

Louisiana, in his own words

December 14, 2012 10:45 AM Mary Ann Travis
mtravis@tulane.edu

Two lines from the sprawling poem “Aftermaths” by Peter Cooley, poet and professor of English at Tulane University, spell out his purpose. The lines, monostiches, he calls them, are: “This is Louisiana Write It Now +++ I’ll sing about the spirit of the place.”



English professor Peter Cooley is writing, a la Walt Whitman, a sprawling, poetic exploration of Louisiana. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Cooley recently won the [Faulkner Society](#) gold medal for poetry for an 800-word (approximately four-page) excerpt of “Aftermaths,” a massive poem that now stands at 194 pages.

“I wanted to explore and to put it [Louisiana] into my own words,” says Cooley. The poem is “exploring the inside of myself and exploring the outside ? the external. The river’s in it. The weather’s in it. A waitress in Cancer Alley is in it. The leper colony in Carville is in it.”

Cooley received an [ATLAS](#) (Awards to Louisiana Artists and Scholars) grant from the Louisiana Board of Regents in 2011-12 to research and write the poem about the

effects of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.

Monostiches, single-line units, all written in iambic pentameter, are the grid on which "Aftermaths" is built. Into that grid, Cooley has spliced more regular poetry ? elegies, sonnets, conventional poems ? dealing directly with events in Louisiana.

Cooley usually adheres to the self-contained, spare style of Emily Dickinson. But, in "Aftermaths," "I wanted to be Whitman instead of Dickinson," he says. Like Walt Whitman of *Leaves of Grass* fame, "I wanted to let myself go and do whatever."

He spent months driving around Louisiana, talking to people and reading books about the "completely fascinating" state.

"Aftermaths" is not yet a completed book. It has to be weeded, says Cooley. And he's not anxious to finish it. He's happy continuing to write it. "I see it just spinning outward."