The View from Here: The Tempest and Race in New Orleans

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An early twentieth-century painter in New Orleans chooses to depict scenes from William Shakespeare’s The Tempest.1 Twenty years later, another New Orleans-based artist photographs the paintings; a decade after that, the same photographer names two more of his photographs ‘Caliban, Number One’ and ‘Caliban, Number Two’.2 Such literary allusions in art are not merely tributes, but rather, as Peter Erickson asserts, reimaginings, reworkings of the old Shakespearean material to grapple with present concerns.3 As Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi have emphasized, Shakespeare’s plays are ‘not singular and stable, but multiple and fluid’, experienced differently in different contexts.4 The same holds true for criticism: Arthur L. Little, Jr. and Ian Smith have found discussing Shakespeare alongside recent police shootings of unarmed black men, women, and children in the United States allows us to question white privilege inherent in contemporary life and as scholars, learners, and teachers in our critical and professional practices in academia.5 Often read as engaged with the European colonial enterprise in the New World, The Tempest’s exploration of race and enslavement continues to compel readers and playgoers to think through issues of privilege and the blind-spots

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1 Throughout, I use the term ‘the South’ to refer to the southern region of the United States. ‘The Deep South’ refers to those areas of the South that relied on plantation slavery in the pre—Civil War era.

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-- neglect, willful ignorance, and exploitation -- on which such privilege thrives. To read *The Tempest* through the lens of the *Tempest*-themed art of the two aforementioned Southern artists, then, is to examine a region grappling with a long history of slavery, racial segregation, and institutional and personal racism just at a point as we witness a surge in white nationalism throughout the United States and Europe. Such a reading is all the more relevant as many New Orleanians have continued to question the ongoing legacy of white supremacy and called for the removal of the city's memorials in honour of Confederate generals.

Unlike the artists discussed by Erickson in his *Citing Shakespeare*, the painter and the photographer in question were both white in a segregated South. My intention is not to (further) privilege these white perspectives on *The Tempest* but rather to dislodge them from a seeming ‘white neutrality’. Rather than disinterested aesthetic statements, I see these works of art and *The Tempest* itself as involved in the construction of whiteness or rather ‘whitenesses’. George Yancy suggests that because it sustains itself on scapegoating and degrading those considered ‘not white’, whiteness is an ongoing project always situated ‘on the edge of disintegration’. As such whiteness is riddled with anxiety, constantly constructing and reconstructing itself to secure its privilege. Although focused on the ambiguously raced Caliban, the work of these two New Orleans-based artists, divided by decades but tied to one another by race, place, and an interest in *The Tempest*, opens a space to think critically about the construction of whiteness in the play and in the Deep South.

The *Tempest*-themed photographs, four of them in all, were taken by New Orleans-based photographer Clarence John Laughlin (1905–1980). Laughlin is best known for his surreal photomontages of scenes from the Deep South of the United States — Southern gothic architecture overrun by Spanish moss, ghostly figures haunting abandoned buildings, as well as stark black-and-white photographs focusing on everyday life in Louisiana. Laughlin’s fellow Louisianan, William Weeks Hall, praised Laughlin: ‘His achievement consists in the fact that these prints are not photographs of these places and these things, but are photographed symbols of his thoughts about them’. Hall continues, ‘His New Orleans is also the Paris of Meryon, the Bermuda of *The Tempest*, and the Brussels of Ensor’. In looking at Laughlin’s *Tempest* photographs, then, one is looking at not only Laughlin’s thoughts about


Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* but also his thoughts about New Orleans in the 1950s and early 1960s.

The two earliest of Laughlin’s *Tempest*-themed photographs are of paintings by New Orleans-based painter Charles Woodward Hutson (1840–1936), known for his coupling of a folk-art aesthetic with his esoteric knowledge of literature and western culture. Building on the detail that Caliban’s mother, Sycorax, had been exiled to the island from Algiers, both paintings present Caliban as having a dark complexion. Moreover, both depict the pre-history of the play when Caliban and Prospero were, according to Caliban, at peace with one another. Whatever Caliban’s motivation for appealing to an idyllic past, the imagery evidently interested Hutson. But Hutson’s *Tempest* paintings are troubling. One painting depicts Caliban showing Prospero the island; the other shows Caliban leaping over a spring as Prospero watches. In this latter painting, Prospero has a swastika on his robe. One might suppose that Hutson was drawing on his knowledge of ancient civilizations, but Hutson made these paintings in 1930, when the Nazi Party of Germany had unfurled its flag bearing the now familiar symbol of fascism and anti-Semitism for all to see. As a young man, Hutson had been a Confederate soldier in the American Civil War. After the war, he taught modern languages at several southern universities. During that time, he wrote *The Beginnings of Civilization*, a book that posited that Aryans were simply superior humans and that Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas were not wholly capable of developing advanced civilizations. He went so far as to suggest that slavery might be necessary for civilizations to advance. It wasn’t until late in life that Hutson retired to New Orleans where he took up painting. Steeped in the western canon of literature, Hutson’s thoughts on language and culture suggest that there may be no direct correlation between ethical thinking and an engagement in the humanities.

Despite choosing to live in one of the United States, it seems clear (as abhorrent as it is) that for Hutson, *The Tempest* was a play that confirmed his belief in the inherent superiority of white Europeans and the necessity of enslaving Africans. Hutson was backward looking, longing for a pre-war South. In his reading of *The Tempest*, he identifies with Caliban’s nostalgia for a time before the play even begins. The identification is somewhat ironic, but there is a congruence between early modern European fantasies about colonial encounters and the old South’s myths about itself, the shared belief that Europeans might—or even ought to—
dominate others. Laughlin photographed the paintings in 1952. As Hall suggests, *The Tempest* (among other works of art) held a special attraction for the avant-garde photographer. The play’s island with its successive waves of occupation resonated with Laughlin’s experience in New Orleans and its traces of indigenous cultures, French and Spanish colonization, African, Caribbean, and Creole influences, and immigrants from Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. In photographing Hutson’s paintings, Laughlin was confronting a reading of *The Tempest* shaped by white fear about his city’s changing political dynamic.

Laughlin took his other *Tempest*-based photographs in 1962. The years that span the photographer’s interest in *The Tempest*, 1952–1962, were punctuated by overt resistance to long-standing white supremacy: the 1953 bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana which created the template for the more well-known bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama; Brown v. Board of Education in 1954; reactions to the 1955 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi; and countless small- and large-scale civil rights protests in and around the city and throughout the South. Laughlin’s New Orleans was among the epicenters of the civil rights movement and white supremacist backlash – In 1896, New Orleans became the launchpad of Plessy v. Ferguson, the case that resulted in the Supreme Court ruling that racial segregation in the South was (for the moment) deemed constitutional. By 1898, Louisiana had modified its state constitution to suppress African American voting rights. When schools were desegregated, African American students faced harassment and violence at the hands of white supremacists, and a riot in protest of desegregation took place in November of 1960. It is no wonder, then, that the Freedom Ride, launched in Washington DC in 1961, had planned New Orleans as its final destination. Part of Laughlin’s attraction to *The Tempest* must have been the way it allowed him to think through the turbulent struggles of the moment in contrast with the idyllic plantation South of Hutson’s imagination.

Laughlin’s 1962 *Tempest*-based photographs, ‘Caliban, Number One’ and ‘Caliban, Number Two’, offer different angles on the same architectural feature, an *atlantid*, a sculpted male figure used as a column or other architectural support. In this case, the figure is a man in a toga, hunched over, muscles strained under the weight of the building. He clutches his head in pain and

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his face expresses terrified agony. The image embodies Caliban’s response to Prospero’s violence and threats of violence throughout the play. In the first scene with Caliban, Prospero rails,

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tonight thou shalt have cramps,  
Side-stitches, that shall pen thy breath up; urchins  
Shall forth at vast of night that they may work,  
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched  
As thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging  
Than bees that made ’em.11
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In the final scene, Caliban laments, ‘I shall be pinch’d to death’ (5.1.276). Under Prospero’s regime, fear, pain, and hard labour are never far from Caliban.

Taken in sequence, the photographs follow the Caliban-plot of act one of The Tempest: Prospero and Caliban were, we are told, once on good terms (the Hutson paintings); then, as Prospero explains, Caliban attempted to rape Miranda, so Prospero enslaved him (the atlantid photographs). From another perspective, however, the materiality of Laughlin’s atlantid Calibans in their agony undermine Hutson’s focus on the myth of détente between Caliban and his swastika-wearing Prospero. The architectural detail is from a women’s dormitory at Mundelein College, now part of Illinois’ Loyola University, Chicago. Perhaps Laughlin was thinking of how Prospero asserts that he enslaved Caliban as punishment for his attempted rape of Miranda. Still, Prospero’s allegations serve Prospero: the attempted rape leaves Prospero feeling justified in enslaving Caliban, and the same story legitimates his careful regulation of his daughter’s sexuality and his temporary exploitation of Ferdinand.12 In the end, just as the atlantid holds up part of the building, so Caliban’s labour makes Prospero’s lifestyle possible; he relies on Caliban’s servitude. Dehumanized, the response of the exploited Caliban is like that of the stony atlantids – terrified agony and suffering. Thus, the second set of photographs calls into question the fantasy of the first set. The younger New Orleans artist appropriates and undermines the work of the elder Confederate-soldier-turned-painter.

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It may be that Laughlin planned to use the photographs for one of his montages. Bringing the two perspectives into dialectic tension may have proven too much for the surrealist photographer, however. In the introduction to his 1948 book *Ghosts Along the Mississippi*, Laughlin suggests that old plantation houses, the mansions built for wealthy white slavers, speak to him of a more certain time with ‘the tongue of imperative melancholy’. Despite being a much more progressive artist, Laughlin shared with Hutson a nostalgia for the ‘old South’, and there is no way to embrace that vision of the South without tacitly accepting its oppressive and antiquated ideologies of race and class. Laughlin then wrestles with the incompatibility of his upbringing in the South and his more cosmopolitan understanding of slavery. Laughlin ultimately likens the slave plantation system to modern day fascism but not before asserting various Southern fantasies about caring plantation owners and the erotic lives of the enslaved.\(^{13}\) Laughlin’s *atlantid* photographs were taken more than a decade after his conflicted thinking about slavery in *Ghosts*. By then he had probably more clearly come to reject Hutson’s white supremacy. Laughlin’s photographs of the region’s black and Creole cottagers emphasize their dignity, their right to be the focus of his camera. There is something voyeuristic and potentially commodifying in these photographs, but for his examination of the dehumanizing enslavement of men and women, Laughlin chose to photograph not an exploited black body but a body of stone. As such, Laughlin at least partially avoids what David Marriott describes as the exploitation of black bodies as ‘distorted and fantasmatic images of white desire’.\(^ {14}\) If anything, the white photographer wanted to complicate the oppressive white desire of artists like Hutson with the stone cold brutality of slavery in the image of the *atlantid*. Still, both artists use the figure of Caliban as enslaved African to form their own subject positions, their own sense of what it meant to be white in the Deep South.

In photographing Hutson’s paintings, Laughlin may well have preserved what he sought to critique (and in writing about the paintings I may have done the same). But liberating critique requires staring down ugly oppression. Such was the case more recently in New Orleans around the status of the city’s various memorials: due to the sustained organizing efforts of Take ’Em Down NOLA, monuments to white supremacy throughout the city are starting to be removed.\(^ {15}\) Take ’Em Down NOLA led marches through the

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\(^{15}\) NOLA is a common abbreviation for New Orleans, Louisiana. Please note the focus here on the work of the organizers of Take ’Em Down NOLA, not the politicians who have attempted to capitalize on their success.
city stopping at each monument to discuss the racist history behind the statues, most of which were erected during the Reconstruction Era as an anxious attempt to reassert the dominance of the city’s white population over African American families. The monuments (and their recent defenders) reflect a combination of white narcissism and at the same time fragility about what it might mean to achieve equality, to share resources, and to cede decision-making to a more pluralistic democracy. Not unlike Hutson’s preference for the imagined pre-history of *The Tempest*, the supporters of the monuments imagined an unproblematic relationship between the descendants of enslaved peoples and statues commemorating slaveholders as ‘great men’. The first monument to come down celebrated a white supremacist attack on the city’s first integrated police force. More spectacularly, the towering figure of Confederate General Robert E. Lee was removed from the end of Saint Charles Avenue. Fittingly, all that remains is an empty pedestal. As Take 'Em Down NOLA organizer Angela Kinlaw puts it, ‘We believe that symbols that honour and celebrate those who oppressed others during the course of history have no place in public space and ought to be removed’. It should be noted that those involved in Take 'Em Down NOLA are not solely interested in symbols – the organization has been instrumental in drawing attention to toxic waste buried at Gordon Plaza, and many of the same individuals regularly attend meetings of the New Orleans People’s Assembly, which has focused on collective action to change material conditions in the city.

How might this more recent regional context change how one reads *The Tempest* in New Orleans? If, as I suggest above, the construction and later defense of Confederate monuments stems from not only a white desire to intimidate others but also apprehensiveness about whiteness itself, we might well turn to analyse Prospero’s construction of whiteness motivated by his own anxious assertion of power over others. Early and late in *The Tempest*, Prospero tells the story of Sycorax, his predecessor on the island. Sycorax, he explains, was a ‘foul witch’ exiled to the island from Algiers (1.2.258; 265).

‘Foul’ registers here not only as a moral judgment but also, as is so often the case in early English texts, as an appraisal of complexion and relative attractiveness in contrast with ‘fair’, an adjective reserved for the likes of the king’s daughter, Claribel. Sycorax, Prospero explains, used her magic to enslave Ariel, and when the spirit refused a particular order, she imprisoned him in ‘a cloven pine’ (1.2.277). Prospero further alleges that Sycorax mated with the devil to produce Caliban (1.2.320). Prospero’s knowledge of Sycorax is at the very least second-hand, if not largely invented. Sycorax was dead by the time Prospero arrived on the island, and it seems unlikely that among her books, there might have been a diary describing her alleged tryst with the devil. It also seems doubtful that Caliban would know much about his mother’s exile or describe her as ‘foul’ or ‘damned’ without Prospero’s own prompting. The only candidate who might have informed him of Sycorax is Ariel, but Ariel is precisely the first character to whom Prospero tells the story of Sycorax, and he does so in a question-and-answer format reminiscent of a catechism, a kind of indoctrination into a very specific belief system. Whether Prospero’s account is accurate or not, it is clear that he sees the story as useful in asserting his own identity and control.

At the end of the play, when he confronts Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonso, it seems important to Prospero to tell the story of Sycorax again, this time emphasizing the extent of her power. In both instances, Prospero is keen to emphasize his own might and at the same time to differentiate himself from the witch who preceded him. Prospero frames himself as the ‘good magus’ who freed Ariel and forgave Alonso and Antonio, not at all like the ‘foul witch’ of Algiers. But this construction of Prospero’s whiteness is always on the brink of disintegration: for all his harping on about the very wicked Sycorax, Prospero seems uncomfortably similar to his ‘foul’ predecessor. Both were exiled to the island and exploit Ariel. Following Sycorax’s example, Prospero threatens to confine Ariel in a tree. Prospero describes Sycorax’s ‘unmitigable rage’ and envy (1.2.276, 258), but throughout the play, we witness Prospero’s own fury, resentment, and desire for revenge. And Sycorax’s source of power, the magic she derives from her books, is also Prospero’s jealously guarded source of power. Prospero’s story of Sycorax, then, is really about the ‘white magician’ appealing to white male privilege.

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18 Claribel is described as ‘the King’s fair daughter’ (2.1.72). On the various meanings of ‘fair’ in Shakespeare, see Hall, “These Bastard Signs.”

19 For a fuller discussion of these parallels, see Margaret de Grazia, ‘The Tempest: Gratuitous Movement or Action Without Kibes and Pinches’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 14 (1981), 249–65 (pp. 255–56).

In his own version of events, what’s important to Prospero is not the pains he’s caused Caliban but Prospero’s ‘pains/Humanely taken’ to supposedly nurture Caliban (4.1.189). As my students and I note, counter-narratives like Caliban’s or Ariel’s are soliloquized or simply shouted down by the would-be magus. Only he can rightfully wield magic; only he can enslave; only he can threaten and abuse. Prospero seems to argue that even when his actions are substantially similar to those of Sycorax, they are to be judged by a different standard.

Other of Prospero’s stories have a similar aim. As he recounts his exile, Prospero explains that his brother Antonio and his co-conspirators ‘With colours fairer painted their foul ends’ (1.2.143) – they seemed to be merciful when they were in fact cruel and unjust. The emphasis on ‘fair’ and ‘foul’ (and the feminizing ‘painted’) rhetorically connects Antonio with the ‘foul witch’ of the island. This racialized discourse of usurpation insinuates that Antonio is a poor match for the place Prospero earlier described as ‘fair Milan’ (1.2.126). Prospero’s description of Antonio’s duplicity, moreover, constructs the unpainted Prospero along with the king’s children as the fairest (the most virtuous and whitest) of the play. From his first entry on the stage all the way to the betrothal of his daughter to the prince, Prospero anxiously pursues a construction of whiteness through a self-aggrandizing narrative that disparages those he exploits as he secures wealth and power for himself and his daughter. Thus, the union of Miranda and Ferdinand is deemed a ‘Fair encounter’ that will result in ‘fair issue’ (3.1.74; 4.1.24).21

At the close of the play, Prospero promises the king he will help pass the time of the voyage back to Europe with once again recounting his life’s story. This may seem like a victory lap for the newly restored duke whose lineage is now entangled with that of the king of Naples, but the construction of whiteness/fairness with all its moral and racial implications is never settled. White supremacy requires silencing the exploited and celebrating exploiters, painting fair foul ends. Thus, Hutson painted a frolicsome Caliban happily leaping before Prospero – a scene from The Tempest that never in fact appears on stage. It is the same spirit that leads defenders of Confederate monuments in New Orleans to attribute an abstract ‘greatness’ to Confederate generals when in fact they merely lament the waning of a system of institutionalized racism. Take ’Em Down NOLA has recently announced its new initiative, Build ’Em Up NOLA, aiming at the establishment of new monuments that more accurately and ethically reflect the history of the struggles of the people of New Orleans. The project has begun with the publication of the zine

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21 One may reasonably suppose an intended contrast of the ‘fair issue’ of Miranda and Ferdinand with the imagined children of Miranda and Caliban or Claribel and the King of Tunis. The play is framed by a potential loss of whiteness.
Roots Rising featuring essays, interviews, poetry, and artwork by local activists.

The inaugural issue begins with ‘Grounded by Sky’, a poem by A Scribe Called Quess? about the oppressiveness of living amid memorials to the Confederacy. Although one might think of statues as silent, the poem describes the memorials’ ‘frozen laughter of gilded antebellum . . . whispering proclamations of self praise’ in contrast with the poet’s buried ancestors whose ‘voices have been muted / by the cast iron gaze above’. Given that New Orleans is a majority African American while bearing the legacy of white supremacy, the poem asserts a paradox. The poet feels rooted in the city: ‘I cannot leave this ground & feel whole’ but at the same time ‘cannot stand it either / and not feel history / trying to break me / on its cyclic wheel’.\textsuperscript{22} Here I cannot help but recall Prospero’s incessant cycle of storytelling, as well as many recent politicians recycling the racialized discourse of the past. There is a difference, however, as groups like Take ’Em Down NOLA, the NOLA Workers’ Group, and the People’s Assembly respond with action against apathy, liberation against domination, community against hierarchy. The voices of New Orleans’ diverse population here supplant the symbols of white supremacy. Prospero has drowned his books; collectively, New Orleanians are writing their own.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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