to be washing ashore, since, when lost at sea, the memory of the living can create a respectful grave for the dead, while the found body, especially when fallen into unscrupulous hands, is subject to the further degradation of mutilation for the sake of profit.

The young wife in the frame story, Diane, in a strange access of gayety at the end of their stay on Grand Isle, insists upon a last swim – anticipating a more famous work of Louisiana literature, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).[26] This image of the wife and mother, returning to the sea in an act of grief and/or freedom, also constitutes a fundamentally decadent act; in a gesture of self-resignation, the individual relinquishes all struggle and allows herself to be carried by the inevitable water. When Diane's body is recovered, the direct connection with the victims of a quarter century before is palpable in the state of her body and, more particularly, her clothing:

> À moitié enterrée dans les sables où la mer l'avait jetée, ses traits purs et fins conservaient toute la première sérénité de la mort; ses beaux yeux noirs étaient grands ouverts et fixes, et elle souriait doucement. Mais ses vêtements étaient déchirés, et ses membres délicats tout raidis, mutilés horriblement.
>
> [Half-buried in the sand where the sea had thrown her, her pure and fine features retained all the first serenity of death; her beautiful black eyes were opened wide and fixed, and she

> smiled softly. But her clothes were torn, and her delicate limbs were stiff and horribly mutilated.][27]

The horror of this scene stands in direct contrast with the placidity of her face. However, her body and her clothing bear witness to the violence of her death; the tearing of the fabric of her dress and of her skin blending the once-living and the inert textile into one mutilated whole. As a locus for a decadent exploration, Dernière Isle also serves as a reminder of Louisiana's imbrication with the Caribbean, creating what I shall call the idea of a 'tropical decadence', a decadence that is predicated on local colour and *créolité,* displaced from urban centres and allowed to fester, like the bodies after the hurricane, under harsher climes.

Mary Gallagher has suggested that Hearn, perhaps more than any other author of the fin de siècle*,* embodies the complexity of *créolité* in his writings and accentuates the cultural continuum between the Deep South and the Caribbean, managing, 'to outline the basis of the Creole cultural continuum and to suggest the manner in which that continuum might cancel the boundaries between different geographical spaces, states, nations, cultures, genres and languages'.[28] Shared origins in plantation slavery and its violent collapse, she argues, are explored by Hearn in an 'aesthetics of *métissage*', a focus on local colour punctuated with stylistic references to recent French writing. Indeed, Bernadette Lemoine has focused on Hearn's indebtedness to France, labelling him as an 'ambassador' to French literature in America and Japan.[29] However, these analyses leave out a larger consideration of how Hearn's writing in Louisiana and the Antilles reworks the mechanisms and imagery of decadence into a tropical setting. Thus, when Hearn chooses as the subject of his first novella, *Chita* (1887), the 1856 hurricane and its devastation of Dernière Isle, this choice does not exist in a literary vacuum. Rather, Hearn's characterization of the menacing power of the Gulf and the collapse of Southern society symbolized by this hurricane draws upon a long literary tradition in Louisiana, and similarities to du Quesnay's novella of a few years later are not to be taken lightly.

As in *Un été à la Grand'Île,* the first glimpse the reader is allowed of Dernière Isle is a retrospective one which dwells on its ruinous state in order to situate the story of the hurricane within the context of the island's eventual destruction:

> Last Island (L'Isle Dernière), – well worth a long visit in other years, in spite of its remoteness, is now a ghastly desolation twenty-five miles long. Lying nearly forty miles west of Grande Isle, it was nevertheless far more populated a generation ago: it was not only the most celebrated island of the group, but also the most fashionable watering-place of the aristocratic South.[30]

Hearn is, in many respects, more explicit than du Quesnay about the parallel between the 1856 hurricane and the impending destruction of the old, aristocratic South. When the Civil War is referenced in *Chita,* it is 'that huge shock, which left all the imposing and splendid fabric of Southern feudalism wrecked forever'.[31] The rending of the 'splendid fabric' of the old South becomes metonymized in the menacing and mysterious tropicality of the locus of Hearn's story. In an apostrophe to the reader, the novel opens with this suggestion: 'you will find yourself more than once floating through sombre mazes of swamp-forest, – past assemblages of cypresses all hoary with the parasitic tillandsia, and grotesque as gatherings of fetich-gods'.[32] And like du Quesnay, Hearn uses the metaphor of fabric to express environmental destruction: 'it will seem to you that the low land must have once been rent asunder by the sea, and strewn about the Gulf in fantastic tatters'.[33] The rending of cloth, and the resulting 'tatters' of land, expresses violence inherent to the physical space of the Gulf of Mexico in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed; from the ancient Jewish tradition of rending garments in mourning to the violence of the Crucifixion being marked by the tearing of the veil in the temple, it brings together a physical and metaphysical rupture in space and systems of thought that can never be 'stitched' back together.

Also like du Quesnay's imagining of the last hours of the island resort, Hearn creates an extended conceit of the final ball given on the island as a way to symbolize the broader destruction that would obliterate the South and its planter class. With an exclamation of 'Il n'y a rien de mieux à faire que de s'amuser!' [There's nothing better to do than have fun!], the denizens of Dernière Isle gather in the hotel ballroom to ignore the impending storm and its destruction.[34] This

hedonistic approach, lacking in both spatial awareness and foresight, echoes the prioritization of the aesthetic over the material with which Hearn diagnoses antebellum society, alleging it believed it

> wiser to admire the grace of Parisian toilets, the eddy of trailing robes with its fairy-foam of lace, the ivorine loveliness of glossy shoulders and jewelled throats, the glimmering of satin-slippered feet, – than to watch the raging of the flood without, or the flying of the wrack…[35]

The fabrics of the women's dresses are given ambiguous adjectives that both describe their ephemeral nature and invite a direct comparison to the troubled waters outside; the 'eddy' of gowns with a 'fairy-foam' of decoration both echo and soften the harsh natural reality that threatens them. And indeed, it is in the course of 'la valse-tourbillon', again echoing the hurricane, that the first sign of impending disaster is the wetness of dancing slippers.[36]

In *Chita*, the aftermath actually forms the bulk of the novella; the textile metaphors of the storm itself – in which 'tearing' of land and 'rending islands in twain' creating a physical and epistemological rupture between the antebellum and postbellum societies – and giving way to the harvesting of fabrics from the bodies of the dead.[37] 'There are silks, satins, laces, and fine linen to be stripped from the bodies of the drowned' – a formulation that, because of its impersonal construction, allows Hearn to make the reader implicitly complicit in the despoiling of the dead.[38] Among the detritus of the disaster is the titular young girl, who is found by a coastal Spanish fisherman named Feliu. To emphasize the conceit of textiles representing the destruction of the social fabric, the eponymous Chita is found as a 'frail creature bound to the mother's corpse with a silken scarf', tethering her quite literally to her old society by the bonds of a costly fabric.[39] Thus, in many respects Chita is first presented as herself a type of wrecker's spoil, a costly bit of fabric fished from the sea because of its value. As Feliu and his wife adopt the orphan girl, who speaks only Creole and is unable to communicate with the couple, the clothes in which she was found serve almost as transitional objects, ushering her into her role as adopted daughter:

> She wore the same dress in which Feliu had found her – a soft white fabric of muslin, with trimmings of ribbon that had once been blue; and the now discolored silken scarf, which had twice done her such brave service, was thrown over her shoulders.[40]

The transformation of Chita from wealthy, creolophone scion of New Orleans society to a coastal Spanish fisherman's daughter is made more poignant by her eventual 'rediscovery' by her father a decade later, although he is delirious with yellow fever and unable to recognize her. And this transition, marked sartorially by Hearn, encapsulates the social upheaval represented by the hurricane and, by extension, the coming Civil War: 'She wore a loose-falling dress of some light stuff, steel-gray in color; – boys' shoes were on her feet.'[41] Hearn's poetizing of social destruction through natural disaster, like du Quesnay's, is inherently a commentary on the social collapse wrought by the Civil War, and like his characters, his writings are haunted, '[h]e who teareth off the Mask of the Flesh had looked into her face one unutterable moment: – she had seen the brutal Truth, naked to the bone!'[42] *Chita,* and *Un été à la Grand'Île,* narratologically tear off the mask of artifice to reveal the social order laid bare – when the fabric of society decays, the nudity underneath is made visible and legible.

In Which the Quadroon Rolls up Her Sleeves

What du Quesnay and Hearn address in terms of Louisiana's decaying social order, George Washington Cable addresses with race. Race is a recurring theme throughout his works, but *Madame Delphine* (1881)*,* being the story of a quadroon woman and dealing primarily with mixed-race relationships, is one of his most explicit. As historian Emily Clark has noted, the 'myth of the quadroon' became a popular trope starting in the eighteenth century and afforded a way to both expose the ills of slavery and indulge in an orientalist-style fantasy of it.[43] The appeal of this figure, further argues Kenneth Aslakson, lies in her simultaneous familiarity and exoticism, being both white enough to make her familiar to a largely white readership while being black enough to maintain her position as an exotic other.[44] Cable's *Madame Delphine*, tells the story of a quadroon and her daughter, and elaborates the lengths to which the eponymous heroine will go for her

daughter to marry the white man with whom she has fallen in love. As Violet Harrington Bryan posits, the question of race is central to depictions of New Orleans as a decadent locus in the novel:

> [I]n *Madame Delphine* Cable emphasizes more dramatically the changes that have occurred in the twenty years since the golden period of Creole life; he paints boldly the atmosphere of decay in the Quarter and suggests that the newly Americanized Esplanade area on the outskirts of the Quarter would also suffer as a result of its complicity in the racial sins of the area.[45]

The area of the French Quarter where Madame Delphine lives is described thus by Cable as a 'region of architectural decrepitude' where stagnation and a hopeless nostalgia reign, a feeling he poetically paints as a 'long Sabbath of decay'.[46] What marks this setting as particularly decadent, I argue, is not just this emphasis on decay but the ways in which Cable paints this decay as beautiful:

> Yet beauty lingers here. To say nothing of the picturesque, sometimes you get sight of comfort, sometimes of opulence, through the unlatched wicket in some porte-cochère-red-painted brick pavement, foliage of dark palm or pale banana, marble or granite masonry and blooming parterres; or through a chink between some pair of heavy batten window-shutters, opened with an almost reptile wariness, your eye gets a glimpse of lace and brocade upholstery, silver and bronze, and much similar rich antiquity.[47]

This bringing together of material luxury, particularly in the appointments of interior décor, and the notion of an irrevocably lost past in New Orleans, is preserved artificially. This sense of fading grandeur that is condemned to be cloistered behind crumbling façades in the French Quarter evokes the 'long Sabbath of decay', a quasi-religious resignation to, and even celebration of, corruption.

More than physical corruption, the reputation for moral corruption in New Orleans dates at least to the eighteenth century, and the mixed-race women of the city fuelled this fascination during the nineteenth century. Numerous figures, both literary and historical, describe the balls where white men and women of colour paired off, often emphasizing the lasciviousness of the 'quadroons' – even political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, on his tour of America, recounts visiting a quadroon ball in 1832, calling it a '[u]nique lien produit par l'immoralité en[tre] les deux races. Une sorte de bazar' [unique place produced by the immorality between the two races. A sort

of bazaar].[48] However, when Cable portrays Madame Delphine as a veteran of the quadroon balls, the 'widow' of a white man, he chooses to emphasize her decorum and dignity, describing the women at the balls: 'They were clad in silken extenuations from the throat to the feet, and wore, withal, a pathos in their charm that gave them a family likeness to innocence.'[49] Whereas other authors, including both Alexis de Tocqueville and Sidonie de La Houssaye, emphasize their salacious side – Mme de La Houssaye often employs the word 'dévergondage' in reference to the practice – Cable opts instead to portray the quadroons almost as hetæræ or women prey to a social convention rather than opportunistic exploiters of men, and this shows most visibly in his sartorial description of them as covered and, almost, innocent.[50]

In an echo of the *costume* worn by her mother decades before, Madame Delphine's daughter, Olive, is hidden both intra- and extra-dietetically when first presented in the narrative. Glimpsed during a mass held by the energetic Père Jerome, Madame Delphine and her daughter are enigmatic figures: 'The younger one bowed silently; she was a beautiful figure, but the slight effort of Père Jerome's kind eyes to see through the veil was vain.'[51] Even the kindly gaze of the priest is unable to penetrate the veil, nor is the reader permitted a glance at the girl beneath. She is sartorially and narratologically marked off, protected. Veils will come to play an essential role in this analysis of Louisiana decadence. As Marni Reva Kessler argues in her book *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (2006), '[l]ike a lens that alternately burs and sharpens, the veil is a tool that helps us to explore nineteenth-century conceptions of femininity, public health, aging, vision, imperialism, urbanism, and modernity art practices'.[52] Holding a privileged, if often overlooked, place in public textiles in the nineteenth century, the veil serves as an instrument of power for women; the veil allows them to maintain anonymity while observing the world and moving freely in it. It acts as a kind of armour, shuttering the woman from the prying eyes of society while allowing her to display the information about herself that she chooses. Thus, when Olive later comes to seek Père Jerome's assistance in her complicated love affair, she again appears veiled: 'turning, he beheld a closely veiled female figure standing at the other end, and knew instantly that

it was Olive'.[53] This time, Père Jerome is able to discern under the veil – he, and the reader, have been granted access to Olive by Cable, but the veil remains as a reminder that she is separate within the text, held off from the corruption, both moral and physical, which surrounds her.[54]

The other function of the veil within this narrative is to obscure the race of the woman wearing it; although Olive appears white, the veil reinforces the ambiguity inherent within a complicated racial hierarchy. In a similar way, sleeves function as an indicator of both race and morals, both hiding the skin from the sun's darkening rays and countering the prurient gaze. Thus, the scene where Olive's love interest, Vignevieille, first glimpses her is indicative of the symbolic role her clothing plays. In her garden, Vignevieille, like Père Jerome before him, sees first the figure as defined by its garments, then perceives the girl: 'a pale glimpse of robes came through the tangle, and then, plainly to view, appeared an outline – a presence – a form – a spirit – a girl!'[55] As Olive materializes through material, 'her arms, half hid in a snowy mist of sleeve, let down to guide her spotless skirts free from the dewy touch of the grass'.[56] What ensues is an unintentional, for Olive, strip-tease, in which the movement particularly of her sleeves simultaneously reveals her body and her purity. The 'snowy mist' of sleeve and 'spotless skirts', metonymically, remind the reader both her of innocence and her perceived race, and, as Roland Barthes has suggested, the dress makes the woman:

> la plume, la fourrure et le gant continuent d'imprégner la femme de leur vertu magique une fois même qu'ils sont ôtés, lui font comme le souvenir enveloppant d'une carapace luxueuse, car c'est une loi évidente que tout le strip-tease est donné dans la nature même du vêtement de départ.
>
> [the feather, the fur, and the glove continue to imbue the woman with their magical virtue even once they have been taken off, acting for her like the encompassing memory of a luxurious shell, because it is an obvious law that all strip-tease lies in the nature itself of the clothing being removed].[57]

The revealing of the arms beneath the sleeves carries with it the ghost of the sleeve, a subtle game of *cache-cache* which operates in counterpoint to Oscar Wilde's aphorism: 'Nothing should reveal the body but the body.'[58]

Vignevieille watches Olive, substituting for the reader in the fascination of the game: 'She approaches the jasmine; she raises her arms, the sleeves falling like a vapor down to the shoulders.'[59] This tactic of using the sleeve as a particular part of the garment that accentuates the quadroon is widespread in fin-de-siècle Louisiana literature. Sidonie de La Houssaye uses it in her series *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans* (1894-1898) to show the whiteness of the arms of Octavia, the 'queen of the quadroons', a signifier of her *métissage*:

> Elle était habillée tout de blanc; la mousseline de son corsage couvrait sans les cacher ses admirables épaules; et ses manches longues, mais très larges, montraient en se relevant ses beaux bras d'un blanc de neige. Une rose rouge était le seul ornement de sa magnifique chevelure, qui retombait en boucles soyeuses au-dessus du peigne destiné à les relever.
>
> [She was dressed entirely in white; the muslin of her bodice covered her admirable shoulders without hiding them, and her long, very wide sleeves showed her beautiful, snow-white arms when they fell back. A red rose was the only ornament in her magnificent hair, which fell in silken curls over the comb that was supposed to hold it up.][60]

Like Octavia, Olive is revealed to both the reader and Vignevieille through her garments, and because the sleeve has a double function of preserving both pallor and modesty, and because of its ability to, almost of its own accord, coquettishly reveal the skin, especially the wide, loose sleeves of the quadroon, it functions as a literal floating signifier, falling through involuntary movement of the arm to signifier its wearer, her sexuality, and her race.

Thus, Olive, although described even more chastely than her mother had been decades before, is still, as part of the quadroon mythology of the Crescent City, an object of sexual fascination, precisely because of her modesty. In a sartorial echo of her mother, who, after all, had Olive because of her semi-clandestine relationship as mistress to a white man, Cable casts Olive as a classical figure, ostensibly to be observed with cold detachment:

> Her chaste drapery was of that revived classic order which the world of fashion was again laying aside to re-assume the mediæval bondage of the staylace; for New Orleans was behind the fashionable world, and Madame Delphine and her daughter were behind New Orleans. A delicate scarf, pale blue, of lightly netted worsted, fell from either shoulder down beside her hands.[61]

Like the scarf that bound Chita to the body of her mother, Olive's scarf binds her to her mother; the final sentence of this quote is ambiguous about the antecedent of the pronoun 'her.' This

attachment, however, serves as the narrative crux of the novel when Madame Delphine finds herself obliged to lie about Olive's parentage so that she can marry. She tells Olive and Vignevieille that she is not Olive's mother so that Olive can claim to be white – the wedding occurs, but Madame Delphine, deprived of her role as mother of the bride, is consigned to the aisles. Among the guests, she stands aside, 'and last – yet first – one small, shrinking female figure, here at one side, in faded robes and dingy bonnet'.[62] The fading clothes of Madame Delphine relegate her narratologically to the past. In publicly renouncing her parentage, she renounces her claims upon the future and recedes into the background, eventually dying as she confesses her lie to Père Jerome. Cable, once again, turns to the metaphor of textiles to add pathos to the drama: 'Madame Delphine might have tried a thousand times again without ever succeeding half so well in lifting the curtain upon the whole, sweet, tender, old, old-fashioned truth.'[63]

The Veil is Rent

Unlike in *Madame Delphine,* the veil in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* in many respects metonymizes a generic shift away from the more wistful Romanticism of Cable, albeit a Romanticism tinged with political concerns.[64] The veil in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* grows ragged and threadbare, marking how the sweeping family epic of the novel displays the unravelling of the fabric of Southern society itself in the years immediately surrounding the Civil War. In the decay of this fabric, Guri Barstad sees both decline and evolution:

> Dans le microcosme louisianais de la plantation Saint-Ybars, ce sont trois générations d'une même famille qui semblent représenter et illustrer les différents stades de l'évolution d'une société qui, sous maints égards, est aveuglée par l'habitude, ou qui, par commodité, choisit de demeurer immobile, d'éviter tout changement, tout ce qui ressemblerait à une évolution et pourrait demander un effort d'adaptation. C'est ainsi qu'après s'être rendue économiquement dépendante de l'esclavage, la société elle-même se retrouve esclave de ses mensonges.
>
> [In the microcosm of Louisiana that is the Saint-Ybars plantation, three generations of the same family seem to represent and illustrate the different stages in the evolution of a society which, in many respects, is blinded by habit or which, out of convenience, chooses to remain immobile and to avoid all change and anything that would smack of evolution or could demand some effort to adapt. It is thus that, after having made itself economically dependent upon slavery, it is society itself that finds itself a slave to its lies.][65]

However, while she is correct in pointing out that society is blinded by habit and immobilized, and thus enslaved by its own structure, it is difficult to see in the story of this family, regardless of how Mercier creates openings for a positivist view of human progress, anything other than decadence.[66]

Like the other works of the corpus of this article, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* opens with a panoramic sweep of the local topography, allowing both the introduction of local colour and permitting the 'weaving' of the local society, setting up the social structures and mores that are going to fall into decline throughout the course of the plot, creating a saga of familial decline and fall, a *Buddenbrooks* of the South. A young Frenchman, Pélasge, who is fleeing his political involvement in the insurrection of 1848, arrives in Louisiana. Engaged to be the tutor on the Saint-Ybars plantation to the youngest scion of the house, Démon, he undergoes a cultural and philosophical journey through 'le rideau lointain et sombre de la cyprière' [the dark and distant curtain of the cypress grove] to arrive at the plantation, where his observations of its inhabitants and mores shake his beliefs and challenge his Eurocentric worldview.[67] In his encounters with the denizens of the plantation, Pélasge's understanding of life in the American South, be it linguistic, social, or political, is upended, creating a question around where shared culture – and even shared language – end.[68]

In the middle of the Saint-Ybars plantation stands an ancient tree, the Sachem; once the meeting point for local Indian tribes, it now shelters their scant descendants while also serving as the resting place for the Saint-Ybars family. The Spanish moss hanging from its branches establishes the funerary stagnation of the Sachem as a locus: 'Des touffes de barbe espagnole pendaient ça et là comme de longs voiles funéraires; leur immobilité morne augmentait la mélancolie de cette solitude, et donnait plus d'intensité au silence' [Tufts of Spanish moss were hanging here and there, like long funeral veils; their mournful immobility increased the melancholy of this solitude and gave a greater intensity to the silence].[69] Like the quadroon's veil in *Madame Delphine,* the veils hanging on the Sachem lend it the gravitas of its ostensibly unshakeable

connection with the past. Although Saint-Ybars superstitiously fears the Sachem, claiming that 'cette immobilité et ce silence ressemblent trop au néant' [this immobility and silence are too similar to nothingness], Démon finds the continuity the Sachem provides with the past comforting.[70] Saint-Ybars's dislike of the locus, however, does not prevent him from seeking it out as a means to attempt to seduce his daughter's music teacher, Nogolka.

In a scene of attempted rape that, like with du Quesnay, is augmented by the pathetic fallacy of an impending hurricane, Nogolka appears by the tomb under the Sachem: 'Elle était vêtue d'une robe blanche; un voile blanc à travers lequel se dessinait vaguement sa figure, tombait sur ses épaules et descendait jusqu'au dessous de la taille' [She was dressed in a white dress; a white veil, through which her face could vaguely be seen, fell onto her shoulders and hung to just above her waist].[71] Dressed in this funereal shroud, Nogolka is both narratologically marked as 'outside' the living world of the plantation and demonstrates, through the metonymy of the tomb, the depravity to which Saint-Ybars is willing to sink. After Pélasge takes the torn veil away as evidence of the attempted rape, the second part of the novel reaches its climax when, frustrated and ashamed, Saint-Ybars lashes out at Démon on the night of the hurricane, beating him mercilessly. When his nurse Mamrie, his 'deuxième mère', saves him by hurling an axe at Saint-Ybars's head, Mercier's analysis of the violent potential of a slave society, however bucolic it may appear on the surface, reaches its most prescient point. As Mamrie is brought into the courtyard to be publicly whipped, Pélasge meditates on how his comfortable life on the Louisiana plantation is at odds with the democratic ideals for which he had been exiled from France:

> Pélasge était dans sa chambre. Debout devant sa table de travail, il avait les yeux fixés sur le voile de Nogolka; mais ce n'était pas à elle qu'il pensait; il regardait machinalement ce voile et pensait à Mamrie: il se demandait encore, au dernier moment, s'il n'y aurait pas un moyen de la sauver.
>
> [Pélasge was in his room. Standing in front of his worktable, his eyes were fixed on Nogolka's veil, but it was not about her that he was thinking. He was looking mechanically at this veil and thinking about Mamrie; he still wondered if there were not some way to save her at the last minute.][72]

Although the scene ends with Saint-Ybars remitting Mamrie's punishment through the intervention of Nogolka, for Pélasge, there is an almost Edenic Fall in this moment, a recognition that even in spite of the normally peaceful life of the plantation, there is a fundamental violence that undergirds it, and the veil by which he links the events of Saint-Ybars's outbursts, serves as a narratological *fil rouge*.

The veil, metonymized from the parasitic moss of the trees to the young woman Nogolka to the slave Mamrie, becomes, through Saint-Ybars's act of mercy, a signifier of changing times and coming collapse. Man Sémiramis, the major-domo of the plantation, expresses her regret over the liberality of white masters:

> Monsieur, dit-elle, les blancs ne savent plus régner, ils faiblissent; dans dix ans il n'y aura plus d'esclaves.
> – Tant mieux, répondit Pélasge.
> Sémiramis le regarda d'un air de pitié, et s'éloigna sans ajouter un mot.
>
> [Sir, she said, the whites no longer know how to rule; they are growing weak. In ten years, there will not be any more slaves.
> – All the better, responded Pélasge.
> Sémiramis looked at him with an air of pity and walked away without adding a word.][73]

Man Sémiramis' presentiment of the end of the antebellum slave society proves to be part of the *zeitgeist*, as even Saint-Ybars's father, Vieumaite (vieux maître), predicts the violent end of the South by apostrophizing her:

> Ô Sud, quel triste sort t'attend! Vainqueur ou vaincu, ton malheur est certain. Vainqueur, tu traînes un boulet attaché à ton pied, l'esclavage. Ton ennemi, défait sur le champ de bataille, te poursuit sans trêve ni merci sur le terrain de la discussion. Vaincu, tes ateliers sont désorganisés; la confiscation te saisit de ses serres impitoyables. Déchiré, dévoré comme Prométhée, que de temps il te faudra pour reprendre ta santé et tes forces! Peut-être un demi-siècle.
>
> [Oh South, what sad destiny awaits you! Win or lose, your misery is certain. As a victor, you will drag the chain attached to your ankle: slavery. Your enemy, beaten on the battlefield, will hound you mercilessly on the field of discussion. If defeated, your industry will be in disorder; confiscation will latch onto you with its pitiless claws. Torn apart and devoured like Prometheus, how much time it will take for you to regain your health and force! Maybe half a century.][74]

Helpless before political and social forces, as well as damned regardless of the outcome of the coming war, the characters on the plantation find themselves prey to a feverish sense of decadence;

like the merrymakers on Dernière Isle, they conduct a last valse-tourbillon before the inevitable collapse of their civilization. As Emma Harlet and Nathan Rabalais have suggested in their introduction to the newest edition of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*:

> L'œuvre de Mercier est colorée d'un ambiguïté face à l'esclavage. Dans le contexte de la fin de siècle, il faut mettre en avant la complexité de la société louisianaise, avec la disparition de la société créole francophone telle que l'a connue Mercier jeune au profit de l'anglo-américanisation de la region.
>
> [Mercier's work is coloured with ambiguity on the subject of slavery. In the context of the end of the century, one must bear in mind the complexity of Louisiana society, in particular the disappearance of francophone Creole society as Mercier knew it in his youth in favour of the Anglo-Americanization of the region.][75]

Thus there is a parallel decadence being explored both dietetically and metatextually; the decadence of the antebellum plantation society stands in, for Mercier, for what he sees as the decadence of francophone Louisiana at the end of the century. *Fin de siècle, fin de la créolité.*

And as with the other works of this corpus, Mercier's novel offers his readers a detailed analysis of the consequences of the collapse of a decadent society. In a gesture that recalls Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the collapse of the house of Saint-Ybars is mirrored by the physical collapse of the family's mansion:

> Le soleil, le vent, la poussière et la pluie commencèrent à y pénétrer librement, à mesure que les portes et les fenêtres étaient enlevées […]. Les planchers s'évanouirent, suivis des poteaux, des solives, des panneaux, des escaliers. Bientôt il ne resta plus que la carcasse en brique, semblable à une forteresse abandonnée après un siège. Les briques elles-mêmes furent emportées; de la magnifique résidence des Saint-Ybars, on ne vit plus que quelques pans de mur du rez-de-chaussée, à l'ombre desquels vinrent se reposer de vieilles vaches errantes.
>
> [The sun, the wind, the dust, and the rain began to enter into it liberally as the doors and windows were taken away […]. The flooring vanished, followed by the columns, the soffits, the panelling, and the stairs. Soon nothing was left but the brick carcass, like a fortress abandoned after a siege. The bricks themselves were taken away. Of the magnificent Saint-Ybars residence, all that remained to be seen were a few pieces of wall of the ground floor, in the shadow of which old wandering cows came to rest.][76]

The destruction of the Saint-Ybars mansion allows Mercier by extension to indulge in a veritable orgy of death for the family; in quick succession, Saint-Ybars, his wife, and their sons succumb to the ravages of postbellum poverty. When Chant-d'Oisel, Démon's twin sister, marries Pélasge, it

is on her deathbed. In a prolonged scene where Mamrie dresses her in a chemise de batiste, a 'dernier reste de l'ancienne splendeur' [last remnant of the old splendour], fabric once again serves as an indicator of decadence.[77] As she tells Mamrie, 'Vous allez […] faire ma toilette de mariée qui sera aussi ma toilette de morte' [You will […] dress me in my wedding gown, which will also be my burial shroud], recalling Hearn's imagery in the epigraph to this article of the South as a dead bride, dying at the moment of lost innocence and entry into the world.[78]

As the house of Saint-Ybars collapses around him, Pélasge's monologues turn more nihilistic; upon perceiving that the Sachem, the symbol of connection with the past, is dying, he embarks on an apocalyptic meditation:

> tout meurt, tout disparaît, c'est la loi. La terre elle-même, berceau et tombeau de tant d'êtres, aura sa fin. Une nuit viendra, nuit lugubre et glacée, où l'humanité, réduite à un petit nombre de familles, attendra vainement le retour du soleil, et sera ensevelie sous une pluie de neige. Mais qu'importe?
>
> [everything dies, everything disappears – that is the law. The earth itself, the cradle and tomb of so many beings, will reach its end. One night will come, a cold and gloomy night, when humanity, reduced to a small number of families, will await the return of the sun in vain and will be buried under an onslaught of snow. But what does it matter?][79]

This eschatological preoccupation, however, is an extension of the social and economic collapse of Louisiana, as represented by the reversal of fortune of the Saint-Ybars family. As disillusioned as Pélasge had been with plantation slavery, the aftermath of the war proves to provide no more hope, leading him to believe that: 'la Louisiane va s'engloutir dans un abîme de sang et de ruines' [Louisiana will be swallowed up in an abyss of blood and ruins].[80] Violence has begotten violence, and the sea of blood and ruination that is engulfing Louisiana echoes, affectively, the sea of the Gulf itself that, for du Quesnay and Hearn, laps menacingly at the shore.

The official end of the Saint-Ybars family, in a dramatic scene involving a murder-triple-suicide, including the suicides of Démon and Mamrie, in which clothing plays a central role – a bullet pierces through a 'gabrielle et chemise' [gabrielle and shirt], and a man is murdered as he is held by the tie – plunges Pélasge, the last man left on the wreckage of the former plantation, into

despair.[81] 'Il considérait sa vie comme finie, il se survivait', the narrative informs us, casting him as a superannuated relic of a world that will never return:

> Je n'ai plus rien à faire sur cette terre. […] je ressemble à un acteur, qui, après une représentation, quand tout le monde a quitté le théâtre, continue de se promener gravement sur la scène, dans le costume de son role.
>
> [He considered his life over; he had outlived himself. […] 'I no longer have anything to do on this earth. […] I am like an actor who, after a performance when everyone has left the theatre, continues to walk about gravely on the stage in the costume of his role.][82]

The 'costume' that Pélasge wears no longer matches the character; with the disappearance of the eponymous Saint-Ybars, he is dressed in the rags of nostalgia, creating a tension on the part of Mercier's narration that both celebrates the end of slavery and mourns the loss of Creole society. As Harlet and Rabalais suggest in their introduction to the new edition of the novel: '[l]a technique narrative qu'emploie Mercier démontre une lutte mentale et morale contre le legs de l'esclavage, l'inégalité raciale dans la société du Sud et la disparition imminente de la culture créole qui lui est chère' [the narrative technique used by Mercier demonstrates a mental and moral battle against the legacy of slavery, racial inequality in the society of the South, and the imminent disappearance of the Creole culture so dear to him].[83] Although the novel explicitly speaks to the inherent link between nostalgia and decadence, it ultimately seeks to allow a measure of hope in even the most complete of tragedies, a view supported by Barstad when she characterizes Démon's suicide as a 'martyre'.[84] This characterization of Démon's suicide is somewhat apt, although the concept of martyrdom is ideologically misapplied, as it makes of the murder-triple-suicide which concludes the novel an appropriate metaphor, all strata of Louisiana society falling upon its sword, killing itself out of the same stubbornness that had made it the richest of the 'states gone to sleep'.[85] Mercier, however, ends the novel with an appeal to progress, by having Nogolka return to request his presence in Europe to lead a fight against social inequality. And while the hope which returns to Pélasge at the end of the novel is undoubtedly a gesture towards a belief in human progress, it functions almost as a *deus ex machina* and transplants the locus of this progress to an unspecified elsewhere.

In spite of his personal efforts to maintain French thought in Louisiana, Mercier's pessimism shows through in the completeness of the ravages he describes in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars.* A later novel, and his final one, *Johnelle*, becomes even more pessimistic about the future of Creole society.[86] And ultimately, this preoccupation with decadence was justified to a certain extent: in 1916, the state of Louisiana banned the teaching of French in schools, and in 1923 the last French-language press, *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, closed its doors. Although decadent Louisianian literature is not limited to its francophone production, as this paper has shown, the sense of collapse of the old Creole order permeates the fin de siècle. And as the literature of the South more broadly began to be reconsidered in the early twentieth century, especially as William Faulkner burst onto the American literary scene in the 1920s with his early writings in New Orleans, the emergence of a Southern Gothic came to both eclipse and recapitulate the earlier Louisiana Gothic. By tracing this continual threat through the literature that directly links France and the American South, the decadence of Louisiana can take its place in both American and francophone letters, bringing to bear the epistemological, moral, and political implications of decadence on issues central to the South: poverty, race, religion, and the legacy of slavery feudalism. To conclude, I offer the ending of Faulkner's 1936 reflection on the influence of aristocratic decay, miscegenation, and regional stereotyping, *Absalom, Absalom!* As the novel concludes, one man, Shreve, observes to another, Quentin: 'The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years', recalling, unintendedly, the notion of Pélasge outliving himself after the collapse of the Saint-Ybars plantation.[87] In response, Quentin ends the novel on a suspect insistence of negation: 'I dont hate it', thinking, '*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*'[88] In theorizing a Southern decadence, I propose that by reconsidering preconceived notions of Southern literature as monolithically white, Protestant, and of only regional concern, we can disencumber it from political and cultural stereotypes and perceive it within a global framework. And, perhaps, we can stop hating it.

[1] Lafcadio Hearn, *Fantastics and Other Fancies,* ed. by Charles Woodward Hutson (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), p. 6.
[2] Catherine Savage Brosman, *Louisiana Creole Literature: A Historical Study* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 12.
[3] Thomas F. Haddox, *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 86.
[4] Désirée Martin, *Les Veillées d'une sœur; ou, Le Destin d'un brin de mousse* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2008), pp. 61-62.
[5] Ibid., p. 62. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
[6] Vladimir Jankélévitch, 'La Décadence', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 55.4 (1950), 337-69 (p. 337).
[7] Ibid.
[8] According to the OED, the word 'decadence' derives from the Medieval Latin neologism of *de* and *cadere*, meaning to fall away from. It arrived into English in the sixteenth century via French.
[9] Following on the periodizing work in the *Anthologie de poésie louisianaise du XIX^e siècle,* I have suggested a periodization of Louisiana literature that includes both a Romantic school and, to borrow a term from Mario Praz, a 'black Romanticism', heavily influenced by both American Gothic authors such as Poe and Hawthorne and French authors such as Gautier and Barbey d'Aurevilly. See my introduction to Charles Lemaître, *Rodolphe de Branchelièvre* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2023), pp. 7-24, as well as *Anthologie de poésie louisianaise du XIX^e siècle,* ed. by D. A. Kress, Margaret E. Mahoney, and Rebecca Skelton (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2010).
[10] In many respects, the origins of the decadent school, at least in a francophone context, can be traced to the watershed year of 1884, in which was published J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours,* Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus,* Élémir Bourges' *Le Crépuscule des dieux,* Joséphin Péladan's *Le Vice suprême,* and Maurice Barrès' journal *Tâches d'encre.*
[11] Jankélévitch, pp. 340-41.
[12] Auguste Viatte, *Histoire littéraire de l'Amérique française des origins à 1950* (Paris & Québec, P.U.F./P.U.L., 1954), pp. 242-75; and Bill Marshall, 'Francophone Gothic Melodramas', in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic,* ed. by Susan Castillo Street & Charles L. Crow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 215-28 (p. 216).
[13] Brosman, p. 97.
[14] Ibid., p. 98.
[15] Ibid., p. 99.
[16] Adolphe Lemercier du Quesnay, 'Un été à la Grand'Île', in *Contes et récits de la Louisiane créole, tome I* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2006), pp. 157-97 (p. 184).
[17] Ibid., p. 186.
[18] Ibid.
[19] In his article 'Fashion, France, and the Politics of Form', David Faflik analyses a nineteenth-century American play in which French fashions are lampooned, and his formalistic argument applies particularly well to this story of francophone Louisiana. He suggests, for example, that, 'The players are so beholden to 'French' fashion sense that they always already prioritize the narrow conventions of haute couture over individual deliberation and choice – whether formal, fashionable, or otherwise. Whatever forms they subscribe to become an ordering force', and to a certain extent, du Quesnay's depiction of wealthy members of antebellum Louisiana's planter class seeking fashion over safety adds a vital element to this analysis. They are depicted as being such slaves to fashion, particularly the French fashions that dominated in Louisiana's material dress culture at the time, that they are helpless to save themselves from destruction. The general lampooning of French fashion at this time that is highlighted by Faflik also serves to encode this story within the aristocracy of antebellum New Orleans, who considered themselves more aligned with France politically than even with the rest of the American South, just as it serves to situate this story within the broader context of the francophone Caribbean. David Faflik, 'Fashion, France, and the Politics of Form', *Arizona Quarterly,* 73.3 (2017), 49-71 (p. 53).
[20] Stephanie Pocock Boeninger, *Literary Drowning: Postcolonial Memory in Irish and Caribbean Writing* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020), p. 24.
[21] du Quesnay, p. 187.
[22] Sophie White has suggested that conspicuous material consumption, particularly in fashion, has been a defining characteristic of francophone New Orleans since its inception: 'New Orleans had been conceived as a city, and in key respects colonists strove to fulfill that vision of an ordered colonial city. One way they did so was through consumption. In response to a colonial environment marked by demographic dominance of enslaved Africans, elites and middling groups sought to reinforce and extend social cohesion through consumer and leisure activities such as shopping, and by echoing the material culture of their exact peers and kin in France.' Thus, this scene can be read as nature stripping off the defining pretense of Louisiana as a French colony and reducing her to her natural state. Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 226.
[23] Ibid., p. 188.

[24] Ibid.
[25] Boeninger, p. 3.
[26] At the end of Chopin's novel, the protagonist Edna Pontellier swims out to sea beyond her capacities, arguably committing suicide in an attempt at regaining freedom. Ironically, this scene also takes place at Grand Isle.
[27] du Quesnay, p. 195.
[28] Mary Gallagher, 'Lafcadio Hearn's American Writings and the Creole Continuum', in *American Creoles: The Francophone Caribbean and the American South,* ed. by Martin Munro and Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp. 19-39 (p. 21).
[29] Bernadette Lemoine, 'Lafcadio Hearn as an Ambassador of French Literature in the United States and in Japan', *Revue de littérature comparée,* 3.319 (2006), 299-317. However, it is via New Orleans that Hearn came to know the French proto-decadents, including Baudelaire's translations of Poe, as well as his fascination for stories and customs of the Far-East. For a biography of Hearn's time in New Orleans and the French Antilles, see Edward Larocque Tinker, *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1924), pp. 109-13.
[30] Lafcadio Hearn, *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1889), p. 12.
[31] Ibid., p. 170.
[32] Ibid., p. 4.
[33] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[34] Ibid., p. 45.
[35] Ibid..
[36] Ibid., p. 48.
[37] Ibid., p. 53.
[38] Ibid., pp. 56-57.
[39] Ibid., p. 87.
[40] Ibid., p. 98.
[41] Ibid., p. 186.
[42] Ibid., p. 142.
[43] Clark makes a direct link between tales about the quadroon as a young, sexualized woman and fictive depictions of the seraglio in the same time period. Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), p. 133.
[44] Kenneth Aslakson, 'The 'Quadroon-*Plaçage*' Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon', *Journal of Social History,* 45.3 (2012), 709-34 (pp. 724-25).
[45] Violet Harrington Bryan, *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature: Dialogues of Race and Gender* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. 17. This echoes, in many respects, Tinker's analysis of Hearn's response to the French Quarter:

> He had become supersaturated with the life of this quarter – its sights, sounds, psychology and traditions – its lack of comfort, its dank feeling of decadence and even its smells. He had exhausted the quarter's local colour and there followed a revulsion of feeling, – a positive dislike for that part of New Orleans which had once so aroused his enthusiasm. (Tinker, p. 190.)

[46] George W. Cable, *Madame Delphine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), p. 2. Also of note is the fact that in the French version of the novella published in Louisiana, *La Fille de la quarteronne: scènes de mœurs louisianaises*, the frame story, including the panoramic sweep over the decay of the French Quarter, is entirely omitted. It is not known if Cable himself translated the book or if it were the work of an unnamed translator. George Washington Cable, 'La Fille de la quarteronne: scènes de mœurs louisianaises', *La Sentinelle de Thibodaux,* 21 June to 16 August 1884.
[47] Cable, *Madame Delphine,* p. 2.
[48] Alexis de Tocqueville, 'Voyage en Amérique', *Œuvres complètes, tome I* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléïade, 2013), p. 180.
[49] Cable, p. 9.
[50] Whitney Nell Stewart suggests that fashion was one of the primary means by which free people of colour in the antebellum period were able to assert and maintain their social status, particularly in the multi-racial society of Louisiana that reigned in the early decades of the century. She posits, for example, that 'By overlooking or underplaying the importance of French material culture, scholars have necessarily overlooked the place of *gens de couleur libres* in the construction and exhibition of Frenchness […]. When we take seriously the material culture of New Orleans, *gens de couleur libres* appear at the center of Frenchness, thereby complicating the narrative about how and why cultural retention was so important to antebellum Franco-New Orleanians' Whitney Nell Stewart 'Fashioning Frenchness: *Gens de Couleur Libres* and the Cultural Struggle for Power in Antebellum New Orleans', *Oxford University Press Journal of Social History,* 51.3 (2018), 526-56 (p. 528).
Likewise, Léona Queyrouze, a Creole writer of the 1880s and 1890s, suggests in her unpublished manuscript *Silhouettes créoles* that the early part of the nineteenth century was a period in which modes of dress particular to Louisiana – most famously, the *tignon* headwrap – was in the process of becoming a universal aspect of fashion, not just limited to one racial group:

> À l'époque dont nous venons de parler, le *tignon* constituait, pour ainsi dire, la coiffure nationale, car il était non-seulement porté par toutes les femmes de couleur, mais adopté, à l'âge du déclin, par beaucoup de femmes de l'aristocratie qui se coiffaient, avec une savante coquetterie, de superbes madras à nuances éclatantes sous lesquels passaient les bandeaux encore noirs de leurs beaux cheveux. Les madras atteignaient souvent un prix exorbitant, et devenaient une parure d'un luxe aussi coûteux qu'élégant.
>
> [In the era about which we have just been speaking, the *tignon* constituted the national hairstyle, so to speak, because it was worn not only by all women of color but adopted, in older age, by many women of the aristocracy who crowned themselves with a knowledgeable coquetry with superb madras in startling colors, under which were the bands of their still-black hair. Madras often commanded an exorbitant price and became a luxury good that was as costly as it was elegant].

Léona Queyrouze (under the name Constant Beauvais), *Silhouettes créoles,* unpublished manuscript in the Léona Queyrouze Barel Papers collection, MSS. 1204, 1222, 1278, 1314, 1323, 1335 in the Special Collections of Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

[51]Cable, p. 37.

[52] Marni Reva Kessler, *Sheer Presence: The Veil in Manet's Paris* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xix.

[53] Cable, p. 101.

[54] Within the context of more canonical decadent texts, the politics of the veil are played out wittily by Oscar Wilde in his short story 'The Sphinx Without a Secret' (1887). In it, a woman surrounds herself with an air of mystery and is witnessed ducking hurriedly, and veiled, into a building. After her death, it is revealed that her eponymous 'secret' was simply a love of creating an air of mystery. Oscar Wilde, 'The Sphinx Without a Secret', in *The Complete Oscar Wilde* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1996), pp. 209-12.

[55] Cable, p. 66.

[56] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[57] Roland Barthes, 'Strip-tease', in *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1957), pp. 165-68 (p. 166).

[58] Oscar Wilde, *Epigrams: Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (Boston and New York: C. T. Brainard, 1909), p. 143.

[59] Cable, p. 67.

[60] Sidonie de La Houssaye, *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle-Orléans, tome I: Octavia la quarteronne, suivi de Violetta la quarteronne* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2006), p. 79.

[61] Cable, p. 70.

[62] Ibid., p. 122.

[63] Ibid., p. 78.

[64] Bryan, pp. 12-14.

[65] Guri Ellen Barstad, '"Vivre dans la verité": la lutte pour la vérité subjective dans deux romans d'Alfred Mercier', *Excavatio,* XXIV (2014), 1-9 (p. 4).

[66] This idea, not original to Mercier, echoes the analysis of Alexis de Tocqueville in *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), in which he stands on the banks of the Ohio River and compares the slave society of the South to Northern industrialism. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, tome II* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1848), pp. 298-99.

[67] Alfred Mercier, *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars; ou, Maîtres et esclaves en Louisiane: récit social* (Shreveport: Tintamarre, 2022), p. 45.

[68] Jennifer Gipson makes the comparison between Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), based in part on her fieldwork in Louisiana. Both mark the fact that 'the boundaries between folklore and literature can be porous, so too can the analytical', suggesting that part of the difficultly, or rather, the potential, in analyzing this novel lies in the fact that it does not easily fit into genres or aesthetics schools. (See Jennifer Gipson, 'Fiction as a Forum for Critical Reflections on Folklore: The Case of Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881)', *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* (2016), 5-20). As Lawrence Rosenwald has suggested: '[W]hat distinguishes it as a novel is chiefly the meticulous, almost sociolinguistic care Mercier takes to have all of his characters, both Black and White, speak the languages they most likely would have spoken in the situations in which he presents them.' (See Lawrence Rosenwald, 'Alfred Mercier's Polyglot Plantation Novel of Louisiana' in *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni,* ed. by Marc Shell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 219-37 (p. 230)).

[69] Mercier, p. 92.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., p. 111.

[72] Ibid., p. 145.

[73] Ibid., p. 148.

[74] Ibid., p. 180.

[75] Ibid., p. 23.

[76] Ibid., p. 182.

[77] Ibid., p. 190.

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., pp. 196-97. Mercier's final novel *Johnelle*, of a decade later, would prove even more apocalyptic in tone, as in it he metaphorizes the loss of francophone Creole Louisiana to abortion. See, for example, Ryan Atticus Doherty, 'Johnelle apparut: le fantôme du non-né dans *Johnelle* d'Alfred Mercier', in *Godot(s)*, ed. by Olga Gancevici and Alexandru Diaconescu (Suceava: Editura Universității Ștefan cel Mare Suceava, 2023, forthcoming).
[80] Mercier, p. 214.
[81] Ibid., pp. 258-60.
[82] Ibid., p. 274.
[83] Ibid., p. 11. Increasing racial hatred even becomes one of the sources of Pélasge's despair in the novel: 'l'esprit de caste est plus prononcé qu'il ne l'était du temps de l'esclavage' [the sense of caste was more pronounced than it had been in the time of slavery]. Ibid., p. 214.
[84] Barstad, p. 9.
[85] See the de Tocqueville quote in note 66 in which he refers to the South by saying, 'la société est endormie'.
[86] See my forthcoming article on *Johnelle* referenced in note 79.
[87] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), p. 377.
[88] Ibid., p. 378. Punctuation and emphasis as in the original.