
 Editor's Introduction

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That avatar of nineteenth-century American optimism, Walt Whitman (1819-1892), opened his *Leaves of Grass* with the lines:

I CELEBRATE myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
 I lean and loafe at my ease ... observing a spear of summer grass.¹

Having lived for a season (January to May) in New Orleans in 1848, before decamping back to Brooklyn, and then later “staying” – as Southerners used to say, and in fact still do say here in the Deep South – in Washington D.C. long enough to “loafe” in those sweltering months of an Upper South summer, Whitman unwittingly evokes for us the old antebellum ideal of *otium cum dignitate* (“leisure with dignity”).² A century and a half later, in our hurried (if still sweltering) summer time one might well respond, “if only!”

In this, our Summer issue, we discern a theme not of Whitmanesque loafing but rather of a busy reinvention, a hurly-burly re-fashioning of individual and collective identity; a play of Tricksters in the shimmer of summer heat, the threat of thunderstorms on the horizon offering the promise of redemptive rain.

We offer here a combination of scholarly and belles-lettrestic work, from Clarence Mohr's suggestive study of the dual invention of “the southern university” and “the idea of the South” in the decades after the Civil War, and Wendy Kurant's consideration of how Mary Boykin Chesnut revised her depiction of a key character in her *Diary* as southern women became the locus of the Lost Cause ideology; to Lawrence Jackson's effort to untangle the brambles of his family's history of newfound freedom and what it means through the generations; to the briarpatch itself, or rather, to the *zéronce* of Creole Louisiana and its trickster tales of *Compair Lapin* (Rabbit), *Compair Bouki*, and the others including, notably, *Compair Tortie* (Tortoise), as collected and translated by another restless and prodigious nineteenth-century man of letters, Alcée Fortier (1856-1914). Born into great wealth and privilege – he was the grandson

of the antebellum sugar-planter and grandée Valcour Aimé (1798-1867), now largely forgotten – just as the chiaroscuro of the *ancien régime* faced the bright lights of a dawning (and daunting) new age, Fortier is an historical example for French-Creole Louisiana of what Professor Mohr considers more generally for the South.³

Today, however, Fortier seems increasingly antiquarian, increasingly a musty relic of a bygone era, and yet his work such as *Louisiana Folk-Tales* (1895) deserves a re-reading.⁴ A leisurely drive up and down the so-called “German Coast” upriver from New Orleans, the region of the most intensive settlement of the biggest French-Creole antebellum sugar plantations (i.e., St. Charles, St. John, and St. James parishes), that is, up LA 18 on the “West Bank” and past plantations such as Evergreen, Laura, and Oak Alley, and then back down LA 44 along the “East Bank” (today noticeably whiter and self-consciously “Cajun”) through places like Convent, La Place, and Destrehan, though certainly worth a lazy summer’s afternoon, yields only a single public historical reference to Aimé, and not one to Fortier.

Because of Fortier’s purblindness to the centrality of African influences in these tales and in the local worlds they evoke, and his residual racism, we are particularly happy to have two modern scholars respond to this selection of Louisiana trickster tales: one, Ibrahima Seck, a Senegalese historian who also works in Afro-Louisiana history; and the other, J. Akuma-Kalu Njoku, a Nigerian-American professor of folklore.

In this summer issue of our journal, then, there is a kind of journey, if not one of ‘loafing’ nor of ‘leisure with dignity’. And it calls to mind another of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* poems, oft-quoted and even more typically American than even he could ever have imagined, especially in summer, “Song of the Open Road.” Let me close with the first stanza:

1

AFOOT and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me, leading wherever I
 choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune—I myself am
 good-fortune;
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more,
 need nothing,
 Strong and content, I travel the open road.

The earth—that is sufficient;
 I do not want the constellations any nearer;
 I know they are very well where they are;
 I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

Still here I carry my old delicious burdens;
 I carry them, men and women—I carry them with me
 wherever I go;
 I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them;
 I am fill'd with them, and I will fill them in return.⁵

NOTES

¹ 1st edition (Brooklyn, NY: Walt Whitman, 1855), p.13. Available online at The Walt Whitman Archive, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/> (Accessed 29 July 2009).

² For a detailed chronology of Whitman's life, see "Chronology of Whitman's Life," The Walt Whitman Archive, online at <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/biography/chronology.html> (Accessed 29 July 2009).

³ Fortier's university appointments were, at first, in the "Preparatory Department" of the old University of Louisiana (which had failed in 1860 and was reorganized in 1878), in 1880, and then in its again-reorganized successor, Tulane University, from 1884 through his death in 1914.

⁴ As significant as Fortier was in the postbellum construction of the print-based "French-Creole Louisiana" culture, he has been surprisingly neglected. He still awaits a biographer, and even a historical marker in St. James Parish, where his family's plantations were and where he was born. For a start, however, see the special issue by Jeanne E. Crombie, "Professor Alcée Fortier 1856-1914," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 55, 1 (1972), pp.vii-xi, 1-62. The bulk of Crombie's research for this special issue was done in 1940-1941 (*Ibid.*, pp.vii-viii).

⁵ *Leaves of Grass*, 4th ed. (New York: William E. Chapin and Co., Printers, 1867), p.225. Whitman's first edition (1855) did not include this poem. It was introduced in the 2nd edition (NY: Walt Whitman, 1856, p.223), as "Poem of the Road"; and then significantly revised under the same title in the 3rd edition (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860, p.315). For the 4th edition, Whitman changed the title, and slightly revised the text; over the next three editions (1870-71, 1881-82, 1891-92), he kept the same title (though he turned the last stanza of the opening section into a parenthetical statement). For digital copies of all seven American editions, plus much else, see The Walt Whitman Archive, a remarkable digital resource, online at <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/> (Accessed 21 July 2009).