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“Art had almost left them:” Les Cenelles Society of Arts and Letters, The Dillard Project, and the Legacy of Afro-Creole Arts in New Orleans

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“Art had almost left them:”
Les Cenelles Society of Arts and Letters, The Dillard Project, and the Legacy of
Afro-Creole Arts in New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

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BA, University of New Orleans, 2001
MA, Loyola University New Orleans, 2005

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Abstract

In 1942, in New Orleans, a group of intellectual and artistic African-Americans, led by Marcus B. Christian, formed an art club named *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters. *Les Cenelles* members looked to New Orleans's Afro-Creole population as the pinnacle of African American artistic achievements and used their example as a model for artists who sought to effect social change. Many of the members of *Les Cenelles* wrote for the Louisiana Federal Writers' Program. A key strategy used by the members of *Les Cenelles* to accomplish their goals was gaining the support of white civic leaders, in particular Lyle Saxon. Christian and Saxon's relationship was unusual in the 1940s Jim Crow era in the sense that it was built upon mutual respect and admiration. This thesis examines both the efforts of *Les Cenelles* and the black division of the FWP, as well as Christian and Saxon's relationship.

Keywords: New Orleans, Afro-Creole, Literature, *Les Cenelles*, Marcus Christian, Lyle Saxon, Federal Writers' Project, Works Projects Administration, Free People of Color.

[I]f judged in terms of the unfavorable circumstances under which it was produced, and if elevated in the light of the literature of the population of the state as a whole during that period, the Negro's contribution to literature in antebellum Louisiana would reflect credibly upon any group.
-Charles Barthelemy Roussève

In June of 1942, in New Orleans, a group of intellectual and artistic African-Americans, led by poet and historian Marcus B. Christian, held an art exhibit at the YWCA. The name of this sponsoring group was *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters, and their mission, according to a 1942 article in the African American newspaper *The Louisiana Weekly*, was to promote the “further development of Race literature and folklore,” and perpetuated “the best traditions of culture among Negroes in Louisiana.”¹ That a group of black southerners were holding an art exhibit in the Deep South in the midst of Jim Crow suppression of black expression is as extraordinary as the group that sponsored it.

Aside from a single mention of *Les Cenelles* in a 1991 article in the journal *Louisiana History*, and in Chance Harvey's *The Life and Selected Letters of Lyle Saxon* (2003), the group is largely neglected by contemporary scholars.² It appears *Les Cenelles* has been forgotten. Yet this group and the work of its members shed new light on a period of intense literary activity in New Orleans, and contribute to a further understanding of the venerable tradition of African-American literature there.

Additionally, *Les Cenelles*, and its stated mission and goals, further illuminate the ways

¹ James LaFourche, *Louisiana Weekly*, March 26, 1942. Hereinafter, unless otherwise noted, any mention of “*Les Cenelles*” refers to the twentieth-century literary society.

² Joan Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writer's Project," *Louisiana History* Vol. 32, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 47-62; Chance Harvey, *The Life and Letters of Lyle Saxon* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 2003).

black New Orleanians navigated the social restrictions of Jim Crow Louisiana in order to accomplish their goals.

The founders of *Les Cenelles* were not the first African-Americans to promote the arts in New Orleans. In 1845, seventeen free men of color published a collection of poetry, *Les Cenelles*, recognized as the first anthology of African American poetry, and called by historian Jerah Johnson one of the most momentous works of antebellum African-American literature.³ The poetry of the nineteenth-century *Les Cenelles* was written in the French Romantic style and include familiar themes such as romance, nature, unrequited love, and melancholy.⁴ The authors intended many of the poems to be sung aloud. Oppressive legislation passed in 1830 had banned free people of color from producing commentary considered politically subversive; therefore, the poetry contained in the anthology was not outwardly political. This is not to say the works ignored the difficult social circumstances placed upon New Orleans's free black population. Enlightenment philosophy and Romantic principles of equality, citizenship, and human rights were ideals paramount to the French Revolution, yet the contributors to *Les Cenelles* knew they must restrain from blatant attacks on unjust conditions. The criticism is subtle and often directed toward the ill treatment of free women of color by white men, hence the dedication of the anthology to the "*beau Sexe Louisianais*."⁵ Additionally, in the introduction to *Les Cenelles*, Armand Lanusse rationalized the decision to publish a

³ Regine Latortue and Gleason R. W. Adams, eds., *Les Cenelles: A Collection of Creole Writers of the Early Nineteenth-Century* (Boston: 1979). Contributors to *Les Cenelles* include Armand Lanusse, Camille Thierry, Pierre Dalcour, and Victor Séjour.

⁴ Caryn Cossé Bell discusses the use of French Romantic themes as a mode of expression in the poetry of New Orleans Creoles in the 1860s. Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition, 1768-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 98-99.

⁵ Latortue and Gleason, xxxiv; Floyd D. Cheung, "*Les Cenelles and Quadroon Balls 'Hidden Transcripts' of Resistance and Domination in New Orleans, 1803-1845*," *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), 5-16.

collection of poetry by amateur writers as both a means of encouraging young black Creole writers, and to promote the value of education as security against the harsh realities facing free people of color in Antebellum New Orleans.⁶ Lanusse not only promoted education in the Afro-Creole population, he was also one of the founders and principle of a school for black free children of color, the *Institution Catholique des Orpheins Indigents*.⁷ In short, the publication of *Les Cenelles* was a bold undertaking for its authors.

The decision to name the anthology *Les Cenelles* had both poetic and political connotations. A *cenelle* is a type of hawthorn fruit, which in English is called a mayhaw. This bright red fruit grows on a tree in the swamp and each May the fruit falls into the water. The fruit can be washed, cooked down in sugar and strained into a jelly.⁸ To gather a mayhaw men would wade through water that was the home to alligators and various poisonous snakes. Just as publishing *Les Cenelles* was a dangerous undertaking for the contributors, collecting these tasty berries was a precarious mission.

Several years before the publication of *Les Cenelles*, several free men of color contributed to a journal entitled *L'Album Littéraire Journal des Jeunes Gens, amateurs de littérature*. Professor of languages and poet Joanni Questy founded the short-lived

⁶ Cossé Bell, 98-99, 167; The term *creole* appeared first in Louisiana's colonial era. In reference to African-Americans, creole distinguished a slave born in the French Colonies as opposed to Africa. Later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries African-Americans whites and people of mixed raced identified as creole to differentiate themselves from the Anglo-Americans who flooded into New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase.⁶ By the 1820s, New Orleans' free people of color distinguished themselves from whites and slaves by labeling themselves Creoles of Color or Afro-Creoles.

⁷ Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Children: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery*, (New York City: NYU Press, 2010), 17-19.

⁸ Jerah Johnson, after a century of confusion, clarifies the exact meaning of the French word *cenelle*. Jerah Johnson, "Les Cenelles: What's in a Name?," *Louisiana History* Vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter, 1990): 113-115.

interracial literary journal.⁹ Questy is remembered as a revered polyglot educator who held the affection of both his students and his community. In an impassioned poem eulogizing to his beloved professor, New Orleans Afro-Creole poet Pierre-Aristide Desdunes wrote:

If I were able to taste, like you, the heavenly ambrosia
With which kind Poetry nourishes her offspring
Green laurels would always grow on my grave! ¹⁰

Twentieth Century and Nineteenth Century in Common

Despite the century separating the two *Les Cenelles*, similarities between the two projects are evident. The twentieth-century *Les Cenelles* faced a political climate parallel to that of their Creole predecessors. One consistent theme found in the works of many nineteenth-century Creole writers of color and the twentieth-century *Les Cenelles* was the desire for, and the moral necessity of, equal rights for African-Americans. Each member came of age in the bleak and onerous social and political climate of a Jim Crow South. Segregation laws denied African-Americans basic civil rights, they faced disfranchisement, poorly funded education systems, and many were relegated to a grueling plantation economy of sharecropping. Leisure time was a rarity for many African-Americans of the time, and therefore a group of young black artists forming an arts club was not common. *Les Cenelles* strove to keep alive and reinvigorate the tradition of arts in New Orleans black population.

It is unsurprising that a group of like-minded men and women would want to get

⁹ Caryn Cossé Bell, "Pierre-Aristide Desdunes (1844-1918), Creole Poet, Civil War Soldier, and Civil Rights Advocate: *The Common Wind's* Legacy," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 55, No 3 (Summer 2014): 282-312.

¹⁰ "Hommage à mon estimé professeur Joanni Questy." Bell, "Pierre-Aristide Desdunes," 291.

together and share their common interests. *Les Cenelles* was not unique in the sense that it was just one of many African-American literary and arts societies formed in the early twentieth-century.¹¹ However, *Les Cenelles* focused on local black artists and their long-standing contributions to Louisiana's creative legacy. *Les Cenelles* members looked to New Orleans's Afro-Creole population as the pinnacle of African American artistic achievements and used the example of the Afro-Creole as a model for artists who sought to effect social change. In particular, their name aligned them with an uninterrupted tradition of black creativity in New Orleans. These writers viewed the era between the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and the 1930s as a time when African-Americans had no time or support to create art. *Les Cenelles* wanted to rescue that artistic tradition while re-writing the history of black New Orleanians, creating an established and idealized image of Afro-Creole literary and artistry.

The decision to name their group *Les Cenelles* did not go unnoticed by local media. Two newspaper articles stated that with the selection of the name *Les Cenelles*, the “members thought that such a name would perpetuate the tradition of the almost century old anthology” and “in selecting this name it would perpetuate a fine tradition which was begun almost a century ago.”¹² The choice of the name *Les Cenelles* suggests its members considered themselves the inheritors of the proud artistic and civic-minded tradition that originated with New Orleans's free people of color, and their naming is a powerful argument and portion of their strategy. A *Louisiana Weekly* article announcing

¹¹ Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002). McHenry's work provides an in-depth history of African-American print culture and literary communities between 1830 and 1940. A contemporary organization of *Les Cenelles* was the South Side Writers Group. Members of this club included Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Arna Bontemps.

¹² *New Orleans Item* Nov. 4, 1941; unidentified newspaper article, Box 11, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

the formation of *Les Cenelles* included the member's home addresses.¹³ Another news article listed the member's professions. The members were all employed in white-collar positions, save for Eugene Williams, a postal carrier. However, the article mentions Williams' position as a former research student from Dillard University.¹⁴ Similar to the careers of New Orleans' nineteenth-century Creole writers, the members of *Les Cenelles* were educated professionals who achieved success, despite the social and legal restraints working against them.

***Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters**

Although little material exists on *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters, sufficient information is available to gather an understanding of their mission and goals, and to provide a glimpse into the member's personal lives. According to their mission statement, this group of educated and mostly young black intellectuals and artists formed an arts society in 1940s Jim Crow New Orleans in order to "stimulate creative work among Negroes in all arts."¹⁵ Although the latter *Les Cenelles* survived for only a few years, but during its brief existence, the group organized at least one art exposition, published a collection of poetry, and hoped to open a center for black artists.¹⁶ The members of *Les Cenelles* included artists as well as civic leaders, professional businessmen and women, educators, and church leaders.¹⁷ While their membership in *Les*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Unidentified newspaper article, Box 11, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

¹⁵ Unidentified newspaper article, Box 11, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

¹⁶ Box 5, Subseries XI. 11, Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

¹⁷ A March 26, 1942 *Louisiana Weekly* article lists the names of addresses of the members. Supplemental materials in the Marcus Christian Collection provide additional *Les Cenelles* members.

Cenelles is, until now, largely unknown, many of *Les Cenelles* members achieved success for other accomplishments.

In 1937, before the formation of *Les Cenelles*, Marcus Christian and other local African-American poets had compiled a collection of verse titled *From the Deep South*.¹⁸ Many of the poems included in the book were taken from the “Poet’s Corner” column in the *Louisiana Weekly*, and similar to the original *Les Cenelles*, the poetry included in this anthology contains conventional poetic themes such as nature, beauty, death, and unrequited love. Unlike the nineteenth-century anthology, however, this book includes discussions of racial inequality, lynching, slavery, and legal oppression.

Marcus Christian dedicated *From the Deep South* to Lyle Saxon and, it is worthy of note that in a gesture akin to Armand Lanusse in the original *Les Cenelles*, Christian asked the reader’s forgiveness for any errors in taste from the “immature poets” featured in the booklet. Moreover, Christian requested that the poems are both “offered in a spirit of sarcasm and irony,” and that they “be received with charity.” Perhaps Christian’s presentation of the poems in such a humble manner was a strategy to avoid emphasis on the overtly political nature of many of the booklet’s poetry. Christian proudly proclaims *From the Deep South* the first collection of Louisiana African-American poetry since the 1845 publication of the original *Les Cenelles*, thereby linking the literary tradition of

Known members are as follows: Geraldine Amos, Maude Armstrong, Mary Badon, Albert J. Bloom, Eugene C. Cannon, Marcus Christian, Peter Clark, Janover, W. Davis, J. G. St. Clair Drake, Randolph Edmonds, Clarence Fornerette, Alva Green, James Griffin, Samuel Hoskins, William J. Huntley, Inez Jones, Olisca Roux Johnson, James B. Lafourche, Gwendolyn Lawrence, Jacob Lawrence, Clarence A. Laws, Ora Joseph Lewis, Octave Lilly Jr., Homer C. McEwen, Robert McKinney, Earl J. Raby Jr., Lawrence Reddick, Ferdinand Rousseve, George Sanders, Alice Ward-Smith, Frank Wyley, Elton Williams, Eugene B Willman, Elizabeth Catlett White.

¹⁸ *From the Deep South*, Box 29, Subseries XIII.2: Literary Manuscripts, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans; additional copy available in Folder 17, Box 3, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

twentieth-century African-American New Orleanians to the long history of cultural production dating to at least the early nineteenth century literary works of free Creoles of color, and foreshadowing the founding of the society that would bear that name.

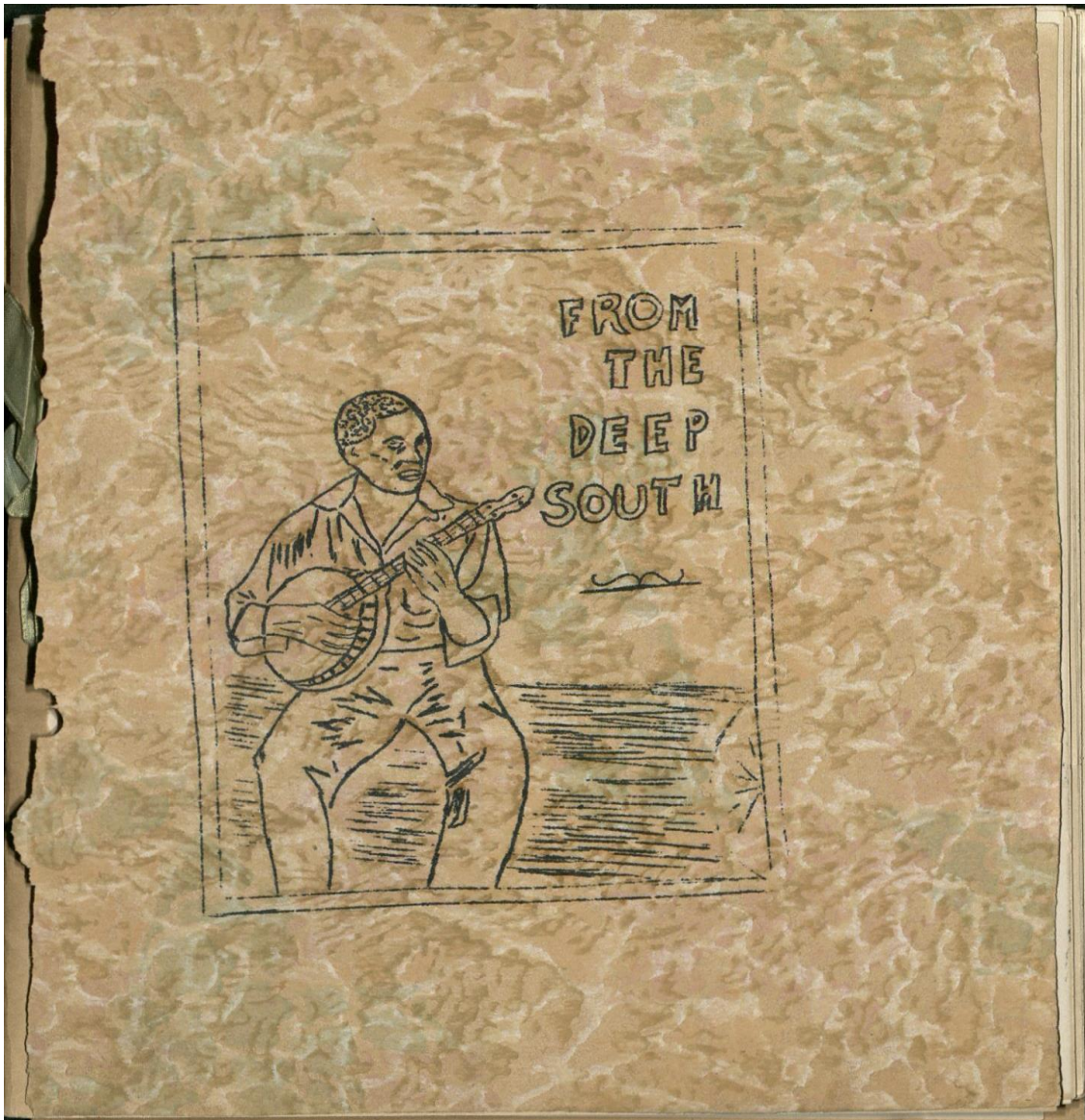


Figure A: *From the Deep South*, Folder 17, Box 3, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

The Exhibit

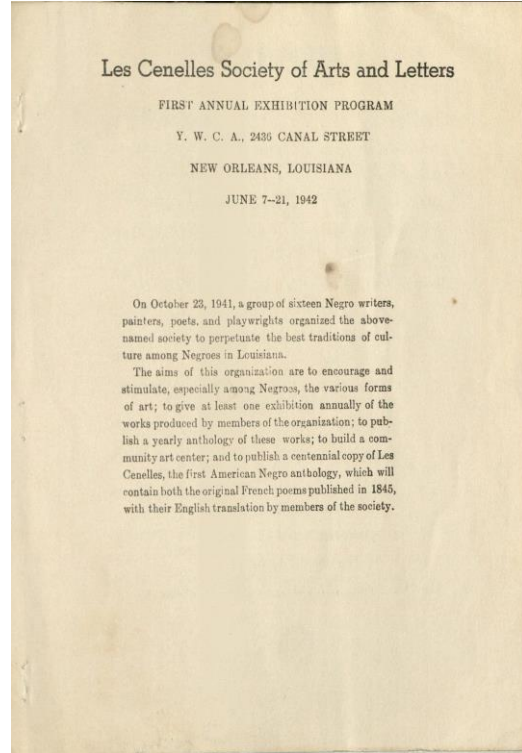
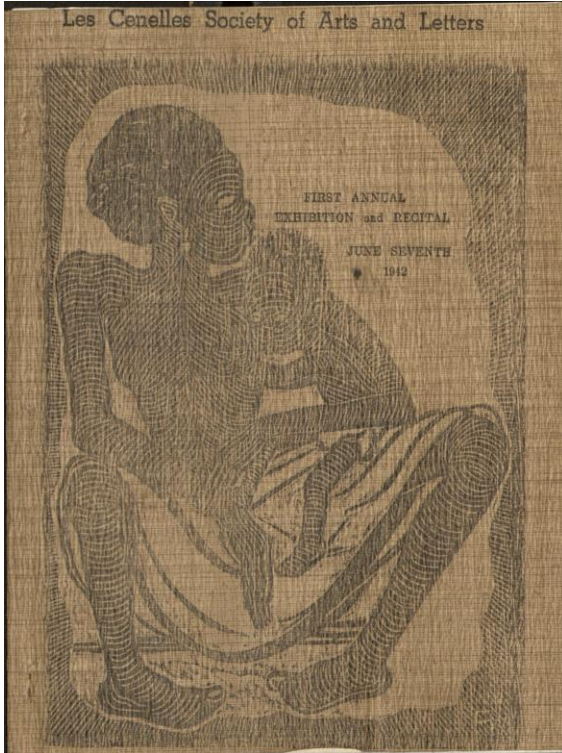
When *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters held their first art exhibition in 1942, just shy of its one-year anniversary, the society also provided an accompanying program that provides insights into its mission and purpose; it begins with a detailed description of the organization's inception. The program states:

On October 23, 1941, a group of sixteen Negro writers, painters, poets, and playwrights organized the above-named society to perpetuate the best traditions of culture among Negroes in Louisiana. The aims of this organization are to encourage and stimulate, especially among Negroes, the various forms of art; to give at least one exhibition annually of the works produced by members of the organization; to publish a yearly anthology of these works; to build a community art center; and to publish a centennial copy of *Les Cenelles*, the first American Negro anthology, which will contain both the original French poems published in 1845, with their English translation by members of the society.¹⁹

There are additional subtleties in this mission statement. By stating the goal of the organization was “to encourage and stimulate, especially among Negroes, the various forms of art” suggests the members of *Les Cenelles* did not object to working with non-African-American artists. Additionally, the program informs the reader *Les Cenelles* exists “in order to perpetuate the best traditions of culture among Negroes in Louisiana.” The exhibited materials included oil paintings, watercolors, anthologies of poetry and plays, and architectural manuscripts. That the contents of the 1942 exhibit exemplify Western European art mediums is significant for at least two reasons. First, *Les Cenelles* members claimed their art the equivalent of their white contemporaries. Moreover, since the work *Les Cenelles* produced were the same mediums used by New Orleans Afro-

¹⁹ *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters First Annual Exhibition Program, Box 11, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Creole artists, *Les Cenelles* asserted their right to claim the European styles of art as their own. As inheritors of the original *Les Cenelles* legacy, *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters inherited their European roots.



PROGRAM

Opening Song God Bless America
 Introduction Clarence A. Laws, Chairman
 Original Short Story Ora Mae Lewis
 Gaud's Gonnah Walk Spiritual . . Eugene Willman
 Art in the Community Ferdinand C. Rousseve
 Original Poems Marcus B. Christian
 Gangsters Over Harlem Randolph Edmonds

A Play Presented by
THE DILLARD PLAYERS GUILD

Cast

Earl Alfred Spriggs
 Frank Emile Meine
 Trixie Doris Block
 Blackie Ernest Armstrong

Time: The Present

Place: Frank's Hide-out in Harlem

Play Directed by Author

Lift Every Voice Johnson



LIST OF ENTRIES

On Exhibition June 7-21, 1942, at the Y.W.C.A., 2436 Canal Street

- No. 1. Marcus B. Christian Poems published in anthologies and Opportunity and Crisis magazines.
- No. 2. Peter W. Clark One book and poems published in the Xavier Herald.
- No. 3. J. G. St. Clair Drake Poems published in Crisis magazine and in From the Deep South.
- No. 4. Randolph Edmonds Books, plays, magazine articles and manuscripts.
- No. 6. Clarence Fornerette Four oil paintings and one pastel.
- No. 7. James J. Griffin Eight water colors.
- No. 8. Samuel Hoskins Poems published in Opportunity and one manuscript of published short story.
- No. 9. Ines Foster Jones Two manuscript poems.
- No. 10. Jacob Lawrence Collection of paintings in Fortune Magazine.
- No. 11. Clarence A. Laws Poems in anthology and in manuscript.
- No. 12. Ora Mae Lewis Short stories, poems and manuscripts.
- No. 13. Ferdinand C. Rousseve Architectural drawings, five manuscript poems and sketches.

LIST OF ENTRIES Cont.

- No. 14. Elton Williams Poems Published in anthologies and periodicals.
- No. 15. Eugene Willman Poems published in anthology and in periodicals.
- No. 16. Elizabeth Catlett White One drawing and one figure in plaster.
- No. 17. Frank A. Wyley Six linoleum prints, four water colors and one oil painting.

GUEST EXHIBITORS

- No. 18. Richmond Barthe Pictures of Barthe's sculpture from the Dillard Arts Quarterly and the Lyle Saxon Collection.
- No. 19. Arna Bontemps Three novels, a short story from Opportunity, poems from anthologies, and children's books.
- No. 20. Charles Barthelemy Rousseve History of the Negro in Louisiana.
- No. 21. Numa Rousseve Three oil paintings.
- No. 22. Charles White Two lithographs and one oil painting.

STUDENT EXHIBITORS, DILLARD UNIVERSITY

- No. 23. Samella Sanders One pastel, one oil painting and one figure in sandstone.
- No. 24. Eugene Winslow one wood carving and one plaster figure.
- No. 25. Harold Curenu One water color.

LIST OF ENTRIES Cont.

STUDENT EXHIBITORS, XAVIER UNIVERSITY

- No. 26. Thomas Brooks One charcoal study.
- No. 27. Edward Dorsey One charcoal study and portrait in oil.
- No. 28. Augustine Moore and Juan Lopez Two pen and ink drawings.
- No. 29. Gloria Raymond Water color sketch.

Front cover linoleum print by Frank A. Wyley.





Figures B- H: *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters First Annual Exhibition Program, Box 11, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

Analysis of the list of entries in the exhibition program verifies that *Les Cenelles* was not limited exclusively to New Orleans artists. For instance, New York-based artist Jacob Lawrence contributed a series of paintings for the art opening. Lawrence is typically associated with the Harlem Renaissance and as a member of the Harlem Art Guild. However, beginning in the summer of 1941, Lawrence and his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight, moved to New Orleans to paint. Both artists joined *Les Cenelles* and attended group meetings.²⁰ Two other nationally recognized contributors to the exhibit were Louisiana native and Chicago-based author Arna Bontemps and Chicago-born

²⁰ *Louisiana Weekly*, unknown date, *ibid.*

painter Charles White.²¹ White, a Rosenwald fellowship recipient, and his wife, sculptor Elizabeth Catlett, both taught art at Dillard University in New Orleans.²² At the time of the exhibit, Lawrence, Bontemps, and White, along with several *Les Cenelles* members, were federal employees of New Deal programs. The federal jobs that connected the artists is of particular interest. In spite of the Jim Crow laws that marginalized African-Americans daily lives, federal programs connected African-American artists, many of whom expressed the necessity for desegregation and equality in the United States.

While African-American art movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and Chicago's South Side Writers Group were both larger and arguably more influential than *Les Cenelles*, it is worth noting that this group of artists in the segregated Deep South attracted the attention of nationally known artists.²³ Although *Les Cenelles* faced an uphill battle; nevertheless, they worked around social restrictions and made their art public; the 1942 exhibition is evidence of their success. Some *Les Cenelles* members wrote with great optimism of a deeper appreciation of African-American achievements in the arts. In fact, the Afro-Creole's contributions to the arts was presented as one of their accomplishments most worthy of emulation.²⁴ The Afro-Creole spirit of hopefulness and the American dream of equality for all carried over to *Les Cenelles*. In fact, the 1942 *Les Cenelles* exhibit opened with the audience singing "God Bless America."²⁵ Despite the

²¹ While working for the FWP Bontemps wrote much of *The Negro in Illinois*. Lyle Saxon mentions he read the manuscript off *The Negro in Illinois* for the Rosenwald Fund, and notes that although it a good book, it could be better. Saxon to Miss Landes, October 8, 1942. Folder 3, Box 6, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

²² *New Orleans Sentinel*, June 13, 1942.

²³ McHenry, 251-255.

²⁴ Redding 55-58.

²⁵ *Les Cenelles* exhibit program; In a letter to Lyle Saxon, *Les Cenelles* member Elton Williams expressed his belief that African-Americans were "well on our way towards obtaining a better social, economic, and political success." Elton Williams to Lyle Saxon, 1/11/1939, Folder 11, Box 2, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

optimism of the above correspondences, the work of *Les Cenelles* members also critiqued society, and they hoped to break down segregation laws.

Lyle Saxon and Marcus Christian

A key strategy utilized by the members of *Les Cenelles* in order to accomplish their goals was to gain the support of white civic leaders, in particular the author, historian, tour guide, and all around *bon vivant* Lyle Saxon.²⁶ Among New Orleans's African-American community, Saxon was highly regarded. He was a mainstay in early twentieth-century New Orleans literary circles and wrote extensively on black plantation life.²⁷ Moreover, as state director of the Louisiana Federal Writers' Project, Saxon hired numerous black authors to write about Louisiana's African-American history and folkways.²⁸ He donated money to African-American fundraisers, served as master of ceremonies of the *Louisiana Weekly* Poetry Award in 1937, encouraged numerous African-American artists and their work, is credited with encouraging the formation of *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters, and along with the national director of the Federal Art Project Holger Cahill and other white people, attended the *Les Cenelles* exhibit in 1942.²⁹ The reasons behind Saxon's interest in black life and arts are

²⁶ Christian to Saxon, April 13, 1942, Box 5, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

²⁷ Saxon's short story "Cane River" won the O. Henry Memorial Prize in 1926, and other well-known works include *Father Mississippi* (1927), *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928), *Lafitte the Pirate* (1930), and *Children of Strangers* (1937).

²⁸ Saxon's obituary in the *Time Picayune* mentioned, although somewhat patronizingly, the writer's kindness toward African Americans: "[h]is personal interests included a lifelong study and observation of Negroes, and many instances have been reported in which he befriended destitute Negroes and assisted them and others in obtaining security." *Times Picayune*, April 10, 1946.

²⁹ James LaFourche, *Louisiana Weekly*, March 26, 1942; Raymond Tillman to Saxon, May 18, 1939, Folder 27, Box 4, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University; A review in an African-American literary journal of Lyle Saxon's novel *Cane River* provides additional proof of Saxon's perceived understanding of race relations. The reviewer writes: "Though the race problem is incidental to the story, the dignity and nobility of spirit with which Mr. Saxon imbues Henry Tyler, a black

complicated and perhaps connected to his lifelong feelings of social estrangement. Despite his reputation as a revered raconteur and gracious host to nearly everyone he encountered, Saxon struggled with depression, alcoholism, and was a closeted homosexual.³⁰ It is possible that because he was a homosexual, a member of a marginalized group, Saxon identified with other marginalized groups, and perhaps Saxon's sense of estrangement contributed to his interest in African-American life.

Lyle Saxon and Marcus Christian met in 1935 when Christian applied for a job with the FWP. Despite the fact that Saxon was Christian's supervisor, the two forged a quick friendship that lasted until Saxon's death in 1946. In a typed journal entry, Christian recalled with great fondness his first meeting with Saxon.³¹ Saxon did not call upon Christian, instead he went to Christian's home. Highlights of their first encounter include Christian's impression of Saxon's "towering" size, their shared appreciation of Christian's library, the ease in which Saxon made himself comfortable in Christian's house and how quickly he felt that he and Saxon were old acquaintances, the whiskey and coke they drank, and the laugh they shared over the dog hair on Saxon's suit. Saxon was well-known in his circle as a skilled talker and listener. If Christian's recollection is accurate, it appears that Saxon was just as comfortable spending time with African-American artists in his more familiar surroundings with white artists.

farm hand, shows a deep and sympathetic understanding of just such men as Henry. [T]he desire for a life free from racial prejudice within as well as without the race are things with which many Negroes besides Henry are all too familiar. Why [*sic*] wouldn't any Negro give for such mutual understanding between the races...?" Irene Colbert, Book Review of *Cane River The Arts Quarterly*, Dillard University Publication (Oct.–Dec. 1937).

³⁰ For more on Saxon's personality and struggles see: Harvey, 43-44, 171-176, 184-185; Rosan Augusta Jordon and Frank De Caro, "In This Folk-Lore Land: Race, Class, Identity, and Folklore Stories in Louisiana," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 109, No. 431 (Winter, 1996): 31-59; Lawrence Powell, *Introduction New Orleans City Guide, 1938*, (New Orleans: Garrett County Press, 2009); Anthony J. Stanonis, "'Always in Costume and Mask': Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism," *Louisiana History* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 31-57.

³¹ Box 12, Subseries XI.11, Research Data, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

The two men exchanged correspondence in both an official and social context, and the personal letters reveal a relationship founded on mutual admiration.³² When Christian became ill in the fall of 1942, Saxon delivered to Christian an “unusual gift” of a large steak. Christian composed a humorous thank-you letter in which he reminisced of his plans to have steak dinners for a week, but, due to the “wolfish crew” descending upon his home at the sounds of sizzling meat, he barely ate any of his steak. Christian concluded his letter by suggesting in the future it may be better for Saxon to bring “the conventional flowers when you call upon sick people.”³³ Christian’s lighthearted prose not only reveals the level of friendship between the two writers, but a relationship that transcended the confines of a segregated society. Shortly after Saxon’s death, Christian wrote to Arna Bontemps expressing his sadness and his renewed energy to complete his manuscript of *The Negro in Louisiana*. After sharing a story to Bontemps in which Saxon encouraged Christian to keep writing, he states his plan to dedicate the book to Saxon. In a hand-written note discussing Saxon’s death, he described his surprise at how Saxon’s death affected him and how the loss of his friend has left him with an “empty space a mile wide.”³⁴ It is true that Saxon was an asset to Christian and other black artists. Saxon

³² The Marcus Christian Collection and the Lyle Saxon papers at both Northwestern State University of Louisiana and Tulane University contain scores of personal letters between Saxon and Christian. In a letter to Rosenwald Fund director for fellowships, George M. Reynolds, Saxon described Christian as follows: “Of all the Negroes employed, Christian is by and far the most interesting and he has a keener insight into the problems of his race than any of the others. He is fully aware of the conditions existing in ratio relationship between white and Negro, but he regards the picture with compassion rather than bitterness. I have been deeply impressed with his work, and in his group he is outstanding. I believe that he has the quality that goes for leadership in his race and I think anything you can do to help him with his creative work would be thoroughly worthwhile. I think that with proper backing he may go a long way toward building a better understanding between the white and Negro races.” Saxon to Reynolds, 02/09/1939, Folder 1, Box 6, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

³³ Christian to Saxon, October 28, 1942. Box 5, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

³⁴ Box 12, Subseries XI.11, Research Data, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

was well-known and had many connections throughout New Orleans, and his willingness to help African-Americans achieve their goals could be an invaluable resource. Saxon's usefulness notwithstanding, Christian and Saxon were friends and their relationship was unique in 1940s New Orleans. In a letter to the Rosenwald Fund, Saxon demonstrated his confidence in Marcus Christian as a bridge builder between the races. Saxon writes his belief that with proper support Christian "may go a long way toward building a better understanding between the white and Negro races."³⁵

The Marcus Christian Collection collection at the University of New Orleans contains multiple letters written on FWP stationery to and from Lyle Saxon. However, none of those official letters mention *Les Cenelles*. The first communication between Christian and Saxon discussing the group occurred on April 13, 1942.³⁶ Written on blank stationery, the letter alerts Saxon to a *Les Cenelles* meeting the previous Saturday evening at the home of Clarence Fornerette on Marigny Street. The letter's first sentence identifies the meeting's location, date, and one member. Christian's letter does not describe Saxon's role in supporting the formation of the group, but does mention a gift of an "ash jar" that Christian sent to Saxon. Christian warned Saxon his gift comes with strings attached. The members of *Les Cenelles* hoped to build an African-American art center and would need the assistance of "other *Amis des Noirs*" to accomplish their goals. Christian lists Archbishop Joseph Rummel, Mayor Robert Maestri, and New Orleans philanthropists Ida Weiss Friend and Edgar and Edith Stern as people he planned to write

³⁵ Saxon to Reynolds, February 9, 1939.

³⁶ Christian to Saxon, April 13, 1942, Box 5, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

in search of support.³⁷ Christian closes by mentioning an upcoming *Les Cenelles* art exhibit to which he will be sure to invite Saxon.³⁸

Christian's letter to Saxon is brief, but the relaxed writing style reveals another glimpse into Christian and Saxon's relationship. Since members of *Les Cenelles* saw the advantages of participating in biracial cooperation in the era of segregation, Saxon was a friend as well as an asset. Christian knew *Les Cenelles* needed the help of many "Amis des Noirs" to find a path around some of the Jim Crow obstacles destined to stand in its way.³⁹ Christian's intent to write the mayor and archbishop shows he knew the group needed both church and state on its side.⁴⁰ The above-mentioned letters are among the hundreds of correspondences still existing between Saxon and African-American writers.⁴¹

The Federal Writers' Project and the Birth of the Dillard Project

Ironically, a government program in the middle of the Great Depression served as an impetus for the formation of *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters. Several of the founding members of *Les Cenelles* worked as professional writers for the New Deal program the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Louisiana's FWP employed a team of African-Americans to contribute stories of black life in Louisiana for publication in state

³⁷ No copies of the letters Christian sent to the mayor and archbishop were located in the Maestri, Rummel, Friend, or Stern collections.

³⁸ Both the Saxon collection at Tulane University and the Marcus Christian at the University of New Orleans both hold a copy of the exhibit's invitation. The exhibit opened June 7, 1942, at the YWCA on Canal Street in New Orleans. The program states the society's mission and lists the names of speakers who lectured on poetry and art and read original works. Additionally, a group of students from Dillard University presented an original play at the opening, and the program lists each original piece of work displayed during the two-week exhibit. Folder 1, Box 6, Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University.

³⁹ Christian used the phrase "Amis des Noirs," but I provided the analysis.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, no copies of the letters Christian sent to the mayor and archbishop were located in the Maestri, Rummel, or Stern collections.

⁴¹ A thorough examination of Saxon's relationship with black artists deserves further study.

and local guidebooks. Members took advantage of the space created by the FWP, local media, and the support of Lyle Saxon to promote their work, to positively influence white perceptions of African-Americans, and to create a history that included *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters.

The Federal Writers' Project came into existence in the summer of 1935 as a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and both Lyle Saxon and Marcus Christian were involved heavily in the Louisiana division of the FWP.⁴² Like other white-collar WPA programs designed to provide assistance for "educational, professional, and clerical persons," the FWP employed individuals with experience in writing and researching and assigned them the task of compiling their states' history and folklore into publishable guidebooks and history books.⁴³ The bureaucratic makeup of the FWP consisted of a national director in Washington, D.C. and a semi-independent office in all 48 states, plus offices in New York City, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Washington,

⁴² The Works Progress Administration was renamed the Works Projects Administration under the Reorganization Act of 1939. Both agencies were the WPA. In Louisiana, Senator Huey Long opposed President Roosevelt's relief programs and planned to take legal action forcing the removal of federal agencies operating in autonomous states. After Long's assassination in September of 1935, and after newly elected governor Richard Leche mended fences with Roosevelt, millions of relief dollars flowed into Louisiana. In New Orleans, federal workers updated the sewerage and waterworks, renovated the French Market, built low-rent housing projects and a new Charity Hospital, renovated City Park, paved roads, and built bridges, amongst other projects. In addition to updating infrastructure, WPA workers in Louisiana provided emergency aid during natural disasters. For example, workers saved a sugar cane crop during a particularly cold winter in 1937, built and reinforced levees along the Mississippi River when water threatened to topple existing levees, and they worked to ameliorate potentially disease-spreading conditions after the hurricane of 1940. By 1939 an estimated 128,000 Louisianians received some form of federal relief. Betty M. Field, "Louisiana and the Great Depression," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Vol. VII The Age of the Longs, Louisiana 1928-1960*, Edward F. Haas ed., (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1984), 3-12; John Robert Moore, "The New Deal in Louisiana," in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, Vol. VII The Age of the Longs, Louisiana 1928-1960*, Edward F. Haas ed., (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1984), 124-148.

⁴³ Records of the Federal Writers' Project, Works Projects Administration, Relating to Louisiana 1935-1943, (M1366). Kathleen O'Connor McKinzie, "Writers on Relief: 1935-1942," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1970.

D.C. A state supervisor oversaw each of the above-mentioned offices.⁴⁴ The state director's responsibilities included overseeing individual state offices, approving projects, delegating assignments, reporting to the national director, managing personnel, editing, and writing.

Lyle Saxon's appointment as director of the Louisiana FWP began October 15, 1935 and the Canal Bank Building in New Orleans housed the main office. At its peak, eighty-six people worked for the Louisiana FWP in a total of seven offices located throughout the state.⁴⁵ Under Saxon's leadership, the Louisiana FWP produced two travel guides and a collection of Louisiana folktales.⁴⁶ Because of his success in Louisiana, the national office requested Saxon to oversee six additional offices.⁴⁷ Federal funding for New Deal agencies ceased as the United States entered World War II and a wartime economy, and the Federal Writers' Project closed on January 1, 1943.

African-Americans participated in WPA projects from its inception and their numbers varied from program to program.⁴⁸ In addition to manual labor jobs, the WPA's cultural programs offered myriad opportunities for African-American musicians, artists,

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Like many other WPA divisions, the structure of the FWP was reorganized with the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1939. Federal funds for the writer's project were low, and each state was required to find financial support from an official sponsor, normally a state agency. In Louisiana, the Louisiana Library Commission, the City of New Orleans, Dillard University, the Louisiana Parks Commission, and the Vieux Carré Commission sponsored the FWP. Additionally, each state FWP office was required to find its own publisher. The Government Printing Office was unable to keep up with the printing demand and therefore each state relied on state and local government publishers, as well as private publishers.

⁴⁵ Other state offices were located in Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Gretna, Lafayette, Lake Charles, and Shreveport.

⁴⁶ Lyle Saxon, ed., *Louisiana: A Guide to the State*. (New York: Hastings House, 1941); Lyle Saxon, *New Orleans City Guide 1938* (New Orleans: Garrett County Press, 2009); Edward Dreyer, Lyle Saxon, Robert Tallant, *Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1987)

⁴⁷ Stanonis, 36.

⁴⁸ Jerry Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943*, (Boston: Little Brown Publishing, 1972)

and writers.⁴⁹ Applications to the FWP poured in from black writers as soon as the office opened in 1935 in Louisiana, and New Orleans was the only southern city to hire a considerable number of black FWP employees.⁵⁰ Initially, Saxon had the budget to hire only one African-American writer, Robert McKinney, but after winning a hard fought battle to procure additional funds, Saxon hired five more black writers.⁵¹ In Saxon's opinion, only black writers could accurately document the African-American experience in Louisiana, and he fought hard to employ black writers to do the work.⁵² Dillard University, a private African-American college in New Orleans, presented the idea of sponsoring the black unit, and in January of 1936, the Dillard Project began.⁵³ The writers of the Dillard Project contributed materials to all Louisiana FWP publications, and, at Saxon's suggestion, they took on the task of writing a book on the history of black life in the state entitled *The Negro in Louisiana*.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Redding, 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48-50.

⁵¹ Ibid., 49-51; In a letter to the Rosenwald Fund, Saxon admits he initially experienced "fear and trembling" and uncertainty as to the result of the Dillard Project. Yet he admits the work produced by the Dillard Project "has been very much like the result achieved by my white workers." Saxon to George M. Reynolds, Feb. 09, 1939, Folder 132, Melrose Collection.

⁵² Alsberg to Saxon, December 13, 1935; Saxon to Alsberg, December 16, 1935. Reel 1, Records of the Federal Writers' Project, Works Projects Administration, Relating to Louisiana 1935-1943, National Archives Microfilm Publications, Microfilm M1366, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, hereinafter cited as FWP-HNOC. National director Henry Alsberg encouraged also the hiring of black writers. In fact, Alsberg hired an African American advisor to review all materials relating to the black experience in the United States.

⁵³ Dillard University opened in September of 1935 as the marriage of two earlier African American universities, Straight College and New Orleans University. New Orleans businessman and philanthropist Edgar Stern donated money to help found Dillard, and served on the board of trustees. Previously, Stern, a tireless champion of Dillard University, served on the board of Straight College, acted as a university fundraiser, spoke before the New Orleans City Council several times to procure a site for the university, helped select the university's first president, and in the president's absence acted as *de facto* university president. Additionally, Stern served on the university board of trustees for two decades. Stern supported the Dillard Project. Donald E. Devore, *Defying Jim Crow: African American Community Development and the Struggle for Racial Equality in New Orleans, 1900-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Edgar B. Stern to Henry Alsberg, January 3, 1930, Reel 1, FWP-HNOC.

⁵⁴ *The Negro in Louisiana* was, despite much effort, never published. One copy of the 1,200-page manuscript is located in the Marcus Christian Collection, Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. The manuscript is filed as Bound Fragments, Unfinished Manuscript on Black Louisiana History, Box 3. An additional unbound version is located in the Lyle Saxon papers, Louisiana

Three of the writers hired by Saxon to work on the Dillard Project had recently graduated from either Straight University or New Orleans University, were published writers, and needed work. Homer McEwen graduated *summa cum laude* from Straight University in 1934 and had lost his job as a social worker.⁵⁵ Dillard University graduate Clarence Laws was a civil rights advocate and in 1938 elected to the position of industrial secretary of the New Orleans Urban League. Laws contributed a weekly editorial column to the *Louisiana Weekly* entitled “Headline Highlights.”⁵⁶ Octave Lilly was born in New Iberia where his father owned People’s Life Insurance Company. Lilly graduated from New Orleans University and lost his job as a high school teacher. One of Lilly’s FWP assignments was working with a team that interviewed former slaves in order to add their stories to *The Negro in Louisiana*.⁵⁷

Research Collection, Tulane University, filed under WPA Writers Program; Ronnie W Clayton "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana." *Louisiana History* 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1978): 327-335.

⁵⁵ McEwen wrote essays on black history in Louisiana, churches, Mardi Gras, and the abuse of African Americans in Louisiana. McEwen became a Congressional minister and moved to Chicago. Homer C. McEwen Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, Col. 238, Box 5.

⁵⁶ *Times Picayune*, November 6, 1938; Laws was drafted into the Army in early 1943 and served in New Guinea. After the war, Laws rose to the position of New Orleans Urban League executive secretary and later moved to Dallas to accept the position of South West Regional Director of the NAACP; *Times Picayune* Jan. 28, 1940; multiple issues, *Louisiana Weekly*, University of New Orleans Special Collections; DeVore, 119.

⁵⁷ A partial list of the questions Lilly used to interview the former slaves is located in Amistad Center housed at Tulane University. Octave Lilly was a founding member of the Friends of Amistad association and upon his death his family donated his papers to the center. Lilly wrote poetry his entire life, kept an extensive journal, and published articles in *Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, and *Louisiana Weekly*. Lilly, along with other NAACP leaders such as A. P. Tureaud, published a short-lived newspaper titled *The Sentinel* in the early 1940s. Shortly before his death, Lilly published a book of poetry entitled *Cathedral in the Ghetto, & Other Poems* (Vantage Press, 1970). Unfortunately, many of Lilly’s papers were lost in the flooding resulting from Hurricane Betsy in 1965. Octave Lilly Collection, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana; “Lilly Rites to be Friday,” *Times Picayune*, May 08, 1975; Interestingly, Lilly submitted a letter to the editor of the *Times Picayune* in response to the opening of LSUNO (now the University of New Orleans) and the proposed construction of an African American university in New Orleans named Southern University, New Orleans. Lilly agreed that the opening of LSUNO was a boon to the area due to “rapid population growth” and the need for “expanded opportunities of public education.” However, he disagrees that the same reasons apply for the necessity of a new African American university in New Orleans. Lilly aptly points out a new university for black students will “retain a segregated pattern of education” in New Orleans. *Times Picayune*, Feb. 05, 1959.

Originally assigned a WPA manual labor job, James LaFourche was a few years older than his Dillard colleagues and, arguably, the most qualified and experienced Dillard Project writer. LaFourche had co-founded and edited the *Louisiana Weekly*. He wrote articles on black history and political involvement in New Orleans in black newspapers throughout the country, plus he had authored three books. Moreover, LaFourche had headed the Louisiana Bureau of the Associated Negro Press and served as the secretary of the New Orleans branch of the NAACP.⁵⁸ Despite his impressive resume, racial prejudices and restrictions nearly placed a glass ceiling on LaFourche's ability to obtain a job with the Writers' Project.⁵⁹

Marcus B. Christian was the last of Saxon's new hires.⁶⁰ Christian's lack of a college degree made him less qualified than his peers at the Dillard Project, but his poetry and tenacity impressed Saxon. Although Christian owned a dry cleaning business, literature and history were his true passions. After several months of negotiation with the national office, Saxon gained approval to hire Christian as a creative writer. In 1939, Christian became supervisor of the Dillard Project.

⁵⁸ *Times Picayune* 11/15/1935; Redding, 49-50.

⁵⁹ James B. LaFourche to John Davis, Nov. 30, 1935; Henry Alsberg to James B. LaFourche. FWP-HNOC.

⁶⁰ Redding, 50-53; Marcus Bruce Christian, born on March 8, 1900 to Emanuel Banks Christian and Rebecca Christian (nee Harris), in Mechanicsville (now incorporated into Houma), Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. The son and grandson of teachers, he was educated at Houma Academy and an evening public school in New Orleans. Orphaned at thirteen, Christian moved to New Orleans in 1919 and resided there until his death on November 21, 1976. In 1943, he received a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to pursue historical research on African Americans in Louisiana. The following year he was appointed assistant librarian at Dillard. During this period he also operated his own printing company. From 1972 until his death in 1976, Christian held the post of special instructor in English and history at the University of New Orleans. Widely acclaimed as poet laureate of the New Orleans African American community, Christian composed some two thousand poems over the course of his life. His first book of poetry was published in 1922, and he contributed poetic, literary, and historical works to the "Afro-American," the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "Opportunity," "Crisis," the "Dillard Arts Quarterly," the *New Orleans States-Item*, the *New York Herald-Tribune*, "Phylon," and the *Louisiana Weekly*. He served as poetry and contributing editor of the *Louisiana Weekly*. His published works include *Negro Ironworkers of Louisiana, 1718-1900; Battle of New Orleans; From the Deep South*; and *Common People's Manifesto of World War II*." From "Biographical Note," Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

In Lyle Saxon, the Dillard Project writers had the supporter and defender that made their work possible. By 1938, the Dillard Project employed fifteen writers, and eventually at least twenty-two people wrote for the Dillard Project.⁶¹ On January 1, 1943, the Louisiana branch of the FWP, including the Dillard Project, closed. Federal officials ordered Saxon to deposit all of the Louisiana FWP materials with the Louisiana State Library Commission and FWP offices in Washington D.C. Always the independent thinker, Saxon only complied partially with these instructions and arranged for the Dillard Project materials to find a permanent home in the Dillard University library. Moreover, he helped to procure a job at the Dillard library for Marcus Christian. In a letter to Dillard president Albert W. Dent, Saxon arranged for work to be completed on Christian's manuscript of *The Negro in Louisiana*. Additionally, Saxon stated that upon completion, he would like to help get the book published and be "allowed to write the foreword in which [he] would like to give [Dent] and Christian the proper credit in the writing and publishing of the work." Dent replied to Saxon the same day and assured him the university would assist Christian in his work.⁶² Despite concerns from his supervisors in Washington D.C., that "matters of this sort can be left in the hands of a private institution such as Dillard," Saxon got his way and the material that would become *The Negro in Louisiana* went to Dillard.⁶³

⁶¹ Saxon to Alsberg, Sept.16, 1938, FWP-HNOC; Loose note, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Melrose Collection, Folder 132. (Hereinafter called Melrose Collection). The following are known Dillard Project employees, *Les Cenelles* members in bold. **Albert J. Bloom**, Edmund A. Burke, Edward Cherrie, **Janover Davis**, Clifford Dozier, Edward Dunn, Henry Hamilton, Samuel Hoskins, William J. Huntley, **James B. La Fourche**, Rodney Lamelle, **Clarence Laws**, **Octave Lilly**, **Homer McEwen**, **Robert McKinney**, Curtis S. Morris, August B. Rose, **Alice Ward Smith**, Henry Stephens, **Raymond T. Tillman**, **Elton Williams**, **Eugene B. Willman**.

⁶² Saxon to Dent Dec. 31, 1942; Dent to Saxon, Dec. 31, 1942, Folder 6, Box 6, LSTU.

⁶³ Clarice H. Rougeou to Lyle Saxon, Feb.16, 1943. Folder 8, Box 6, LSTU.

The Search for *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters

No scholarly work exists on the subject of *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters. However, numerous journal articles and monographs discuss and analyze the African-American contributors to the Louisiana branch of the Federal Writers Project as well its director, Marcus Christian. Despite the lack of direct discussion, enough material is available to reveal the often-hostile environment in which these writers worked, the challenges they faced, and will lead to a deeper understanding of the creative milieu that produced *Les Cenelles*.

In a 1978 article, historian Ronnie Clayton discusses the formation and some of the work produced by the black writers who worked for the Federal Writers' Project.⁶⁴ Clayton compares some of the experiences and challenges facing both white and black FWP writers, and the different ways of writing about slavery in the two Louisiana FWP books, *Gumbo Ya Ya* (written by white authors) and *The Negro in Louisiana* (written by African-Americans). In particular, he points out that black FWP employees faced a lack of access to public records and libraries. Another struggle involved suspicion from what Clayton termed black "cult leaders" toward the intentions of the educated and federally employed Dillard Project writers. As far as differences in interpretation, Clayton cites the treatment of the subject of slavery in *Gumbo Ya Ya* compared to *The Negro in Louisiana*. *Gumbo Ya Ya* describes an idyllic antebellum life for both master and slave. The slave was content and proud to serve, while the masters took great care of his slaves and often thought of them as family. *The Negro in Louisiana* paints a different picture in which the

⁶⁴ Ronnie W. Clayton, "The Federal Writers' Project for Blacks in Louisiana," *Louisiana History* 19, no. 3 (Summer, 1978): 327-335.

slaves made cultural contributions to Louisiana, desired their freedom, and did everything in their power to assert control over their lives.⁶⁵

Clayton discusses Lyle Saxon's insistence to his supervisors in Washington that only black writers could accurately portray the black experience in Louisiana.⁶⁶ Clayton concludes with a discussion of the closing of the FWP offices in New Orleans at the end of 1942, how the same year Dillard University came to receive the FWP materials related to black life in Louisiana, and the mystery surrounding the present-day whereabouts of these materials. Clayton does not discuss the lives of FWP writers after the project closed, or mention *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters.

The following year, historian Jerah Johnson refuted Clayton's claim that the FWP materials left at Dillard University were missing.⁶⁷ Johnson claims that since 1976 the University of New Orleans, where Christian worked as a history and English lecturer, holds the Marcus Christian Collection, and the Christian Collection includes the manuscript and notes to the unpublished *The Negro in Louisiana*. Johnson states that when Christian left Dillard in 1950, he took copies of his manuscript and other FWP materials with him. Johnson praises Christian as a dedicated writer and scholar who worked diligently, however unsuccessfully, to publish his manuscript. Johnson's article discusses aspects of Christian's life after the FWP, but nothing about *Les Cenelles*.

In an article analyzing the Marcus Christian Collection at the University of New Orleans, Marilyn Hessler uses materials from the collection to present a biographical

⁶⁵ Ibid., 332-334.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 328.

⁶⁷ Jerah Johnson, "Marcus B. Christian and the WPA History of Black People in Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter, 1976): 113-115.

sketch of Christian's life and his work.⁶⁸ Hessler gives extensive detail of the contents of many of the boxes in the collection. The Christian Collection contains volumes of the author's poetry, his manuscript of *The Negro in Louisiana*, correspondence between 1913 and 1976, and thirty-three boxes of articles dating from 1816 to 1976 make up the clippings portion of the collection. The series of clippings contains varied information on topics such as education, athletics, desegregation, health care, economics, and music. Hessler describes a sizable percentage of the Christian Collection; however, *Les Cenelles* is not mentioned in her article.

Numerous collections in Louisiana contain material on the Federal Writers' Project and individual members of *Les Cenelles*. The Marcus Christian Collection at the University of New Orleans possesses materials that verify the existence of this forgotten organization, and the Amistad Research Center provides essential information about several members of *Les Cenelles*.⁶⁹ The collection contains a stamped postcard announcing a meeting of *Les Cenelles* on July 4, 1941, at Christian's home at 314 S. Rocheblave Street. The postcard comes from the "Office of the Secretary" but the collection holds no mailing list, so it is not known who else attended the meeting. However, the postcard is printed with the group's letterhead with blank spaces in which to write the date, location, and time of the meeting. The blank spaces imply *Les Cenelles* printed multiple cards in anticipation of continued meetings.

Other correspondence at the University of New Orleans includes letters from two *Les Cenelles* members, writer Arna Bontemps and the New Orleans Urban League

⁶⁸ Marilyn S. Hessler, "Marcus Christian: The Man and His Collection," *Louisiana History* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 37-55.

⁶⁹ The Marcus Christian Collection contains over twenty boxes of correspondence between the years 1913-1976. Box Five contains Christian's correspondence from July 15, 1939 – October 30, 1942. Those dates are before Saxon's death and near the end of Christian's tenure with the FWP.

secretary and a former FWP writer Clarence Laws. Both men expressed excitement over the formation of *Les Cenelles*. Bontemps sent several poems for display at the *Les Cenelles's* art exhibit, and Laws was a founding member and chair of *Les Cenelles*. Additionally, the letters of both men mention their own recent contact with Lyle Saxon. Neither Bontemps nor Laws provided details of their correspondence with Saxon, but their prose suggested a friendliness in the letters context. The letters show that Saxon maintained contact with his present and former FWP colleagues and took genuine interest in their work.

Saxon wrote Christian in May of 1943 to congratulate him on receiving a Rosenwald fellowship and to inquire upon the status of Christian's book. Saxon concludes the letter by asking Christian not to "lose touch with me entirely."⁷⁰ The fact Saxon chose to continue relationships with these writers suggest that if Saxon's understanding of race was shaped by his time, he believed the work of these artists needed support to thrive.⁷¹

The Amistad Center holds collections of *Les Cenelles* members Geraldine Amos, John Blassingame, Jacob Lawrence, Octave Lilly, Homer McEwen, and Ferdinand Roussève. Reference to *Les Cenelles* was not located in any of these collections. The Octave Lilly Collection contains correspondence between Lilly and other FWP writers, including Lyle Saxon. A letter from 1932 thanks Saxon for his donation to a "Negro

⁷⁰ Lyle Saxon to Marcus Christian, May 31, 1942, Box 5, Subseries XI.11, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

⁷¹ See Harvey 32-35, 253-256 for a discussion of Saxon's public and private views on race. Saxon was supportive of black artists but his private letters reveal a paternalistic attitude. Also see 59-67 for an overview of Saxon and his French Quarter contemporaries.

Youth Conference.” Again, further light shines on Saxon’s relationship to his black employees and his feelings about race in general.

In addition to the Marcus Christian Collection and the Amistad Research Center, several other sources in and around New Orleans contain information about The Federal Writers’ Project, but nothing pertaining to *Les Cenelles*. Tulane University’s Special Collections holds the Lyle Saxon papers, and the Williams Research Center of the Historic New Orleans Collection holds the Records of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), Works Projects Administration, Relating to Louisiana, 1935-1943 (M1366). The latter collection are microfilmed documents with correspondence between FWP officials and Lyle Saxon providing information as to the history of black writers in the FWP, and giving details of Saxon’s and his superior’s pleasure with the quality of the work produced by the Dillard Project. The Melrose Collection at Northwestern State University’s Cammie G. Henry Research Center holds Lyle Saxon’s diaries and correspondence, and the Clayton Collection. Northwestern State University’s collection includes files used by Ronnie Clayton for his 1990 book, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers’ Project*. Additionally, the Clayton Collection contains materials related to the Louisiana FWP. Again, no mention of *Les Cenelles* is found in either collection.

***Les Cenelles* in a Local and Global Context**

To put *Les Cenelles* in the larger historical discussion, one can consider how some historians frame early twentieth-century African-American history. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, large-scale migration from the British West Indies to the Americas

and Caribbean islands contributed to the construction of black identity in these migrants' new homes. Historians often look beyond the politics of the era and examine how issues of race, class, and gender affected these migrants' lives, and therefore shaped black identity. Historians such as Lara Putnam discuss this era of black history in relation to the "myriad black internationalism that flourished in popular culture" in the early twentieth century.⁷² Moreover, she examines the inspiration received by black artists at the time received from the large number of Caribbean migrants arriving in the United States. Putnam disagrees with the notion that local cultures are developed exclusively from within, claiming mass Caribbean migration in the 1930s from influenced African-American identity.

Robin D.G. Kelley offers an explanation as to why African-American history and identity is often best understood through an international perspective.⁷³ Kelley claims mass migration from Southern states to Northern cities left many African-Americans without a sense of national belonging. As African-Americans left the familiarity of the South many attempted to carve out a national identity. According to Kelley, the mainstream historical profession in the early and mid-twentieth-century put emphasis on nationalism and the nation state, and focused on the inevitability of nations. In a reaction to the exclusion of African-Americans in the larger national portrait, black historians often reconstructed African-American history with a focus upon a "glorious African

⁷² Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 7.

⁷³ Robin D. G. Kelley "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950," *The Journal of American History* (Dec, 1999):1045-1077

past.” These historians helped to create what he termed a “cultural basis for a type of ‘peoplehood.’”⁷⁴

Along with the pan Africa-American trends that were common in early twentieth-century black literature and art, in New Orleans many African-Americans of that era, and those before them, took great pride in their local culture and achievements. In a 1907 rebuttal to what he saw as W. E. B. DuBois’s oversimplification of the lack of education and the political complacency of southern African-Americans, New Orleans writer Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes points to the achievements of New Orleans’s Creoles of color in the arenas of the arts, politics, and sciences.⁷⁵ Desdunes’s 1911 book, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* lauded the history of New Orleans’s black French speaking Creole population and their accomplishments. He drew delineation between what he labeled the attitudes of the “Anglo-Negro” and the “Creole-Negro.” Desdunes not only believed the two people as different racially, but with core differences between their cosmologies of the world. Identifying the Creole-Negro first, Desdunes writes:

One hopes, the other doubts. Thus we often perceive that one makes every effort to acquire merits, the other to gain advantages. One aspires to equality, the other to identity. One will forget that he is a Negro in order to think that he is a man; the other will forget that he is a man to think that he is a Negro.⁷⁶

Themes of hope permeate throughout Desdunes’s description of the New Orleans Afro-Creole. He stresses that within the Creole world of New Orleans, African-Americans saw

⁷⁴ Kelley, 1050.

⁷⁵ Born in New Orleans in 1849 to French speaking free people of color parents from Haiti and Cuba, Rodolphe L. Desdunes was a writer, civil servant, and organizer of the *Comité des Citoyens*, which spearheaded the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896.

⁷⁶ Joseph Logsdon, “Rodolphe Lucien Desdunes: The Franco-African Ideology of a New Orleans Creole,” Unpublished paper, Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, University of New Orleans; Folder 38, Box 77, Series 10, A.P. Tureaud papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

the French Revolutionary cry for *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité* as the inspiration for interracial harmony.

Refugees from Saint-Domingue who settled in New Orleans between 1791 – 1810 reinforced the French-speaking population of New Orleans, and made a profound and lasting effect on the free population in New Orleans.⁷⁷ Free people of color from Saint-Domingue quickly assimilated into the free black population of New Orleans and they and their descendants made advancements in the fields of literature, politics, education, religion, and arts.⁷⁸ The French revolutionaries of 1848 inspired free blacks in New Orleans to fight for their own “social and political revolution” that brought liberty in France and Saint-Domingue.⁷⁹ Some Afro-Creole New Orleanians understood their heritage as French, not African, and it was from within that legacy the New Orleans’s Creole of color often turned for inspiration. A pride in local achievement, and connection to the past, is visible in the twentieth-century *Les Cenelles*.

Afro-Creole Literature in New Orleans through the Lens of the Dillard Project

In addition to contributing to *Louisiana, A Guide to the State* and the *New Orleans City Guide*, and writing *The Negro in Louisiana*, members of the Dillard Project wrote articles and editorials to local newspapers, and these articles are revealing as to the

⁷⁷ For more on the influence of Saint Domingue refugees to New Orleans see Caryn Cossé Bell and Joseph Logsdon, “The Impact of Revolutionary Unheaval in France and the French Caribbean on nineteenth-century black leadership in New Orleans.” *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, Vol. 15 (1992): 142-153; Natalie Dessens, “The Saint-Domingue Refugees and the Preservation of Gaelic Culture in Early American New Orleans,” *French Colonial History*, Vol. 8 (2007): 53-69; Mark Charles Roudané and Matthew Charles Roudané, “The Color of Freedom: Louis Charles Roudanez, New Orleans, and the Transnational Origins of the African-American Freedom Movement.” *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring 2008), 1-6.

⁷⁸ Dessens, 65; Bell and Logsdon, 151-153. Notable New Orleanians of Haitian lineage include Sister Henriette Delille, Louis Victor Sejour, Camille Thierry and brothers Rodolphe and Pierre-Aristide Desdunes.

⁷⁹ Bell and Logsdon, 143-144.

attitude of the authors to black literature of the period. The Dillard Project members wrote with great optimism of an increasing acknowledgment of African-American accomplishments in the arts and politics. The Dillard Project writers spoke out against discrimination and often portrayed the African-American's contribution to the arts as his greatest accomplishment.⁸⁰ In 1941, the group contributed an article to *The Louisiana Weekly*, highlighting the literary accomplishments of African-Americans in New Orleans. Titled "Negro Writers Prominent in LA. Literature," the article reads like a who's who of black Creole writers from the antebellum era through WWII.⁸¹ The article is attributed to the Dillard Project and not an individual author. However, Marcus Christian wrote articles for the *Louisiana Weekly* for many years, including a 1937 series of editorials focusing on prominent nineteenth-century free people of color and their contributions to New Orleans culture.⁸² While the 1941 piece is a somewhat hagiographical paean in its prose, the article delineates Creole literature into four phases and provides information on both well-known writers and some lesser-known figures.

According to the article, the first phase of Creole literature begins in the 1840s with a group of free men of color. These men made considerable contributions to the canon of Louisiana literature, including *L'Album Littéraire* the original *Les Cenelles*. Throughout the piece, the Dillard Project writers made it a point to highlight the Creoles' most positive attributes. The article claims educated Creoles held exclusive possession of antebellum African-American literature in Louisiana. They spoke and wrote in French

⁸⁰ Redding 55-58.

⁸¹ "Negro Writers Prominent in LA. Literature," *The Louisiana Weekly*, Sept. 20, 1941. An unattributed and abbreviated version of the article appears in the *Louisiana State Guide*. Saxon, *Louisiana, A Guide to the State*, pp 188-189.

⁸² Box 17, *Louisiana Weekly*, 1932-1957. Series XIII. Literary and Historical Manuscripts by Marcus Christian, Marcus Christian Collection (MSS 11), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

and were born into stable middle class or wealthy families. All worked as professionals and tradesmen, claimed a much higher social status than a slave, and some received their education and earned success in France. The article stresses the Creole's French heritage and intellectual achievements. Of course most free people of color were far from being to the manor born, the *Louisiana Weekly* article focuses on educated intellectual Creoles.

Beginning with the founding of the tri-weekly French and English language *L'Union* in 1862, the paper became the first daily black newspaper in the United States and was renamed *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orléans*. *La Tribune* published editorials on topics such as the condemnation of slavery, labor rights, education, universal male suffrage, and fiction and poetry promoting racial equality.⁸³ In 1864, Belgian-born socialist Jean-Charles Houzeau took the helm as editor.⁸⁴ Desdunes remembered Houzeau as a “learned man and a friend of the oppressed, he put all his ardor and talents into the service of the cause he embraced.”⁸⁵ The newspaper's mottos switched to mirror political and social issues of the day, including “To Every Laborer His Due: An Equitable Salary and Weekly Payments, Eight Hours a Legal Day's Work” and “Universal Suffrage is the Only Safe and the Only Just Basis of Reconstruction.”⁸⁶ Other African-American newspapers of the era included the *Louisianian* and the *Daily Crusader*.

As with the previous group of writers, the Dillard Project writers pay special note in the article to the free lineage, superior educations and intellect, professions, and wealthy backgrounds of these Creole New Orleanians. Another distinction is the

⁸³ Dessens, 65.

⁸⁴ Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Time Passage at the New Orleans Tribune: A Memoir of the Civil War Era*, trans. Gerard F. Denault, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

⁸⁵ Desdunes, 133.

⁸⁶ Mark Charles Roudané, *The New Orleans Tribune: an Introduction to America's First Black Daily Newspaper* (New Orleans: Self Published, 2014).

emphasis of the Creole's political action and demand for racial equality, especially espoused in African-American newspapers. *L'Union* did advocate for abolition, but its writers focused on the concerns of the elite free people of color in New Orleans and their crusade for political equality. In contrast, *La Tribune* demanded the equal rights of all people of color. During the Civil War, and later with a Reconstruction government in place in Louisiana, these newspapers acted as sounding boards for African-Americans to call for equal opportunity for the disfranchised. And while their crusade for egalitarianism ultimately failed with the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896 and Jim Crow installed as the law of the land, the article remembers these men and women as selfless leaders who often risked their lives in the name of equality.

The third literary phase from the article occurs during the era commonly referred to as the "Nadir of the Negro." The period between 1890 and the 1930s was a time when strict legislation forced most African-Americans into a role of noncitizenship, depriving them of basic civil rights and previously enjoyed privileges in the northern states.⁸⁷ In a powerful statement, the Federal Writers define Jim Crow as a time when the African-American was:

Disfranchised and ruthlessly exploited, he had little time for leisure or for art. A generation had grown up since the Civil War that was neither slave nor free, showing all the faults of both systems, with few of the blessings of either. Art had almost left them. A grinding plantation economy ruined their body and soul.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir* (1954); C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (1954); Nikki L. M. Brown, Barry Stentiford, eds., *Jim Crow: A Historical Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014), 295-299. For a discussion of the deplorable condition of African-American public education during this era in New Orleansians see Donald E. DeVore, 125-126.

⁸⁸ *Louisiana Weekly*, Sept. 20, 1941.

While the Dillard Project writers declare the literature produced during this bleak epoch as negligible, they do note some exceptions.

Creole author Rodolphe L. Desdunes was singled out as the era's most significant writer. The Dillard Writers regarded Desdunes's book, *Nos Hommes at Nostre Histories*, as one of the most important works on the lives and achievements of the Afro-Creole in New Orleans. While Desdunes did pick and choose exceptional people to commemorate, and focused on his subject's genteel backgrounds and invaluable contributions to Louisiana's history, his work is still worthy of study.⁸⁹ The article does not dedicate much ink to this period of extreme oppression and only discusses three literary figures. The article concludes with a brief mention of four writers working in the 1940s including Louisiana native and friend to both Marcus Christian and Lyle Saxon Arna Bontemps; Archie E. Perkins and Charles Barthelemy Roussève are noted as biographers of prominent African-Americans in Louisiana; and Lucien V. Alexis is commended for publishing his scientific discoveries.

The *Louisiana Weekly* article highlighted the accomplishments of men and women who, despite the hardships of a segregated society, created art at least equal to that of white writers. African-Americans not only possessed the capability of working within the styles of Western European art, but they could master their crafts. The article followed Desdunes's model of focusing on exemplary Creoles and their impeccable credentials. The Dillard Project writers hoped to preserve and protect their heritage, and to continue the tradition of using Western art to argue their capabilities, with the

⁸⁹ See Bell and Logsdon; Natalie Dessens, "The Saint-Domingue Refugees and the Preservation of Galic Culture in Early American New Orleans;" Mark Charles Roudané and Matthew Charles Roudané, "The Color of Freedom: Louis Charles Roudanez, New Orleans, and the Transnational Origins of the African American Freedom Movement."

formation of *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters. *Les Cenelles* was not only a group of like-minded people with shared interests; the works produced by *Les Cenelles* demonstrated the necessity of equal rights for African-Americans.

Conclusion

Les Cenelles opened their art exhibit with a sense of pride over their present accomplishments, and with a series of projects they hoped to complete in the near future. However, these objectives never materialized, as there is no evidence *Les Cenelles* put on another exhibit or achieved their future goals. The most obvious reason *Les Cenelles* faded was the entrance of the United States into World War II. In fact, an article in the *Louisiana Weekly* encouraged the public to support *Les Cenelles*' efforts "to keep alive some aspects of our culture in a world at war."⁹⁰ At least two members, Clarence Laws and Elton Williams, were drafted, and other members were possibly involved with the war effort. Another probable cause for the group's disbandment was the closure of the Dillard Project at the end of 1942. Many *Les Cenelles* members were suddenly unemployed and needed to find new ways to support themselves and their families, perhaps outside of New Orleans. The need for financial security would undoubtedly come before their commitments to *Les Cenelles*.

In spite of its brief existence, *Les Cenelles* did leave behind a legacy. The legacy has less to do with the group's collective achievements, but with their role during a transitional period in African-American literature in Louisiana. Similar to the model championed by Rodolphe Desdunes, *Les Cenelles* members not only looked to New Orleans' Creole population as the pinnacle of African-American artistic achievements,

⁹⁰ *Louisiana Weekly*, June 6, 1942.

but also they aimed to use this model as a means of effecting social change. However, during what author Tom Dent describes as “the lean Forties and Fifties,” the Eurocentric style of poetry practiced by members of *Les Ceneilles* fell out of vogue with young African-American poets.⁹¹

Dent uses both Christian and Lilly as examples of two early twentieth black artists who believed that the black artists of the 1960s not only underappreciated the previous generation’s contributions, the level of work was not up to the standards of their predecessors. Dent claims Christian “was a staunch opponent” of his LSUNO student’s black protest literature, and that it did not qualify as art.⁹² Octave Lilly openly criticized Black Nationalist poetry and expressed his artistic isolation and frustration in the 1940s and 1950s. In a journal entry, Lilly writes about his “sense of injustice and short sightedness toward his generation” from the black activists in the 1960s. Lilly’s entry does not explain his reasons behind his feelings, but additional documents professing the same sentiment may lead to further understanding of how some older black civic leaders understood the younger activists of the 1960s.⁹³

Dent claims that despite the differences in artistic styles, the black activists of the 1960s inspired older writers such as Christian and Lilly to once again publish work.⁹⁴ Dent saw Christian as ahead of his time, a literary man from a backward community. Christian loneliness and feeling underappreciated, and his sense of isolation perhaps made him bitter toward black consciousness literature. Dent expressed hope that

⁹¹ New Orleans born writer Thomas Dent was the son of former Dillard University, and Christian’s former employer, Albert Dent. Tom Dent, “Marcus B. Christian: A Reminiscence and Appreciation.” *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 18, No 1 (Spring 1984). 22-26; 23.

⁹² *Ibid*, 22.

⁹³ Folder 18, Box 1, Series 1, Octave Lilly Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁹⁴ Dent 23; Marcus Christian, *Ironworkers of Louisiana, 1718-1800*, Pelican Publishing (Gretna, Louisiana, 2002); Octave Lilly, *Cathedral in the Ghetto*, Vantage Press, (1970).

Christian might be appreciated once more when his unpublished works became available to the public.

Les Cenelles Society of Arts and Letters formed to serve as both a vehicle to celebrate the artistic legacy of New Orleans' free people of color, and as a collective of young artists who wanted to produce and make their works public. *Les Cenelles*, a group of successful and respectable African-American intellectuals, hoped to use their art to help erode negative stereotypes of African-Americans and help bring forth racial equality. Ultimately, they wanted to build upon the achievements of the past to create opportunities for African-Americans in the present. Although they did not achieve all of their goals as war took over the daily lives of many Americans, *Les Cenelles* did not fail. The members did not allow the Jim Crow laws of the day to stop them from creating public art. The members who worked for the Dillard Project proved themselves worthy of working for the FWP and helped create employment opportunities for dozens of additional African-American writers in Louisiana. They earned the respect of Lyle Saxon and served as a bridge between the era of the Plessy decision to the Civil Rights Era. While the collective *Les Cenelles* did not produce a substantial body of work, *Les Cenelles* Society of Arts and Letters deserves recognition for its contributions to the legacy of African-American art in Louisiana and for its contributions to American art as a whole.

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