

Trailer Trash Talks Back:
John Dufresne's *Louisiana Power and Light*
by Bernard Gallagher

It seems to me that it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see parallels between the American South and Western European Colonies. Both the American North and Europe used military force to establish their dominance, and both the American North and Europe have used cultural imperialism to establish and maintain that dominance. For instance, both dominant cultures construct their subject cultures as exotic and effeminate.¹ There is the inscrutable Orient and the aristocratic South. There is primitive and undeveloped third world and the poorly educated and backwards South, populated by Boss Hoggs, Duke Families, and any number of unctuous, well-spoken villains with long hair and slender fingers. There is the semi- or incompetent and corrupt governments of former colonies and, yes, there is the semi- or incompetent and corrupt state governments of the South. There are the beautiful but often incomprehensible dialects of native peoples and the genteel loquaciousness of the South, rendered somewhat quaint and archaic by its “beautiful” southern accent.

If these parallels seem too tidy, it is because they are. As charming as it may seem, it would be far too simplistic to see former colonies or the American South as homogenous wholes. They are instead often rife with conflict because they use the same sorts of cultural imperialism to define internal hierarchies and to set internal class boundaries. On one level, there is an interstate hierarchy of southern states, with each one seeking to establish itself as superior to the others. Louisiana, unfortunately can often be found at the bottom of this hierarchy of southern states, only slightly ahead of Mississippi.² On another level, there are intrastate hierarchies as well. There are, for instance, the contentious intrastate conflicts among various religious sects as they struggle for domination, and there are clearly

established intrastate social hierarchies in which wealthy and educated elites establish their dominance over the less well off and well educated. Faulkner's Quentin Compson, I suppose, would seem a prime example of how powerful and determinate these social hierarchies are. His suicide appears to be the result of his despair both over the loss of the honor and virtue he believes is associated with the old South and over the loss of his membership in the elite class.

So, if I can step back for a minute, the points I am making here are three: first, “hierarchies and [colonial] ‘systems’ depend for their functioning on rigid categorizations, specifically on binary codification (Ashcroft et al. 99). In the case of the American North and American South, some of those binaries would appear to be the following: north/south, self/other, normal/abnormal, masculine/feminine, educated/uneducated, innocent/decadent, pure/corrupt, rich/poor, urban/rural and so on. The second point that I want to make is that this “imperial discourse” of the American North, which is rooted in the binaries just mentioned, maintains its authority over the South by striving to delineate the South (here you can substitute any of the binaries listed above) “as radically different from the” North,” while maintaining “sufficient identity with the . . . [South] in order to valorize control over it” (Ashcroft et al. 102). The third point I want to make is that American South, even when it attempts to step outside the “imperial discourse” of the North, appears to replicate this same “imperial discourse” unconsciously when it uses the same binary system of categories to construct both interstate and intrastate identities. The “New South,” it appears to me, is nothing more than an attempt of the old and agrarian South to make itself over in the image and

the likeness of the industrial North, minus unions of course

John Dufresne's first novel, *Louisiana Power and Light*, may be of interest, then, because it attempts to explore and deconstruct both the imperial discourse of the American North outlined above and the American South's unwitting replication of that imperial discourse. In a March 21, 2002 interview with Robert Birnbaum, Dufresne addresses the supplementary elements of the imperial discourse about which Ashcroft writes. From almost the very beginning of the interview, Dufresne tries to step outside the binary oppositions implied by the term Southern Writing. He tells Birnbaum that anyone who wants to know what the term Southern Writing means should probably talk with "whoever calls it" that. Dufresne also tries to step outside the binary opposites lurking behind the term Southern Writing when he says that he's "not even sure what the South is" (Interview).³ Later on, when Birnbaum and Dufresne both agree that the term Southern Writing carries a "pejorative" connotation, they quickly deconstruct the term by wondering why there is no category called "Midwestern writing" (Interview).

The power of imperial discourse, however, is so great that it ultimately reins Dufresne in. He says,

It's like New York and then the rest of the world. In New York, evidently, they write for everybody, but if you are not from New York — I'm generalizing, certainly not all New York writers are like this.... nobody wants to know about people who live in trailer parks. I would rather know about them, but that's my taste. (Interview)

His dislike for the north/south binary implied in the term "Southern Writing" is clear enough when he re-inscribes the traditional north/south binary as New York and everywhere else, thus parodying the original binary and highlighting an aggressive New

York ego-centrism that identifies its interests as universal and the interests of everyone else as benightedly parochial. Though Dufresne would like to reject the category Southern Writing, Dufresne adopts that category and its corresponding polarities when he puts himself, his writing, and his audience in opposition to New York. At the very moment he seeks to counter the imperial discourse of the North, he is subsumed by it; thereby demonstrating its power. Dufresne, now caught in the web of binary oppositions from which he sought to free himself, next confesses that he is more interested in people who live in trailer parks than he is in New Yorkers and their urban world, once again adopting the very binary relationship he wishes to deconstruct. What's clear by now is that the reversing the antipodes of North and South simply re-establishes the North as the standard against which everything else is measured. It appears then that directly rebelling against the imperial discourse of the North simply replicates and legitimates that discourse. The better strategy, it would seem, is to problematize that set of binary polarities, thereby revealing the Wizard behind the curtain.

And problematizing is exactly what *Louisiana Power and Light* does. Dufresne's novel clearly parallels his struggle with and his failure to escape from categories in general and from the imperial discourse of the North in particular. However, the narrative structure of the novel, with its frequent digressions, flashbacks, catalogs of accidents, genealogies, and back stories, reinforces the idea of heterogeneity and the impossibility of a totalizing discourse, thereby subverting both the notion of a unified Other and the possibility of clearly recognizable telos. The narrative point of view, on the other hand, somewhat compromises this counterhegemonic move. Louise Kennedy of the *Boston Globe* says it this way:

For the narrator that Dufresne has chosen to tell this wildly rambling but very pointed tale is not any one of the marvelously rich

and varied characters he conjures up. . . . ; the voice we hear, in its understated wit and all-encompassing humanity, is the very soul of Dufresne's fictional town. The author makes this quite clear, even having the narrator refer to itself as "we." (B27)

So, while it is true that Billy Wayne Fontana has a voice and engages in dialogue, it is equally true that the reader's experience of Billy Wayne Fontana is almost completely mediated, thereby replicating the hierarchical social structure that the narrative structure of the novel calls into question. This sort of narration uses the zero focalization about which Prince speaks, and it is decidedly different from the traditional omniscient narrator since first person narrators, even if heterodiegetic, are firmly anchored in the discursive formations that shape and maintain communities. Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," warns readers about the pitfalls of insurgency, telling them that insurgency simply helps to replicate the hegemony from which the subject-other seeks to escape. She also warns readers that even the friendly discourse of well-intentioned narratives will ultimately maintain the subject-Other in its secondary position while simultaneously allowing for its humanity. According to Spivak, hyperbolic admiration for a character or characters is simply a way of reinforcing an existing prejudice without making it appear as prejudice or as limiting or as hurtful (Spivak 292-93). My contention, therefore, is that Dufresne's *Louisiana Power and Light* is only partially successful in letting the subaltern speak. It does, I think, create a space in which Trailer Trash, a term I would like to valorize, can talk back. However, that speech is muted and it occurs mostly between the lines and in what the text cannot say. However, in spite of those limitations, the novel does successfully problematize the bipolar oppositions of imperial discourse (normal and abnormal, subaltern and master, and center and margin, and order and aporia) by demonstrating

how those oppositions inadequately address the one certainty in life, death.

The narrative structure of *Louisiana Power and Light* is most successful in countering the imperial discourse of the North and creating a space for the subaltern to speak when it critiques the idea of narrative order. Like a lot of other post-modern novels, this one explores the constraints of novelistic form much in the same way Beckett does in his trilogy of novels or Graham Swift does in his novel *Waterland*, "a multilayered narrative which is at once a history of domestic upheaval and of the East Anglian fen country" (Drabble and Stringer). Believing that an orderly, linear tale with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end is so out of step with lived human experiences that adherence to such a form would constitute a serious ethical breach of faith, post-modern writers have opted "for the presentation of highly fragmented universes in the created world of art" (Holman 346).⁴ Such post-modern narrative structures, in turn, disrupt the rigidly imposed order of imperial discourse because their multiple layers and competing perspectives fragment and obscure the binary oppositions that have been holding that discourse in place.

The narrative structure of *Louisiana Power and Light*, on two specific occasions, directly addresses the uncertainty both of narrative and of the lived human experience which that narrative structures. In the first instance, the narrators invest over one hundred words in reintroducing readers to Dencil Currence who is hitchhiking home to Monroe. The narrative makes several conventional gestures here; it describes the character, Dencil—"he's . . . sitting spraddle legged on a toolbox in the bed of a pickup" (49); it describes the setting—he's "heading through downtown—what there is of it—Andalusia" (49); and it adds a telling detail to the pickup when it describes a bumper sticker in its window. After all that work, the narrative makes an unconventional gesture and disrupts the narrative pattern it was establishing. The narrators say, "we'll just delete Dencil's journey altogether. The next

time we see him, he'll be in Monroe" (49). This reversal, which ignores mechanical causality that E.M. Forester says differentiates plot from story,⁵ requires readers to replace their faith in mimesis with a watchfulness that interrogates the ways in which ideology and interests rather than phenomena shape narrative. What governs this narrative, personal or otherwise, then, is not so much an allegiance to truth as it is allegiance to the situation at the moment and to the context in which the action occurs.

The second time the narrators exercise this same kind of arbitrariness occurs when they interrupt the narrative line to discuss what might have happened if Fox Ledbetter had not died. They speculate that

It would be gratifying, not to say entertaining, to have had Fox a round for the duration of our story. He would have evolved before our eyes into, well, who can imagine what? Perhaps, he would have fallen in love again. He could be there this morning at his office, phone line on hold, reading *Light in August* or *Wise Blood* for the tenth time. He could look up and see the cockroach negotiate a path across his computer keyboard He might go to lunch at the Dinner Bell with Hotson. . . . He might call Claudia Simmons. . . ." (177)

This digression is more complicated than the first. In it, the narrators express their regrets for Ledbetter's death prior to that death, thereby problematizing narrative order. On one hand, they treat narrative order as arbitrary—they share with the reader the foreknowledge of this character's death. Such foreknowledge, it would seem to me, suggests that the narrative is firmly under their control and that they can adjust it to suit themselves. On the other hand, they also treat the narrative as an inexorable set of external events over which they have no control—they mourn the loss of Ledbetter

because they appear to have no control over the event of his death and because that death deprives them and the readers of a range of possibilities that extends from watching a cockroach crawl into a disk drive to falling in love to calling Claudia Simmons. Such mourning would suggest, unlike the foreknowledge mentioned earlier, that they are subject to the narrative rather than the narrative subject to them. This interplay investigates the relationship of the narrative to identity and depicts the way in which the dominant groups can both institute narratives and be defined by them.

Nowhere does the part played by narrative in identity formation become clearer than when the townsfolk of Monroe (including the narrators) construct a meta-narrative in which they establish themselves as normative and Sovereign subjects and the Fontanas as non-normative subaltern others. The narrators open the *Prologue* to the novel, saying that "telling stories about the Fontanas is our attempt at creating the truth of the past by considering its facts and exploring its sequence" (1). These stories focusing solely on one family, the Fontanas, form the narrative that frames all the other narratives in Monroe and are the source of its community identity rather than heralded public narratives about the "City of Steady Habits, Crossroads of Pipelines, [and] Corrugated Paper Capital of the North Delta Parishes" (1). The incongruous displacement of these three seemingly larger social narratives, one that is moral and two that are economic, and all of which would seem to merit more public attention than stories about one particular family, seems comic until the narrators reveal that these stories create rather than discover truth. Narratives about the Fontanas, then, are objectified constructs that individuate Monroe, Louisiana from the rest of the world and that "form and sustain [that city's] collective definition of social arrangements, and hierarchies of power" (Cerulo 390).

The narrators and Monroe as whole base their identities on a simple binary opposition, one

that establishes them as the primary term and the Fontanas as the secondary and supplementary term. Townsfolk are categorized as self, normal, educated, rich, and urban/rural while the Fontana are categorized as other, abnormal, uneducated, poor, and rural. They hardly seem fit material for such an important narrative. Even the narrators ask,

Why the Fontanas? What are the sorry lives of this benighted passel of swampers going to teach us about life? Is it sins of the fathers? Is it the way we're raised? Is it poverty? Is it ignorance? Is it fate? Is it genes? Is it a sun so hot it drives us crazy? Is it, like Moon Pie, Billy Wayne's younger boy, once explained to his brother, Duane, some deranged God compensating for his insecurities the way he did in Eden. Or is it, like the philosopher said, that we just can't sit quietly in a room, alone, television off, both closed, sit there and face what there is to our lives? (Dufresne 40)

The answer to these questions, I believe, lies in the uncertainty of the origin of the Fontanas, in their mysterious intrusion into an already formed community, and in the attempt of Bosco and Mangham Fontana to form a counter-narrative to the post-Reconstruction narrative in which "everyone found, or was led to, his rightful niche in the new society" (11).

Although the narrators and the community speculate on and off throughout the novel about the origins of the Fontanas, they do not reach a conclusive answer. Russell Sikes and Buddy Tidwell advance the Venusian hypothesis (304), suggesting that a spaceship from Venus dropped the Fontanas off in the swamp. Tenille Suzenau thinks it more likely that Peregrine Fontana, the apparent founder of the Fontana clan, came from "Cooter Point" (305). The community turns this inability to trace the genealogy of the Fontanas back to its

origins as a fault and uses it to separate themselves from the Fontanas.

They have no questions about their own origins, though; they only have questions about the origins of the Fontanas, and this question of origins is not one easily dismissed in the American South where bloodlines are important, especially among the elite. The narrators, for instance, identify Fox Ledbetter as being a member of one "of the first families of Monroe" (72). Yet they do not trace his genealogy or anyone else's farther back than three generations. Of all the characters in the novel, Billy Wayne Fontana is the one with the most complete record of his genealogical history, but no one in the community recognizes this incongruity, no one in the community considers the impossibility of finding one's origins, and no one in the community attempts to uncover their own origins. Since the character with the most established genealogical history is Billy Wayne Fontana, the community has unwittingly inverted the binary opposition that they have used to privilege themselves and to marginalize the Fontanas.

The mysterious appearance of Peregrine Fontana is the second reason for the communal interest in the Fontanas. He "stunk like marsh gas, had webbed fingers, and caused a panic among the women and children of Talla Bena when he appeared on Main Street in nothing but alligator hide drawers" (10-11). Physical deformities, mode of dress, and the suddenness of his appearance mark Peregrine as different from the community into which he has stepped. There is no inversion of the binary polarities that privilege the community at the expense of the Fontanas here. There are however, a number of oddities that blur this distinction between the townsfolk and the Fontanas. Chiquita Deal still sucks her thumb at the age of thirty-five (139); Ted Muto sleeps and drools during the meetings of the Great Books Club where he goes to meet and pick-up women (139); Cicero Wittlief sends letters to Suzanne Pleshette; Tommie Nash locks her "doors and windows six times every night," chews "each

bite of food twenty-seven times,” and never buys “chicken because you can never get all the little hairs off. (139); and Bobby Sistrunk has eaten “the exact same food for breakfast every day for the last five years (139). Valerie Sayers, Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame describes these quirks in a review of *Deep in the Heart of Paradise* as “a manic insistence on Southern weirdness.” As much as the natives of Monroe would like to differentiate themselves from the Fontanas, outside observers are not so willing to grant them their privileged position in the binary opposition they used to normalize themselves.

The counter-narrative proposed by Bosco and Mangham Fontana neatly inverts a post-reconstruction narrative in which everyone has either found or been placed in his rightful niche (11). The Fontana brothers wander “the Delta for forty years claiming” that they and their followers are “the lost Tribe of Israel” (11). They eventually claim “Chauvin Bottom” as their “Promised Land” and settle in for good. This Fontana narrative directly counters the meta-narrative told by the townsfolk when it categorizes both them and their followers as God’s chosen and the people of Monroe as the Other. This counter narrative, however, would seem to fail simply because its claim is so grand; the Fontanas are God’s chosen people. However, the dominant communal narrative is hardly less grandiose when it claims that whatever niche people find themselves in at this moment is their rightful niche. This would once again seem to be an example of how narratives about the Fontanas are objectified constructs that individuate Monroe, Louisiana from the rest of the world and that form and sustain [that city’s] collective definition of social arrangements, and hierarchies of power” (Cerulo 390).

The dependency of Monroe on its subject-other and great underclass, the Fontanas, becomes apparent when Earlene and Billy Wayne Fontana separate and file for divorce. The narrator says,

What all this meant was that soon there may not be any Fontanas in Monroe. Some people, maybe even most people, had hoped for this. But then how would we define ourselves as a town without Fontanas? Sure we were the “Pacemaker City” and we had the tallest TV tower in the state and more athletes per capita than any other city in the country. (197)

With the end of Billy Wayne Fontana’s marriage to Earlene and the absence of any offspring, it appears that Billy Wayne is the last Fontana and that the meta-narrative which has shaped collective Monroe into a community is ending. He is the last subaltern, and the binary opposition between self and other, normative and non-normative will break down and have to be reinvented when he dies.

The deaths of Billy Wayne Fontana and his two boys, Duane and Boone Kyle (otherwise known as Moon Pie) resurrect the same worry about the communal identity of Monroe. The death of the Fontana family means that

This was the end of a presence that we had all taken for granted, and we weren’t at all sure what we would do from that day forward. It was as if something in the soul of the town had died, or worse, we feared that we had let something precious slip away.

What would happen to Monroe now? (297)

Although the Fontanas have been categorized as a “benighted passel of swampers” (40), their position as subalterns in the social hierarchy have deflected the attention of communal Monroe from its own deformities, idiosyncrasies, and the “enfeebled and transient condition . . . they share” (39). Russell Sikes has a pronounced lisp and believes he has been abducted by aliens, but he occupies the primary category of normative and is viewed as being a step above the Fontanas. Angelo Candelo is elected to office as a Louisiana State Senator after a

twenty-two shell penetrates “the gray matter of the brain [and bores] . . . a three inch tunnel through Angelo’s memory, imagination, self-consciousness, verbal faculties and whatnot” (154). Fox Ledbetter fills a swimming pool with carp and sponsors an annual carp fishing party. The catalogue could go on; however, the fact is that the meta-narrative about the Fontanas conscripts them into the class of subaltern and ignores the heterogeneity of their colorful lives. They are always already the other; and their narrative function is to establish the margins of the meta-narrative that forms the communal identity of Monroe. And even though the subaltern cannot speak as Spivak suggests (308), the way in which the meta-narrative that frames all the other many narratives and even the privileged themselves recognize the importance of and are unwilling to part with the subaltern Fontanas.

A visiting Professor attempts to speak for the Fontanas and to remove them from the category of the subaltern when he tells the Great Book club that

we’ll have lost a way of life, a mythology unique to our community, something valuable to preserve. When we all hear stories about the Fontanas . . . we’re learning about ourselves, about what its like to be a human being and how that feels. The Fontanas are jus like us, only more so. /belonged to one of the first families of Monroe, his death did not raise such grave concerns about the welfare of the city. (302)

Although this gesture on the part of the Professor seems kind, it employs what Derrida calls “hyperbolic admiration” (qtd. in Spivak 293), which is a way of reinforcing an existing prejudice without making it appear as prejudice or as limiting or as hurtful (Spivak 292). So, even as the Professor attempts to defend and to speak for the Fontanas, perhaps lifting them up from their subaltern status,

the very meta-narrative he seeks to counter subsumes both him and the Fontanas.

Narrative is powerful and in the case of the Fontanas, coercive. It is our primary way of knowing and being in the world. Thus, communal worry about the loss of the Fontanas and the professorial attempt to recuperate them ultimately provide the Fontanas with a voice. However, what that voice says is neither condemnatory nor redemptory. The Fontanas talk back insofar as the turmoil of their lives and the ways in which it is enwebbed in narrative demonstrate that “Identity [is] . . . a reflexive “gift” stuck in a churning network of identities within the ideological constraints of society” [and that regardless of those constraints]. . . The relationship between agency and subjectivity is inextricable; our identities are functions of the ways in which others construct us” (Gairola).

Spivak goes on to argue that “dominant indigenous groups at regional and local levels” can occupy positions of dominance in one region and subordination in another, thus making it impossible to establish a unified subject-other who would fall neatly in line with class structure and supplement the sovereign subject at the same time (79). Instead, this fluidity among indigenous groups creates “ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle class peasants all of whom belong, *ideally speaking*, to the category of “people” or ‘subaltern classes (80).

Although Spivak observes a very fluid class structure in which different indigenous groups have competing interests, she also notes that “social strata hierarchically inferior to . . . dominant groups still *acted in the interests of those [dominant national groups] and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being* (80). In other words, these competing groups of subalterns only achieved unity in subjugation. What this behavior would seem to demonstrate is that

there is no pure form of consciousness According to Coronil, “Spivak’s aim is “to counter the impulse to solve the problem of political subjectivity by romanticizing the subaltern . . . and “to apply to the subaltern ‘all the complications of “subject production” which are applied to us”” (qtd. in Coronil 646). In short, it would seem that she wants us to step away from the idea of the other as a monolith.

Notes

¹See Said’s *Orientalism*

²See StateMaster.com for its list of best educated states.

http://www.statemaster.com/graph/edu_bes_edu_in_d-education-best-educated-index

³Since most fourth grade students are taught to identify the southern states, it seems reasonable to assert here that Dufresne’s problem is conceptual rather than geographic. Although political commentators for CNN and FOX would consider North Carolina, Texas, and Florida southern states, few, if any, scholars would put writers from those states into the category of Southern. See the full interview for the discussion of Southern Literature.

⁴The term post-modern is one without doubt that is problematic and therefore requires some simple but conventional refereeing, so that readers/auditors will understand that I am using the term in a very limited fashion. Such a defintional move I know is very un-post-modern, but one that I in my aporia feel compelled to make.

⁵Forester argues that causality is what distinguishes plot from story. A plot line might run as follows: the king died because the death of the queen broke his heart. A story or chronological sequence, on the other hand, will run as follows: the queen died and then the king died. Forester argues that causality is what distinguishes plot from story.

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