

Max Cafard, *Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion, and Resurgence* (illustrated by Vulpes), Oakland: PM Press, 2025. ISBN: 9798887441009 (paper); ISBN: 9798887441108 (eBook)

Everybody Loves an Alternative Teleology

We have a state today because we have the wrong writing on the body.

—Max Cafard, *Lightning Storm Mind: Pre-Ancientist Meditations*

When I was a little boy, there was a copy of Jan Wahl’s *How the Children Stopped the Wars* (1969), a relic of the European peace movement, in my house. I don’t remember the story very well, but I vividly recall the sculptural form that it took: a heterodox political parade against fascism.

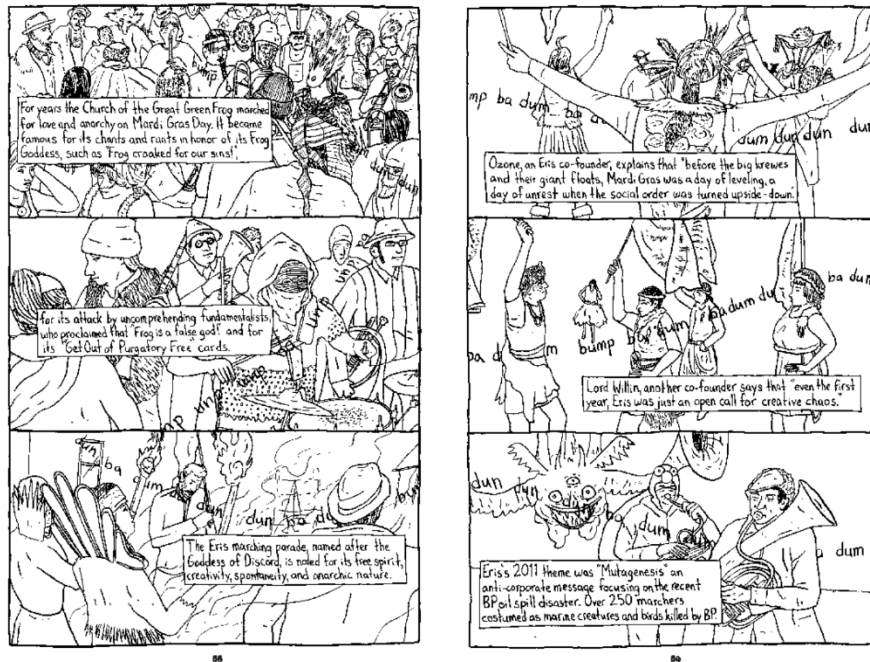
Anarchy in the Big Easy is a modestly long-awaited offering from PM Press with text by Max Cafard and illustrations by Vulpes. The book is an unequivocally brilliant little artifact, the radiant affirmation of a history that many of us here in Louisiana and sometimes beyond have reached out to, touched, and kept close ever since. It takes the form of a graphic novel, and the touch is light, but the air feels sacred. This is a work of history for all the right reasons, not as polemic but as continuity between the living, the dead, the yet to be living, and, so, the yet to be dead.

If the book asks to be compared to a parade, it is not because of the carnivalesque atmosphere often associated with contemporary anarchism, nor because of Louisiana’s sometimes regrettably univocal association with Mardi Gras in the popular imagination, but because *Anarchy in the Big Easy* offers the possibility of locating oneself in time and space as part of a procession and counter-tradition.

It is a radically open work.

Halfway through, we learn about the People’s Carnival, the counter-spirit that animates the Mardi Gras Indians, the Church of the Great Green Frog, and the Trash Parade in which the

French Quarter is invaded by people dressed up in trash and has featured castles and obstacle courses, also both made of trash, in recent years.



From *Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion, and Resurgence*, written by Max Cafard, illustrated by Vulpes. Reproduced by permission of PM Press.

I am a transient transplant to Louisiana, and I am leaving soon. But I stayed here long enough to really know that I will never understand it. Which is the best opportunity to love it, and maybe the best opportunity to love anything. To phrase this a bit differently: New Orleans is characterized by a living principle of Glissant's (1997) opacity, rather than an engagement with what it is, is not, should be, or could be. It is more of a laboratory for play than a lectern for immanent critique. If Mardi Gras is overworked in the popular geographic imaginary of Louisiana, the swamps are underworked. They show up here in the arms of that name given to a nameless maternal spirit of the Mississippi Delta, so clearly seen at this spot where the river kisses the gulf, *La Grande Indulgente*, "The Big Easy".

These swamps are our hinterlands, almost endlessly saturated with living things, the material condition that makes alternative political life possible. Once, they allowed the big easy

to offer refuge to Saint Malo, a maroon village that operated as a “completely self-governing free community for over 150 years, with no taxes, police or oppressive laws” (p.23). Perhaps this alternative community and others—outside the view of the city—allowed New Orleans a certain relaxation against the demands and anomie of modernist urbanism. The hybrid spirit of carnival is also inextricably part of New Orleans, a city that sometimes seems constitutively allergic to nihilism for its chronic excess and its extraordinary repertoire of so many rituals for the dead, their memory, and their continued presence as citizens.

This is reflected in Vulpes’ drawings—smart and clearly, lovingly laborious—and the way that they play with the text. Like all talented comics illustrators, we see Vulpes’ vision most clearly in those moments when they play both with and beyond the conceit of the frame. In moments of historical connection, for instance, sounds move across panels until the frame begins to mutate and then dissolve. The form of the work itself becomes an elegant exegesis on dialectics, a clever ambience of unities and dyads and flow.



From *Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion, and Resurgence*, written by Max Cafard, illustrated by Vulpes. Reproduced by permission of PM Press.

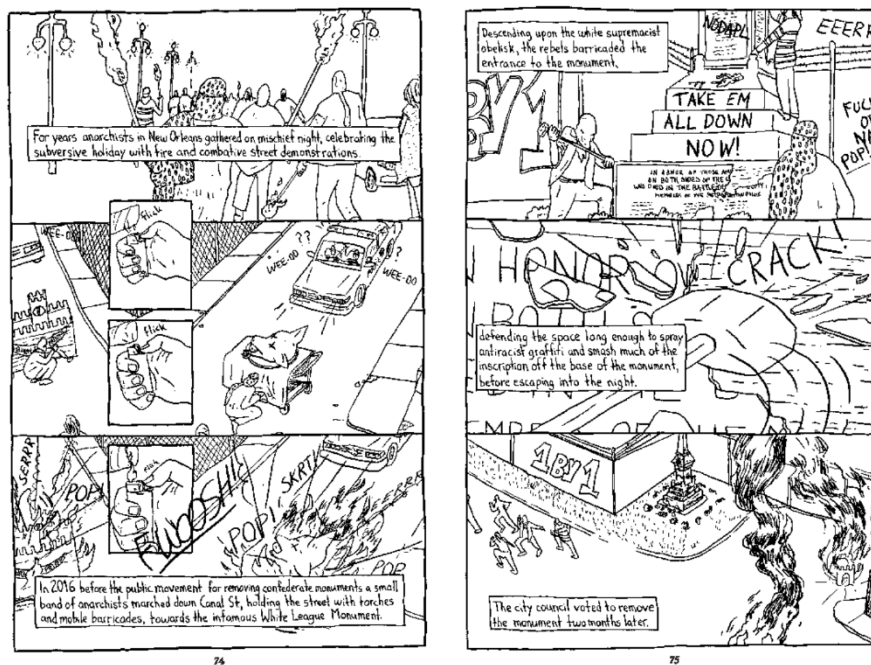
The generous manner in which the book allows readers to triangulate themselves in relation to those before and after feels something like a detournement of the classic comic book form: there is no elite cadre of superheroes to be found, only a horizontal counter-ideological praxis of departed friends like Élisée Reclus, Joseph Déjacque, maroon leader Jean Saint Malo, and many others unnamed. These figures are the meaty threads of a pumping multiplicity; a parade that continues today, extending its hand to each person whom it passes.

The reader shakes hands with Jelly Roll Morton, who turns out to be an anarchist, Malik Rahim, co-founder of the Common Ground Collective, and Big Chief Donald Harrison Sr., a prominent Mardi Gras Indian; they meet Charles Deslondes, one of the largest looming figures in decolonial US history, better known here than anywhere else, and himself part of another procession that began with the Haitian Revolution.

When I was little, I drove through New York City on car trips with my family and enjoyed vivid fantasies about disappearing into its vibratory scape. The city was so different even just those few decades ago that it felt plausible that I might open the door and allow it to consume me and metabolize me into someone else. *Anarchy in the Big Easy* does the opposite; it offers inspiration for how to appear, like a manual for how to discover you have arrived on an alternative timeline where Hegel is a misunderstood jazzman and we are the products of a cosmically flowing movement from the formation of the gulf through the Black Panthers and beyond.

Max Cafard is the trickster-ish possession state and alter ego of Prof. John P. Clark, noted scholar, progenitor of Dialectical Social Ecology and prolific author of *The Impossible Community* (2022) among others. Max first announced his presence to Clark in the 1980s. Max Cafard, in the closest thing to an origin story he has to offer, reports that he came about, inside Clark, in opposition to the “crypto orthodoxy” (Cafard 2017) of the canon. Clark describes his spectral friend Cafard as an alliance with Pierre Clastres, the radical anthropologist who authored *Society Against the State* (1987). Similarly to Clastres, Max represents the emergence of a principle of *writing against writing*. Like Clastres, he is a living opposition against domination who proposes that writing can take other forms than the state’s writing on the body.

There is an unfortunate strain of masculinist metaphysical militancy among some contemporary anarchists that might lead to the strategic assertion of presence here, a slouch towards Maoism, tactics, strategy, machines, all to fortify dualism. But Max slips into the warm bath water of Daoism instead, the puzzling playfulness of non-dualism. We see this in the graphic novel where Max exceeds mere authorship, also reminding us of the rich history of productive absurdity, inspired by New Orleans, but always at hand to any of us – starting a trash parade, using language not to fortify our metaphysics, or simply starting a parade with others who also wish to smash the forces of domination



From *Anarchy in the Big Easy: A History of Revolt, Rebellion, and Resurgence*, written by Max Cafard, illustrated by Vulpes. Reproduced by permission of PM Press.

A question arises, looking at what is still essentially a comic book about history: are there “canon events” in an anarchist comics universe? That turn of phrase is not so old. The blockbuster movie *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) fortified the concept of a canon for various fandom universes by introducing them as a causal meta element—aka the thing that had to happen—

accompanied by a statement, “it’s a canon event”, which one blogger (Krishnan 2023) even described as a replacement for the aphorism, “it is what it is”.

As it happens, “it is what it is and what it is not”, is one of Cafard’s most common refrains. Indeed, the phrase might be said to carry the entire thought of Max Cafard. This is truly remarkable to me—if also deeply ordinary—because the annals of Max Cafard already evidence an extraordinary set of synchronistic un-likelihoods and this set prompts us to reflect on what we no longer even see or pay attention to whenever we enact any form of closure and imagine it is real.¹

This device— “canon events”—turns out to be a very radical prompt about inevitability. When the cops smash heads, or white nationalist thugs congregate, or Common Ground falls prey to a bad actor, is this a canon event? Maybe it is. Maybe it’s not. Or maybe we could appear together in another universe or on another timeline.

Buy a copy of this book for someone who will live longer than you and ask them to do the same.

¹ Apparently, the Max Cafard persona “emerged unselfconsciously” to its host around 1988. The number of meanings it holds in a volley of semiotic play is incredible, from cockroach (Cafard is the French word for cockroach) to “tattler”, to the drummer Max Roach (Maximum/Cockroach). “What seems intriguing is that it would be impossible to simply decide to find a term that would convey all or even most of these interconnected meaning. For this to happen, it must find you” (Cafard 2017).

References

- Cafard M (2017) *Lightning Storm Mind: Pre-Ancientist Meditations* (photographs by Michel Varisco). New York: Autonomedia
- Clark J P (2022) *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism* (2nd edn). Oakland: PM Press.
- Clastres P (1987) *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (trans R Hurley and A Stein). New York: Zone Books
- Glissant É (1997) *Poetics of Relation* (trans B Wing). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Krishnan H (2023) It's a canon event: The new "it's what it is". *Medium* 22 June
<https://medium.com/@harikrishnan.pa/its-a-canon-event-5e212fcedf00> (last accessed 21 July 2025)
- Wahl J (1969) *How the Children Stopped the Wars*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Mat Keel
Department of Geography & Anthropology
Louisiana State University
mat.keel@gmail.com

July 2025