

California State University, Bakersfield  
Graduate Student Center

Application for  
The Graduate Student-Faculty Collaborative Initiative  
In Research and Scholarship Award

Student: Riley Hewes

Faculty: Dr. Marie Stango

Spring Semester

February 16, 2018

The religious history of New Orleans has fascinated social scientists for decades. Shaped by the synthesis of African, French, and Spanish traditions, the city's religious history stands out amidst the predominance of Anglo-Protestant narratives in American history. While historians have examined religion in New Orleans through a variety of different lenses, this thesis will provide new insights into the formation of alternative spiritual beliefs and practices during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, it will reveal the creative ways in which New Orleanians of all ethnic backgrounds understood life, death, and the supernatural in a city where death was a constant and inherently visible threat. This study is also warranted by New Orleans' most recent experience with extreme disaster in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina. This thesis will provide historical significance for the city's modern challenges with death, disaster, and recovery.

This research project ultimately seeks to make a connection between two major historiographical topics concerning New Orleans. Historians such as Lawrence N. Powell, Jo Ann Carrigan, and Sophie White have explored the city's experience with disease, disaster, and violence by illustrating the realities of death in New Orleans under French, Spanish, and American regimes. They illustrate the history of a city prone to natural and manmade disaster, plagued by frequent yellow fever epidemics, and confronted by disturbing displays of death on a near daily basis. Regarding religion in New Orleans' history, historians such as Emily Clark, Marth Ward, and Ina J. Fandrich have examined the history of the Catholic Church in New Orleans, as well as the origins of voodoo, spiritualism, and religious syncretism. This thesis will make a clear and meaningful connection between these two ongoing historical discussions.

The first two chapters will establish the reality of death and the visibility of death in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The realities of death were numerous. From tropical storms, devastating fires, frequent yellow fever epidemics, deadly heat, and rampant starvation, life in New Orleans was precarious at best. On top of these obstacles, early European settlers lived in constant fear of the so-called "man-eating" Indians. This fear was heightened significantly by the Natchez Massacre of 1729. For the numerous ways in which death was always lurking around the corner, the visibility of death further reminded New Orleanians of their mortality. This section will therefore provide an in-depth examination of public displays of death in New Orleans. Specifically, it will illuminate how public torture, urban slavery, and the visibility of corpses during severe yellow fever epidemics forced New Orleanians to confront their own mortality constantly.

The last two chapters will connect the city's experience with death, disease, and disaster to its religious, spiritual, and cultural history. Voodoo, spiritualism, and a fascination with ghost stories flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The amount of newspaper articles, interviews with ex-slaves, and writings from travelers and locals that address a belief in ghosts, intercessory beings, devils, and curses is astounding. This section will clearly connect this affinity for the supernatural with the ubiquitous nature of death in New Orleans. In a city where life was often cut short, spiritual churches, séance circles, voodoo gatherings, and telling ghost stories established for New Orleanians that life continued after death and that deceased loved ones could still be reached. Lastly, this section will show how the preeminence of death encouraged New Orleanians to appreciate joy, ceremony, and pleasure. After disaster or during yellow fever epidemics, New Orleanians refused to

cower in the face of death. Instead, this thesis will show that, since death was likely coming sooner rather than later, they unabashedly celebrated and appreciated life's pleasures.

The draft of the first chapter is to be submitted shortly after my first visit to the archives in New Orleans which will take place March 11<sup>th</sup> – March 16<sup>th</sup> of 2018. Before the final submission and defense of the thesis by March 2019, I plan on visiting the archives again in May and October. The Research and Scholarship initiative would make archival research in New Orleans possible, allowing me to consult with many important sources within the Historic New Orleans Collection and Williams Research Center, the Louisiana State Museum, the New Orleans City Archives, and vital transcripts at the University of New Orleans.

Important manuscript collections include the Pontalba Letters, accessible at the Earl K. Long Library via Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. These letters represent the only extensive, firsthand account of the yellow fever epidemic of 1796. They provide invaluable insights into daily life during the epidemic, which would significantly support my arguments. Also housed at the Earl K. Long Library, in the Rene Grandjean Collection, are numerous séance transcripts, from 1850-1920, that will allow me to analyze the nature of these séance circles. The New Orleans City Archives at the New Orleans Public Library house many translated French and Spanish government documents from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, including the Conseil de Ville records, which will allow me to analyze ordinances pertaining to religion, crime and punishment, and more. The Louisiana State Museum also houses numerous diaries, pamphlets, and family papers that are only accessible in their translated form through the museum archives.

New Orleans has been referred to as “The City of the Dead,” “The Southern Necropolis,” and the “Wet Grave” of the United States. The legacies of this reputation survive in New Orleans today. Modern-day trends and fascinations with ghosts, vampires, zombies, and other supernatural beings continue to be associated with New Orleans – reaffirmed time and time again through pop culture, ghost tours, and fictional literature. Along with providing historical significance to Hurricane Katrina and the city's experience with disaster and recover, this thesis is relevant to modern New Orleans as it seeks to provide insights into the historical and factual origins of its reputation as a haunted city. This dimension of the thesis seeks to add to historian Tiya Miles' recent work relating to dark tourism and what she calls “ghost fancy” in the American South.

The final outcome of this project is a successful MA thesis defense. However, it is also my goal to participate in conferences appropriate for my topic and to submit chapters of my thesis to academic journals for publication. The Research and Scholarship Initiative award would greatly assist my efforts in illuminating this unexplored and crucial narrative of New Orleans history.

### **Faculty Mentor Statement: Marie Stango, PhD, Assistant Professor of History**

The Research and Scholarship Initiative award will make it possible for Riley Hewes to complete archival research necessary to the successful completion of her MA thesis and produce new historical knowledge. Hewes is training as a historian of Early America and New Orleans, in particular. New Orleans has long been understood by historians to be particularly rich site for examining cultural change, as its population included native people and Africans, as well as French, Spanish, and British settlers. What historians have not well examined – and where Hewes' research

will be essential – is the connection between the high visibility and typicality of death in New Orleans and the new forms of religious and spiritual practice that emerged, she postulates, as a result. Thus, her research question investigates how New Orleans’ residents – Indian and African, free and enslaved, rich and poor – changed their religious and spiritual practices to reckon with mortality.

Ms. Hewes is among the top students enrolled in the MA degree program in the History Department, and has completed a number of relevant seminars which will enable her to successfully complete her thesis. She has completed our cornerstone Research Methods and Historiography course with Dr. Cliona Murphy, earning an A; a Reading Seminar in Atlantic History with Dr. Kate Mulry, earning an A-; and a Reading Seminar in U.S. History to 1865 with me, earning an A-. Overall, her GPA in the graduate program is an impressive 3.82.

As Ms. Hewes’ thesis committee chair, we meet biweekly. Throughout the duration of her award, we will continue to meet regularly, and I will attend the workshop hosted by the Graduate Student Center. Hewes has already presented to me her Thesis Prospectus, which includes a discussion of the relevant historiography, a description of her research project, a list of materials to be consulted, chapter outlines, and a timeline for completion of the thesis, culminating in the thesis defense in March 2019. She plans to draft the first chapter of her thesis immediately following her return from the archives in March 2018.

For historians, data collection takes the form of archival research. Within archival institutions, various collections contain original, primary source materials that historians use to construct narratives about the past and to answer research questions. These materials are unique and only available through in-person visits to these archives. Ms. Hewes has already identified significant archival collections available only at institutions in New Orleans, including the Williams Research Center and the New Orleans City Archives, and she has been in contact with these institutions to plan her research trip to be taken in March and again in May 2018. In these repositories, she will consult French and Spanish legal records, the archives of the Conseil de Ville (municipal government council), financial records of cemeteries and churches, and interviews with former slaves, among other sources. Ultimately, the research trip is a data collection expedition, in which Ms. Hewes will begin to refine her research question and attempt to address the connection between the public visibility of death and new forms of spirituality and religion in eighteenth and nineteenth century New Orleans.

The clear outcome of Ms. Hewes’ research is the successful defense of the MA thesis. However, the value of her research extends beyond her personal academic progress. I plan to use her findings in my Hist 1218: Survey of U.S. History to 1877 course for undergraduate students, particularly in lectures on antebellum slavery and religion and reform in the mid-nineteenth century, and would invite her to give a guest lecture in this course. Furthermore, I will encourage Ms. Hewes to present her research in other academic and community settings. Her work would be welcome at international conferences such as the annual American Academy of Religion conference and the annual Society for Historians of the Early American Republic conference. Furthermore, she may well be invited to present her work at archival institutions in New Orleans, thereby sharing her findings with the New Orleans community and increasing CSUB’s research profile.

