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Florian Freitag. *Popular New Orleans: The Crescent City in Periodicals, Theme Parks, and Opera, 1875-2015*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 356 pages, £120. ISBN 9780367437718

- 1 In the crowded field of post-Katrina scholarship on New Orleans, some books have celebrated the city's distinctive history, literary corpus, and value system (Abrahams; Azzarello; Berry; Cannon; Piazza; Sublette), while others have debunked the myth of New Orleans exceptionalism. Prominent among the latter has been Thomas Jessen Adams and Matt Sakakeeny's edited collection *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity* (2019), which successively analyzed the way writers, travelers, and historians contributed to the early construction of the city and its denizens as *sui generis* ("The Invention of a Romanticized New Orleans"), nuanced commonly-held narratives about the city's longstanding sexual permissiveness or unique class and race relations ("The Invention of a Romanticized New Orleans"), and described New Orleans as an emblem of the postindustrial neoliberal city ("Predictive City?").
- 2 Though the book does not appear in *Popular New Orleans's* extensive list of references, Florian Freitag shares Adams & Sakakeeny's twin desire to "de-exceptionalize" (9) New Orleans and to account for its hold over the popular imagination. Beyond this thematic affinity, however, the two volumes are quite different. In lieu of a dramatic face-off between touristic depictions of the city and "reality," Freitag—a historian specialized in transnational studies of U.S. culture—concentrates on the transformations of New Orleans's image in popular culture over the course of the last 150 years.

- 3 In the opening chapter (“*Scribner’s Illustrated New Orleans*”), the author traces the origins of the New Orleans mythos in the illustrated, local-color writings of Edward King, George Washington Cable, Grace King, Lafcadio Hearn, and others published in various issues of *Scribner’s Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People* (known as *The Century* after 1881) between November 1870 and October 1893. He stresses the role that periodicals—which Richard Ohmann (21) termed “the first national mass medium”—played in the popularization of New Orleans as a destination for tourists, and thus takes issue with historians and sociologists like Anthony Stanonis, J. Mark Souther, and Kevin Fox Gotham, who have dated the branding of New Orleans to the 1920s, the 1940s, and the 1960s, respectively. The argument is convincing, though one could also argue that the reputation of New Orleans as an anomalous city originated in the early American colonial period—which would partly explain the connection between Latinness and distinctiveness that Freitag rightly pinpoints in Cable’s and King’s writings.
- 4 In the next section, entitled “Disney’s Immersive New Orleans,” Freitag analyzes the gradual translation of “*Scribner’s Illustrated New Orleans*” into the New Orleans-themed spaces of the “Disneyzone” (144). From Disneyland’s “New Orleans Street” and “New Orleans Square” to the New Orleans-themed area of Tokyo Disneyland and Walt Disney World’s “Port Orleans—French Quarter,” Freitag argues that Disney’s immersive spaces have consistently depicted “the city’s past as French and the city’s French[ness] as past” (13). More generally, they have created a (physically *and* metaphorically) sanitized version of New Orleans that appeals not only to tourists who have never visited the Crescent City but also (ironically) to New Orleanians searching for an improved copy of their hometown. Freitag’s contention that Disney’s brand of “restorative nostalgia” (Svetlana Boym, qtd 338) has affected the evolution of the New Orleans urban landscape itself—turning it into a copy of a copy—is rooted in copious, solid evidence.
- 5 The book’s final section hypothesizes that in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, live performances—including the “native” (234) medium of carnival parades and opera—thoroughly reconfigured the popular image of New Orleans. Moving away from an image of the city as simply “French” or “different,” *Wading Home: A New Orleans Opera* (2015), especially, stressed “the representative Americanness of the city” by presenting displacement and dispossession as “ubiquitous experiences for African-Americans both before and after Katrina, as well as both in the Southern cityscape and in the rural South” (14). Though it is always risky to generalize based on just a few examples, the idea that an opera set in post-Katrina New Orleans may herald a new, popular understanding of New Orleans as emblematic rather than abnormal is alluring.
- 6 Indeed, what Freitag’s sample may lack in size (the book is made up of three case studies and therefore engages with only a fraction of the thousands of New Orleans-themed cultural productions), it amply compensates in critical depth. The artefacts that have been selected are so carefully connected with other cultural productions and so solidly anchored to the social, political, and cultural context of their times that patterns can indeed be identified, e.g. the correlated tendency to “pastify” and “Frenchify” the city in late nineteenth-century popular culture, as opposed to the “nationalization” of the New Orleans narrative in the post-Katrina period; or the feedback loops between local-color or “Disneyfied” depictions of New Orleans and actual changes in the city’s fabric (e.g. increased tourism, gentrification, etc.). Freitag is careful to recognize that there have always been “several popular ‘New Orleanses’”

(337) and that none of the narratives about the city has ever been hegemonic. Still, he convincingly argues that preservation, which aims to erase the passage of time and tends to naturalize power structures and inequalities, is slowly being replaced by “critical nostalgia” (Shannon Lee Dawdy, qtd 338) in recent popular depictions of the city.

- 7 While *Popular New Orleans* does a great job of tracing the evolution of the Crescent City’s representations in popular culture, I would argue that it makes an even more valuable contribution to theoretical/methodological debates about what is popular culture, why it matters, and how it should be approached.
- 8 In his introduction, for instance, Freitag makes a strong case for including opera in the realm of popular culture—after all, *Wading Home: A New Orleans Opera* was presented “in English, for free, and in a socially ‘neutral’ venue,” and it dealt “with a highly relatable topic” (5). Conversely, he withholds the label “popular” from certain aspects of the “Disneyzone” reserved to a VIP clientele. To him, the contours of popular culture may be blurry, but they are largely shaped by four factors: “material or physical accessibility”; “intellectual or cognitive accessibility”; “availability of various modes of reception”; and “access to production” (5).
- 9 Later in the book, the author persuasively argues in favor of a holistic approach to nineteenth-century periodical print culture, one that takes illustrations seriously—*Scribner’s* and other monthlies were, after all, “*Gesamtkunstwerk[e]*”, i.e. total artworks (105)—, situates magazines in a specific production context, and does not gloss over the issue of reception. The “rhizomatic” (12), “intermedial” (50) turn that Freitag champions allows to identify the various ways in which the local-color stories and illustrations published in *Scribner’s/Century* “call[ed] and respond[ed]” (Mark Noonan, qtd 29) to other literary, journalistic and artistic depictions of New Orleans published in the same or in other issues of the magazine. It also enables him to confirm the centrality of George Washington Cable within the *Scribner’s/Century* interpersonal network. Indeed, with the exception of the magazine’s staff, the New Orleans-born writer was “connected to more individuals within this network than anyone else” (49). Finally, it provides a window into the way a northern metropolitan imaginary produced a generation of magazine-toting audiences who came to New Orleans to “see the elephant,” (Campanella) thus reifying the city’s reputation “when their preconceived expectations were inevitably confirmed (138).”
- 10 In Chapter 2, Freitag demonstrates the usefulness of looking at theme parks as palimpsests in which past elements are never totally erased and are instead recombined with newer elements to produce hybrid forms conveying complex messages. His longitudinal analysis of New Orleans-themed Disney theme parks and resorts allows him to escape from the “textualism” of much research on immersive spaces and to connect it with other disciplines such as urban studies and social/cultural history.
- 11 Chapter 3 advocates a similar departure from textualist approaches to opera and reveals the potential of adopting a “performance studies” outlook on the genre. Freitag’s investigation into the reception of the Dallas premiere of *Wading Home*, in particular, addresses the tricky issue of the efficacy of performance on the audience and eloquently suggests that drama can turn into a “utopian performative” that “rehearses” political action (Jill Dolan qtd 244).

- 12 All in all, this is a first-rate monograph that furthers theoretical and historical scholarship on New Orleans while having clear implications for academic conversations in a number of fields, including urban history, periodical studies, theme park studies, and performance studies. It would make an ideal text for a graduate-level course on the history of urban tourism titled, say, “Imagining the U.S. City.”

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