The Commodification of Festive Culture in New Orleans

Institutional vs. Grassroots Reactions

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Introduction

Since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, the transformations of the cultural sector in New Orleans have generated intense, often passionate, debate. On the one hand, the commodification dynamics promoted by both the state of Louisiana (through the Louisiana Cultural Economy Foundation) and the municipality (through the Mayor's Office of Cultural Economy) is thought to have led to the standardization and mass production of festivals denounced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in a chapter of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*[1] On the other hand, many local organizations focus on the empowering dimension that popular festive practices such as second lines, Mardi Gras Indians processions, and carnival parades can have.[2] They demand that greater respect and financial support be granted to those whom they refer to as "culture bearers."

[1] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

[2] Second lines consist of people who follow brass bands to enjoy the music, dance, and engage in community-building. The second-line style of traditional dance, in which participants dance and walk along with the social aid and pleasure clubs in an African-based, free-form style with parasols and handkerchiefs, is called "second-lining." Mardi Gras Indians (also known as Black Indians) are black carnival revelers who dress up for Mardi Gras and a few other events in "suits" influenced by Native American and Afro-Creole ceremonial apparel. See Helen A. Regis, "Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 4 (November 1999): 472-504; Michael P. Smith, "Behind the Lines: The Black Mardi Gras Indians and the New Orleans Second Line," *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 43-73.

After briefly considering the history of New Orleans' reputation as a festive city and studying the way city elites capitalized on the label following the Civil War, this paper will use institutional and ethnographic data collected in 2018 and 2019 to highlight the tensions that currently exist between city officials, the tourism industry, and culture bearers over the degree to which local festive culture has been (and should be) commodified. My conclusion will be that the majority of culture bearers do not necessarily oppose the idea of "making money with culture," but rather lament the unequal distribution of tourism revenues in post-Katrina New Orleans. Mayor LaToya Cantrell's recent initiative to divert the monies from a tourism marketing agency to a grant fund for culture bearers will be interpreted as a response to those grassroots concerns.

A Brief History of New Orleans' Reputation as a Festive City

The Birth of a Label

From its foundation as a French colony in 1682 to the early nineteenth century, depictions of Louisiana as a degenerate society received wide circulation in Europe. Three factors gave credence to this portrayal in particular: the fact that the white population included male and female convicts (*forçats*), the fact that the colonists increasingly broke loose of the mercantilist system after 1730 and resorted to smuggling, and the frequency of interracial relationships between enslaved laborers from Africa and European-born planters. One disgruntled visitor, Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, writing at the moment when France was considering selling Louisiana to the United States, denigrated New Orleanians as "rude, envious, interested, avaricious, and presumptuous," adding that "their ignorance exceed[ed] all human credibility." He also viewed local slaves as "lazy, libertine, and given to lying, [though] not incorrigibly wicked."[3]

New Orleans's ill repute grew as the population and the economy expanded. The merchant's capital of the South sold amusement as just another commodity. Fearing long-term repercussions, local officials fought back with ordinances regulating alcohol sales, curtailing the behavior of "lewd and abandoned women" in public space, and forbidding "cries, songs, noise or otherwise… from disturbing… the peace and tranquility of the neighborhood." They imposed $50 annual license fees for all inns, boarding houses, and billiard halls, and $150 for all "coffee houses" as well as taverns, grog-shops, and cabarets, the last three defined as "where liquors are retailed by the glass."[4]

[3] Pierre-Louis Berquin-Duvallon, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas in the Year 1802, Giving a Correct Picture of Those Countries*, trans. John Davis (New York: I. Riley and Co. 1806), p. 59, p. 84.

[4] "An Ordinance concerning Inns, Boarding-Houses, Coffee-Houses, Billiards-Houses, Taverns, Grog-Shops, and Other Houses with the City of New Orleans," March 8, 1831. *A General Digest of the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Corporation of New-Orleans* (New Orleans: Jerome Bayon, 1831), p. 63-70. According to Richard Campanella, enforcement was sporadic, but license fees were taken more seriously. Richard Campanella, " 'Seeing the Elephant' in New Orleans's Interstitial Spaces. A Look Behind Modern-Day Bourbon Street to the Origins of Civic Repute." In Teresa A. Toulouse and Barbara C. Ewell, Eds., *Sweet Spots: In-Between Spaces in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), p. 148.

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Still, visitors' testimonies continued emphasizing the wicked aspects of the city throughout the nineteenth century. Like tourists today, newcomers tended to gravitate toward that which deviated from perceived norms of behavior. Unsurprisingly, therefore, what got most coverage in their journals and travel accounts was the odd assortment of quadroon belles, back-of-town prostitutes, costumed revelers, and mixed-race tavern customers who defied the continental Sabbath, rather than the responsible businessmen and diligent workers. These accounts did not provide a particularly accurate of New Orleans, which is why historians are usually very careful when referencing them. But their "orientalist" view of the city[5] resonated with northern readers and produced a subsequent generation of novelty-hungry visitors – who in turn further reified the city's growing reputation when their preconceived expectations were inevitably confirmed. The result was "a meta-belief in New Orleans' social deviance,"[6] popularized through the print media and reinforced through confirmation bias.

The Commodification of Festive Culture after the Civil War

After the Civil War put an end to New Orleans's dominance as the South's largest metropolis and "merchant city,"[7] New Orleans political and economic elites attempted to attract visitors by developing annual festivals. By the 1880s, the national popularity of the New Orleans carnival celebrations was such that a correspondent for the New York-based *Christian Union* confidently announced, "New Orleans at this season is at its best. Every Northern man has heard of its glories during the Carnival, culminating at the Mardi Gras."[8]

Even better for local boosters, transportation companies eager for passengers increasingly promoted the annual holiday. Intent on maximizing travel, railway companies in particular offered discounted fares, special trains, and seductive tales of Mardi Gras extravagance. According to an 1892 article in the *Dallas Morning News*, the enthusiasm was infectious: "All the traveling passenger agents are out on the road whooping up the carnival and they say more people are going that New Orleans can well take care of." Steamboat companies likewise made special arrangements for river cruises to the Crescent City. As late as the 1920s, "two magnificent boats […] carrying tourists" made their way from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in 1938, Mayor James Stewart of Cincinnati was supporting a "plan of having one of our steamers convey a group of our citizens" to Mardi Gras.[9]

Writers like Lyle Saxon, whose prose oscillated between realism and romanticism, largely contributed to the reputation of New Orleans Carnival across the United States. The tale that he wrote about a Mardi Gras Day he experienced as a child,

[5] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2014).

[6] Richard Campanella, "'Seeing the Elephant' in New Orleans's Interstitial Spaces," p. 138.

[7] Scott P. Marler, *The Merchant's Capital: New Orleans and the Political Economy of the Nineteenth-Century South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[8] Emerson, "In and About New Orleans," *New York Christian Union* (March 6, 1884). Quoted in Anthony J. Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," *Southern Cultures* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2008), p. 128.

[9] "Mardi Gras Business," *Dallas Morning News* (February 26, 1892); Mayor James Garfield Stewart to Mayor Robert Maestri, 19 February 1938, Mayor Robert Maestri Papers, New Orleans Public Library. Quoted in Anthony J. Stanonis, *Ibid.*

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published in 1928 in his *Fabulous New Orleans* collection, reflected the growing taste for exoticism, mystery, and local color in the traveling literature genre.[10] The political and economic elites of the city were grateful to him for depicting their city in such "fabulous" terms, as can be seen from thank-you letters kept at Tulane University. "You are a whole Association of Commerce in yourself," the president of the New Orleans Association of Commerce, Alfred David Danziger, commended in 1929.[11] Interestingly, during the Great Depression Saxon headed the Louisiana branch of the Federal Writers' Project and supervised the writing of a tourist guide to the city of New Orleans: *The WPA Guide to New Orleans.*[12] In this detailed (and still useful) book, the chapter on carnival was subsumed under a larger section entitled "Economic and social development."[13] Clearly, the process of transforming local culture into a commodity had already been ratified.

During the decades that followed, the Convention and Visitors' Bureau and the municipal Publicity Bureau attempted to rationalize the production and consumption of Mardi Gras by establishing new carnival balls and parades for tourists during the weeks preceding Mardi Gras.[14] Meanwhile, a group of businessmen decided to boost the local tourism economy by organizing "super-krewes." The creation of the Bacchus, Endymion, and later Orpheus, organizations in the late 1960s-early 1970s heralded the beginning of a new era in which krewes overtly and explicitly attempted to recruit nonlocals and celebrities to make carnival more spectacular and entertaining. Not only did carnival become a major locus of sociability year-round, but it also started to permeate all the nooks and crannies of the local economy, feeding musicians, dressmakers, photographers, restaurant owners, hotels, street vendors, etc.

In addition to the expansion of carnival (the 1985 season set a historical record, with its 56 parades and a hundred balls in New Orleans metropolitan area between January 6 and Ash Wednesday), New Orleans saw the birth of a host of new festivals in the 1970s-1990s (New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, French Quarter Festival, Gumbo Festival, Tomato Festival, Southern Decadence, Christmas Under the Oaks, Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, Oktoberfest, etc.), a phenomenon that led Ann Pond to reflect on "New Orleans' unique capacity for generating festivals, virtually spontaneously."[15]

Many thought this "festivalization" of local culture and of public space was essentially complete by the end of the twentieth century. The reputation of New Orleans had

[10] Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (New York: The Century Company, 1928).

[11] Quoted in Anthony Stanonis, "'Always in Costume and Mask': Lyle Saxon and New Orleans Tourism," *Louisiana History* 42, no. 1 (2001), p. 40.

[12] On the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana, see Richard Megraw, "Federal Writers Project," https://64parishes.org *Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, edited by David Johnson, Louisiana Endowment or the Humanities, January 10, 2011; Joan Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," *Louisiana History* 32, no. 1 (1991), p. 47-62.

[13] Federal Writers' Project. *The WPA Guide to New Orleans* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1938), p. 174-185.

[14] Kevin Fox Gotham, *Authentic New Orleans: Tourism, Culture, and Race in the Big Easy* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 92-93.

[15] Ann Pond, "New Orleans' Art for Arts' Sake Gala: A Case Study of the City's Penchant for Festival," *Louisiana History* 34, no. 4 (1993), p. 432. According to Pond, this had to do with the "pre-modern" character of the city, which never experienced the same levels of industrialization or unionization as other North American cities did, nor separated work and leisure as strictly.

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indeed become gospel believed worldwide. It was even embraced locally: New Orleanians had come to view themselves as mischievous Epicureans, regardless of their diurnal occupations as bus drivers or tax accountants. And yet, the early twenty-first century saw an intensified commodification of culture in New Orleans, as the municipality vowed to turn it into a place "where culture mean[t] business."

New Orleans, a Place Where "Culture Means Business"

In the early twenty-first century, culture was reframed in neoliberal terms,[16] as a way for New Orleans to attract a new generation of skilled laborers (those whom Richard Florida called "the creative class" in 2002[17]) and to compensate for the stagnation of tourism and oil revenues, as well as the decline of its port activities.[18]

This strategy was first developed at the state level. Mitchell Landrieu, Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana from 2004 to 2010, popularized the slogan "Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business," which originally was the title of a report on Louisiana cultural industries written by the consulting group Mt. Auburn Associates.[19] During his two terms, he promoted an essentially commercial understanding of culture (be it cooking, digital media, the visual arts, music), hoping for a "return on investment" in terms of job creation and state revenue.

Observers thought the damage wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (1,500 deaths just in Louisiana) would temporarily halt this evolution by refocusing the state's priorities on rebuilding.[20] However, the disaster was quickly reframed as an "opportunity" by Lieutenant Governor Landrieu. "Louisiana has an economic asset that other states can only dream of: a multifaceted, deeply rooted, authentic, and unique culture," he insisted when testifying on Capitol Hill just weeks after the New Orleans levee system failed and 80 per cent of the city was flooded.[21] The privatization of the Louisiana public sector accelerated in the following months and years, making the state a perfect example of what Naomi Klein soon dubbed "disaster capitalism," i.e a strategy consisting in "waiting for a major crisis, then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens [a]re still reeling from the shock, then quickly

[16] Like the word "democracy," the term neo-liberal has been defined in widely divergent ways. I will here follow Megan French-Marcelin's definition of it as a "third way" of sorts between classic liberalism and socialist planning, which has led states and municipalities to create favorable conditions for the expansion of the capitalist system, especially through deregulation and fiscal incentives. According to French-Marcelin, the neoliberal turn in New Orleans started in the 1970s, when mayors redirected federal programs meant for low-income housing (*Community Development Block Grants*) to build hotels, convention centers, and company headquarters, thus reorganizing the city around private interests at the expense of the public good. Megan French-Marcelin, "Gentrification's Ground Zero," *Jacobin*, August 28, 2015. https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/katrina-new-orleans-arne-duncan-charters/

[17] Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[18] The energy and maritime sectors experiences significant job losses in the 1980s and 1990s, due to the declining price of oil, growing competition from OPEC countries, technological advance in the field of naval construction, and the consolidation of the energy sector in Houston. Today, the oil and gas industry only employs 4-5 percent of the Louisianan workforce.

[19] Mt. Auburn Associates, *Louisiana, Where Culture Means Business* (Baton Rouge, State of Louisiana, 2005).

[20] Bruce Boyd Raeburn, " 'They're Tryin' to Wash Us Away': New Orleans Musicians Surviving Katrina," *Journal of American History* 94, vol. 3, "Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?" (2007): 812-819.

[21] Quoted in Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation & Tourism, "Louisiana Rebirth: Restoring the Soul of America" (2005), p. 14.

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making the 'reforms' permanent."[22] As in New York after the September 11 attacks, the rhetoric of resilience thus became a pretext and an instrument for privatization.[23]

After he was elected Mayor of New Orleans in 2010, Mitch Landrieu constantly focused on making New Orleans *the* cultural capital of the South, a title it had lost a long time ago to more attractive metropolises such as Atlanta, Austin, Nashville, and Houston. Culture thus became an instrument of Bourdieusian "distinction"[24] in a context of increased regional competition. The establishment of the Mayor's Office of Cultural Economy in 2010 epitomized this commercial apprehension of culture. Under the leadership of Scott Hutcheson, a team of five (later six) people made it their mission to bridge the gap between non-profit and for-profit cultural endeavors.

Parallel to such municipal and state action, the commodification of festive practices accelerated, with the creation of yet new festivals during which concession stands and street vendors were often more numerous than the artists themselves (there are more than a hundred festivals in New Orleans today, i.e more than two every weekend). The oil industry became a crucial sponsor of such festivals (Chevron subsidizes French Quarter Fest,[25] Satchmo Summer Fest, and Christmas New Orleans Style today, while Shell finances Jazz Fest). Also, one could now see processions of tourists led by bands through hotel lobbies, convention center halls, or French Quarter streets, i.e. "mock" second lines in a space other than the street, and at a time other than Mardi Gras, St. Joseph's Day, or Super Sunday.[26] This, by the way, mirrors what has been happening to Bahia's black carnival organizations (*blocos*), the most well-known of which (Olodum, Ilê Aiyê) have totally assimilated marketing codes.[27]

Current debates on the commodification of festivities

How do people on the ground feel about the commodification of festive culture today? To assess the current state of mind of people directly or indirectly involved in the cultural sector, I conducted qualitative interviews in 2018 and 2019 with 65 individuals involved in the city's festive culture, from float-builders to krewe founders to journal-

[22] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf, 2007), p. 7.

[23] Kevin Fox Gotham and Miriam Greenberg, *Crisis Cities: Disaster and Redevelopment in New York and New Orleans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Cedric Johnson Ed., *Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); John Arena, *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (St. Paul, University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

[24] Pierre Bourdieu. *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

[25] Ironically, the opening day of French Quarter Fest 2018 was marked by an oil spill in the nearby Mississippi River.

[26] As musicologist Matt Sakakeeny explains, "in these performances – variously called 'mock' parades, 'hotel gigs,' or simply 'white gigs' – musicians are hired to play familiar repertoire and appear in the traditional uniform of white 'button-down' shirt, black pants and shoes, and a visored cap bearing the band's name in gold lettering. The musicians and spectators are often led by a parade marshal, adorned with a sash and an umbrella, who demonstrates second line dancing to the uninitiated. These jobs are frequently contracted by destination management companies (DMCs), which arrange venues, suppliers, and entertainment for meeting planners, such as Bonnie Boyd and Company's jazz funeral package, 'complete with pallbearers, mourners, styrofoam coffin and 'widow woman.'" Matt Sakakeeny, *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 72.

[27] Laura De La Rosa Solano, "Les blocs 'afro' du carnaval de Salvador de Bahia, entre luttes symboliques et enjeux économiques," *cArgo: revue internationale d'anthropologie culturelle et sociale* 1 (2016), p. 7-18.

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ists to academics to police officers to shop owners to city councilors. I then organized and coded the data according to recurrent themes and subthemes. "Commodification of culture" was one of these themes and yielded about thirty-two results.

Proponents of culture as a way to attract tourist dollars

In accordance with the orientation set by the municipality, many of the people whom I interviewed believed culture was irremediably married to capitalism. This was mostly the case with business owners, float-builders, and super-krewe founders.

In an interview I conducted in June 2018, Barry Kern, who is President and CEO of the float-building company Kern Studios, repeatedly praised the city for understanding the necessity of marketing culture aggressively. At some point, we discussed his latest project, a popular Halloween parade organized by the in-house Krewe of Boo. Unlike New Orleans's Carnival parades, the Krewe of Boo has corporate sponsors. It is also one of the only parades with large floats that gets to proceed on the outskirts of the French Quarter. Even though Kern repeatedly insisted that this was not a money-making venture, he often reverted to a blatantly commercial discourse, vaunting the affordability of membership fees ("it's a good deal"), the expected effects of the event on local businesses, and the projected expansion of the parade into a two-week event. ("the goal is to keep growing"). "Corporate sponsorships and New Orleans parades do not need to be mutually exclusive," he insisted.[28]

Resistance to tourist-oriented, capitalistic culture

Then, they were those who, inspired by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's reflections on the homogenization and mass production of cultural products,[29] rejected any view of culture that was rooted in the capitalist ethos.

Jerome Smith, a veteran civil rights activist and the moving force behind the Tambourine and Fan Club, an organization that promotes black musical and festive traditions in New Orleans, has long complained that the latter had lost most of their original political, oppositional dimension. "There was music for the sake of the music, for the sake of the spirit. There is now a kind of thing that's like the American presence coming into the village, and then commercialization can affect what was hidden, what was protected by separation from that," he lamented in 2002.[30] In 2018, many of my interviewees joined him in stressing the disastrous impact that commodification was having on the quality and complexity of African American cultural practices (which the city had recently subsumed under the "multicultural festivals" category on its Website[31] Victor Pizzaro, a restaurant waiter who was also a member of the 'tit Rex carnival organization and an anti-gentrification activist, issued an especially scathing remark about the role played by the "culture economy" in the "selling" of his city:

[28] Interview with Barry Kern, CEO of Kern Studios, June 28, 2018.

[29] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

[30] Quoted in Mick Burns, *Keeping the Beat on the Street: The New Orleans Brass Band Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p. 128.

[31] See the city's official Website, maintained by the non-profit organizations New Orleans & Company (formerly the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau). https://www.neworleans.com/things-to-do/multicultural/).

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> I think that when I was younger, as a traveler, you knew you had to experience some discomfort to go abroad and experience new places and a variety of cultures. This is true of a lot of the world still, but something started changing about a decade ago, where capitalism and AirBnb decreed that you could have all of the comforts of home when going to new and interesting places. This expectation became the norm and the all-consuming capitalist culture embraced the notion and it became a shared expectation. Landrieu and his cronies saw this new expectation when travelling as a way to sell New Orleans to the unwashed masses and they went for it hard. Now every motherfucking inbred piece of shit from Memphis to Moscow with the means can come shit all over New Orleans and expect us to love it for the crumbs and loose change they leave behind. This has to do with the modern concept of travel and the pimping of New Orleans and the "Cultural Economy". Man, what a fucking term. You'd think people would be ashamed for blatantly trying to monetize culture that way, but no, it's the New Normal. Don't think it is? Listen to WWOZ. Go to Jazz Fest. (With apologies to all friends involved with both local institutions, but c'mon y'all, that shit ain't really for us anymore and YOU KNOW IT.)[32]

Like him, many New Orleanians denounced the extraction of capital from culture as, not just a process of accumulation, but a form of dispossession, the term geographer David Harvey has used to describe the privatization of what used to be commonly held, such as environmental assets, community outputs, or public-sector assets.[33] Mardi Gras Indians, especially, expressed feelings of alienation due to the widening gap between their understanding of art as devoid of exchange value and the way the city has advertised their masking practices since the 1990s. "When someone sells tickets, runs a tour bus through a neighborhood, or uses a stolen image to brand a product, the community feels deprived of its collective product."[34] In other words, the commodification of culture turns the community into a site of privilege for some and poverty for others.

Promoting a "positive commercialization" of culture

Somewhere in the middle, there were the "culture bearers" who tried to make a living out of their traditions while attempting to preserve them. Musician and band leader Aaron Blanks, for instance, presented commodification as welcome source of revenue as long as it was "set up with the people, the natives – not certain individuals that own the Jazz Fest – that's for one person to make money! These people are using these people for their culture and history, to gain for themselves! We have the feeling that other people are making money with our culture."[35] Like him, many of my interviewees insisted that, as much as Jazz Fest was an asset to local culture,

[32] Victor Pizzaro, Facebook post, December 30, 2019.

[33] David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[34] Interview with Ed Buckner, President of the Original Big 7 Social Aid and Pleasure Club and founder of the Red Flame Hunters youth tribe, July 2, 2018.

[35] Quoted in Bernhard Bauer, "Not Commodified Enough: An Anthropological Case Study about Music in New Orleans," p. 354. In Christina Antenhofer, Günter Bischof, Robert L. Dupont, and Ulrich Leitner,

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local culture was a bigger asset to Jazz Fest. When looking at the festival logo – a silhouette of four second liners dancing with umbrellas – they questioned whether the money that trickled down to them was commensurate with that generated by their very presence. "[We] do not feel compensated," confirmed Robert C. Tannen, the co-founder of the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans in 1976. "Many of the cultural producers in New Orleans feel that the city is using their creativity and products without supporting their activity locally and without investing in their activities. If the public, city and state, would make funds available for these producers it would make life easier."[36]

Ben Jaffe, the owner of a traditional jazz venue located in the French Quarter that is very popular with tourists, admitted that the line between commercialization and commodification was a thin one indeed. "Tourist dollars and oil dollars in a very strange peculiar way are what support the music industry here – it's a bitter pill that all of us have to swallow every day." The real problem, however, was making sure people can actually make a decent living out of it and ensuring the survival of local traditions.

> What my dad believed was, that to make cultural traditions last, to have certain social traditions survive, they had to be profitable to the people who were creating them – maybe not financially profitable but maybe something that was redeeming to them in some way. I definitely believe that, I'm a firm believer that if musicians can't make a living with playing music, slowly that traditions that they create would fade.[37]

Mayor LaToya Cantrell's "Third Way"

Since Mayor LaToya Cantrell's election as Mayor of New Orleans in November 2017, the idea that there can be such a thing as a "positive commodification of culture" seems to have been gaining ground. In a pre-inaugural, April 2018 interview with the local magazine *Gambit*, Cantrell mentioned her desire to include culture-bearers in the decisions made by the Mayor's Cultural Economy Office. Her appointment of Alana Harris, a member of a black female marching group named the Creole Belle Baby Doll, as Transition Administrator and then as Deputy of Arts and Culture with the Mayor's Office of Cultural Economy, reflected such a philosophy. Until 2020, however, the office mostly lay dormant.

On January 17, 2020, LaToya Cantrell's administration announced that the city was looking to drastically revamp the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation, changing it from a marketing agency that attracted tourists to a $3.9 million fund that would "support the cultural economy and culture-bearers of the City of New Orleans through programs and projects, and to advance, promote and maintain tourism

Cities as Multiple Landscapes: Investigating the Sister Cities Innsbruck and New Orleans (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2016).

[36] Interview with Robert C. Tannen, *ibid.*

[37] Interview with Ben Jaffe, *ibid.*

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that is equitable and sustainable."[38] "As tourism has continued to grow, many have not felt the benefits of that growth," said a policy paper written by the Cantrell administration.[39] "For a long time there have been culture-bearers who want to and feel that they need to get more of their fair shake," added Josh Cox, Mayor LaToya Cantrell's Director of Strategic Initiatives.[40]

Later in 2020, the City Council ratified the change, renaming the initiative "Cultural Economy Funding Program" in the process. The organization's board was reduced from 15 members to seven, two of which became council members and five of which became culture bearers or "individuals with expertise in the cultural economy" appointed by the mayor. In a matter of weeks, therefore, the organization changed from a marketing agency for the city's tourism industry to "a modest funding program to individuals and organizations that are engaging in activities that promote the cultural economy through educating [the] youth, training […] cultural producers, providing network opportunities, creating cultural events and much more."[41]

However commendable the shift may seem to many New Orleanians, especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic has put a temporary stop to the city's festive season and curtailed cultural activities in general, it is far from unproblematic. For one thing, this proposal still falls under the "cultural economy" category, thus making it very similar to Mitch Landrieu's approach to traditional folk practices and the arts. It is also part of a bigger deal with Louisiana state officials according to which the $16.9 million that previously went to the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation (a public body) will now go to New Orleans and Co., a private non-profit. In other words, the city is privatizing services at the same time as it is creating a small fund to support "culture-bearers" – a testament to the continued strength of the neoliberal agenda. Thirdly, the Cantrell administration's use of the term "culture-bearer" (sometimes replaced with "stakeholder") seems to align with a proprietary view of culture as a "birthright" (one either "bears" culture or not). Ultimately, this may turn individuals and groups into commodified "ambassadors of authenticity" and serve exclusionary purposes based on the artificial divide between "authentic" and "inauthentic" culture.[42] Above all, the fund looks more like a drop in the ocean than a solution to New Orleans's combination of high poverty rate, social inequity and high cost of living, coupled with a scarcity of state funding for public investment. The city's 16,000 to 20,000 "gig economy" workers (visual artists, musicians, but also freelancers, festival production workers, and arena workers who set up stages for events like Jazz Fest) get few government resources to cushion blows like the current epidemiological disaster. They lack access to the minimum wage, paid sick leave, overtime pay, and standard

[38] Michael Isaac Stein, "Public tourism body Changes Its Mission Under Plan From Mayor Cantrell," *The Lens*, February 10, 2020. https://thelensnola.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=9d31931c87727842f5ecdefbf&id=64ec878f93&e=7ad59ae70b

[39] Michael Isaac Stein, "Cantrell proposal would turn tourism marketing Agency into Grant Fund for 'Culture Bearers,'" *The Lens*, January 17, 2020. https://thelensnola.org/2020/01/17/cantrell-proposal-would-turn-tourism-marketing-agency-into-grant-fund-for-culture-bearers/

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] New Orleans Office of Cultural Economy, "Cultural Economy Funding Program," accessed October 21, 2020. https://www.nola.gov/cultural-economy/cultural-economy-funding-program/

[42] For a discussion of the extent to which authenticity itself is a brand, see Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

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employee benefits.[43] By promoting mostly short-term projects and requesting that grantees submit "performance reports," the cultural economy funding program will not help reduce job insecurity among cultural workers and will likely perpetuate the inequalities that exist between them.

Conclusion

New Orleans presents itself as an opportune place to study what George Yúdice calls the "expediency of culture."[44] As in many other U.S. metropolises indeed, cultural artifacts and performances have been identified as an economic resource and have been recontextualized in new spaces for exhibition and consumption.

While the current institutional perspective on culture is well-known, it is useful to go back to the earliest days of the city's cultural history to see how the process of commodification came to be (it is actually not as recent as people think, and New Orleans was a pioneering city in this regard) and to ask people what they think of this hegemonic understanding of culture (in short, they are not necessarily opposed to commodification but they insist on a better distribution of the monies produced therethrough).

Clearly, Mayor LaToya Cantrell's recent initiative is addressing a dire need. Will it be sufficient to curb the excesses of commercial culture in New Orleans and to ensure better living conditions for cultural workers? Probably not. The daily rants that I read from my more activist friends who live in New Orleans will, therefore, probably continue for some time.

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[43] Rhodes Murphy, "The Economic Impact of COVID-19 Is Magnified in New Orleans," April 1, 2020. https://www.marketplace.org/2020/04/01/the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-is-magnified-in-new-orleans/

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