The Interdependence of Theatricality, Gender, and Race in Cinematic and Performative Representations of New Orleans—From Jim Crow to Hurricane Katrina

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THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF THEATRICALITY, GENDER, AND RACE
IN CINEMATIC AND PERFORMATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF NEW ORLEANS—
FROM JIM CROW TO HURRICANE KATRINA

by

Alexandra (Sascha) Just

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, City University of New York

2017
This Manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The Interdependence of Theatricality, Gender, and Race in Cinematic and Performative Representations of New Orleans—from Jim Crow to Hurricane Katrina

by

Alexandra (Sascha) Just

Adviser: Professor Marvin Carlson

In this dissertation, I consider New Orleans a case study to explore the interdependence of gender and race and of the performative and the cinematic. New Orleans offers itself for such an investigation because throughout its history so often the city has been the center of media attention and because racialized and gendered identities are driving forces in its performance cultures.

The rise of film to a major entertainment industry and the rise of New Orleans’s prominent performance traditions—white-dominated carnival balls, Voodoo rituals, Black Indian processions, and jazz funerals—to major civic rituals historically coincide. When, after the Civil War Jim Crow laws began to segregate the city, carnival festivities, jazz, and Black Indian parades exploded as performative responses to these social shifts. As early as 1926, film crews captured carnival parties and parades, setting the trend of portraying New
Orleans as a highly theatricalized urban space, a stage and a screen for celebrating role-play and fantasies that promulgated, or at times even challenged, racialized social hierarchies. Since those early documentations these performance traditions have inspired very distinct treatment and coverage by fiction and/or documentary filmmakers, leading to complex negotiations between performers and filmmakers as to how the former are to be portrayed.

Arguing that the positions of power or resistance to oppression the performance traditions celebrate are intertwined with their representations in the media, over the four chapters, I map portrayals of New Orleans—feature films, documentaries, TV shows, Web-based videos, and photos—and its performance cultures from the end of the nineteenth century to the media frenzy of the Hurricane Katrina era. Highlighting one performance tradition in each chapter, I combine field and archival research with cultural theories to contextualize how this dynamic of depiction and experience, performance and mediatization shapes the city’s social structure.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents who taught me the beauty and joy of storytelling, of theatre, and of film.

Like most creative endeavors that are authored by one this dissertation is the result of a long and complex collaborative process. To begin, I would like to express deep appreciation to my committee Marvin Carlson, Joe McElhaney, and James Wilson, who worked with me closely for several years, reading and discussing each and every draft that I produced. I am especially thankful to Marvin Carlson, the chair of my committee, for encouraging me to explore this topic, for supporting my interdisciplinary approach, and for guiding me every step of the way. I am indebted to Joe McElhaney and James Wilson whose feedback on my film and performance analyses were instrumental in shaping this dissertation. I feel fortunate to have studied with Daniel Gerould and I am thankful for his support and inspiration in the beginning of my research. His love for jazz and his vast CD collection of traditional New Orleans music were a wonderful discovery over which we bonded, and I will continue to miss him. I am grateful to Joseph Roach for his ongoing conversations about my project. His work on New Orleans serves as a model and an inspiration.

This dissertation is about a place—New Orleans—and its people. Virtually all New Orleanians had to overcome harrowing obstacles because of Hurricane Katrina and the floods caused by the levee breaks. Their courage and ingenious use of the arts as a way to
cope with such a catastrophe impresses and inspires me. I want to thank the countless New Orleanians who with their performances, their films, and music, but also with their everyday activities make this city what it is. More so, I want to thank the many New Orleanians who have allowed me to interview them, film their performances, and document their lives. Very special thanks goes to filmmaker and scholar Maurice Martinez who offered me guidance and introduced me to Chief Darryl Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas and his wife Sabrina Montana-Mays. The Montanas’ generosity in welcoming me to their home moved me deeply and opened a world to me that would otherwise not have been accessible. My stay with the Montanas will always remain one of my fondest memories. I also want to thank the many other Black Indians, musicians, and theatre artists who I encountered in a multitude of settings and who invited me to their homes, among them, Sylvester Francis of the Backstreet Museum, Ronald Lewis of the House of Dance and Feathers, Big Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson of the Guardians of the Flame and the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame, Chief Clarence Dalcour of the Creole Osceolas, Lisa and Tay D’Amour, Kathy Randels, and John O’Neill.

Part of my research took place in various archives and centers in New Orleans. I would like to thank the archivists, in particular Daniel Hammer at the Historic New Orleans Collection, Klara Hammer at Sweet Home New Orleans, and Bethany Bultmann, the founder and director of the Musicians Clinic, for helping me find films and photos, for copying music scores and other materials, for allowing me to interview them, and for
connecting me to members of the performance communities that I study. I particularly want to express my appreciation for Bruce Raeburn, Alaina Herbert, and Lynn Abbott at the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, whose generous support and insights made this project possible. Research like mine involves many visits, and I am grateful to Naomi Stubbs for introducing me to Elizabeth Kalos-Kaplan. Many times, Elizabeth and her husband Michael made their home mine, and New Orleans would not be what it is without these true friends.

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When after completing my research I entered the writing phase, my life was disrupted by unforeseeable difficulties. I greatly appreciate that my committee and Jean Graham-Jones as executive officer and later Peter Eckersal in this position showed such understanding, adjusted to my situation, and encouraged me to persevere. Many people stood by me during those troubled times. I want to express my deep thanks to my parents and my sister for helping me in any way possible, to my creative companions and dear friends Steffen Wagner, Debra Hilborn-Davis, Jason Marsalis, Robert Davis, Twana
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INTRODUCTION—PERFORMANCE AND DEPICTION

Upon arriving at the New Orleans airport, the traveler is greeted by Louis Armstrong. Far up in the center of the Parabola Lobby, flanked by angels, Armstrong floats in heaven. He blows his trumpet vigorously while, so it seems, guarding the many other music greats that crowd the intensely colorful mural, “Louis Armstrong’s Heavenly All-Star Band.” Among them are pianist Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans’s self-proclaimed inventor of jazz, and singer Billie Holiday, with whom Armstrong appeared as a Storyville musician couple in the 1947 movie New Orleans. Below the mural stands a statue of Armstrong, who is clad in a shiny white dinner jacket and black pants, with bulging eyes rolled backwards, raising his trumpet high. Draped around his neck is a sign proclaiming LOUIS ARMSTRONG AIRPORT. In 2001, the newly renovated airport was named in the musician’s honor. The sign is adorned with the fleur-de-lis, the emblem of New Orleans. Together with the fleur-de-lis, a portrait of Armstrong decorates the airport website, and on the road into the city, the traveler passes billboards with Armstrong’s smiling face above cast-iron poles ornamented in the shape of the fleur-de-lis. The linking of these two images is indicative of New Orleans’s complex relationship with its cultural heritage. The fleur-de-lis, now ubiquitous on T-shirts, jewelry, posters, and flags, not too long ago was used to brand enslaved people of African descent who had dared to violate the rules laid out for them in the Code Noir. Issued in 1685 by Louis XIV and adopted in Louisiana in 1724, the

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1 This and other murals in the airport were painted by Richard C. Thomas.
2 From 1897 to 1917 prostitution was legal in a small district of the city named Storyville after City Councilman Sidney Story, who devised guidelines regarding this business.
*Code Noir*, or Black Code, strictly regulated the lives of people of African descent.\(^3\) Among these was Armstrong’s grandfather, who was born into enslavement. The evolution of the fleur-de-lis from a symbol of oppression to one of pride signifies how quickly experiences of victims and deeds of perpetrators can be buried in larger historical narratives. Casting performer Armstrong in the role of the city’s patron saint may reflect the evolution of such historical narratives, but it also suggests the importance the city places on its performance culture to create its public image—arguably one that is designed for commercially viable tourism. Both the relationship between the use of Armstrong’s image-persona and his family history and the relationship between the fleur-de-lis’s contemporary popularity and its violent history encapsulate the dynamic between act and image, between performance and its mediatized representation, that concerns me in this dissertation.

Four years after the Armstrong airport was renovated, in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina pushed New Orleans into the center of the news. Like so many others, I sat glued to the TV, watching in horror as residents of New Orleans drowned in muddy flood waters or died of heat stroke and thirst on the roofs of their houses and in the Superdome. Vividly I remember the shocking awareness that virtually all of the people suffering and dying were black. What unfolded over days on mine and so many others’ screens appeared like an enactment of the Atlantis myth. In an attempt to grasp the authenticity of what seemed too

\(^3\) Louis XIV created the *Code Noir* together with his prime minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who died in 1683, two years before the *Code Noir* was instituted. The final law built on Colbert’s earlier drafts.
extreme to be anything but the ultimate reality TV show, I continued to watch. Immediately after the storm floods had subsided and the news reported on other disasters, I went to hole-in-the-wall screenings that within weeks had materialized all over New York to view documentaries by both professional filmmakers and amateurs depicting destruction and survival in New Orleans. Even when watching these well-intended, rather spontaneously filmed productions, the sense remained that the victims, and with them the entire city, had been cast against their will as protagonists in this life-or-death drama to perform for us, the far-away audience sitting in the safety of a Downtown storefront theatre. Yet it was the fading photograph of an African-American man, pointed out to me by a friend, that sparked this investigation of how the interdependence of the city’s performance practices and their depiction in the media shape the city’s public image and its (related) social-political structure. In this picture the man—as I learned, a member of a Black Indian tribe—wears an intricately beaded and feathered costume with a grand headpiece reminiscent of those worn by some Native American tribes. He strikes a martial pose, a defiant and theatrical stance of resistance, expressing the determination as Black Indians say, “to never bow down.” Looking in awe at his triumphant grandeur, I wondered why performers like him, who create such spectacle and surely would call media attention to themselves, did not appear in any of the many films and TV programs that I had watched. Clearly, my view of the city that I venerated as the cradle of jazz was painfully incomplete, perhaps even only loosely based on reality. With the question in mind of what influences had made me
construct my own image of New Orleans, I began this investigation.

In my effort at disentangling the dynamic of depiction and experience, I map mediatized portrayals of New Orleans—feature films, documentaries, TV shows, Web-based videos, and photos—and its performance cultures—carnival balls, Voodoo rituals, Black Indian processions, and jazz funerals from the end of the nineteenth century to the media frenzy of the Hurricane Katrina era. New Orleans offers itself as a case study for this study because, from everyday to special events, the city’s performance traditions play a vital role in its social life and because throughout its history New Orleans has been the center of media attention. The city’s unique position as a (former) French and Spanish colony singled it out within the United States and propelled it to serve as a stage for some of the more significant historical battles. The widely publicized landmark case *Plessey v. Ferguson* (1892/1896) concerning institutionalized segregation was fought in New Orleans—and lost. Sixty years later, under intense media coverage, the battle over school integration was won in New Orleans. All eyes and cameras were again on New Orleans when in 2005 the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina vividly illustrated that the lines of separation still run deep.

Beyond those events of social and political import, it is in particular the link between entertainment and sex that has drawn the media to New Orleans. Storyville was instrumental in shaping this image of the city as a place of sexual freedom. Typically, brothels in Storyville offered live jazz to entertain their clients and so, by linking the
performative quality of prostitution with artistic performances, increased the district’s appeal—and inadvertently helped popularize jazz. While the Armstrong vehicle *New Orleans* downplays the link between jazz and prostitution, constructing Storyville as a rather tame neighborhood, a myriad of movies sensationalize the city’s sensual allure and its entertainment–performance cultures.

The rise of film to a major entertainment industry and the rise of New Orleans’s prominent performance traditions—carnival balls, Black Indian parades, and jazz funerals—to major civic rituals historically coincide. When, after the short-lived Reconstruction period that had afforded real equality to African-Americans, Jim Crow laws segregated the city, whites-only carnival festivities, jazz funerals, and Black Indian parades exploded as performative expressions of the racial tension that shaped New Orleans’s social life. As early as 1926, film crews captured carnival parties and parades, setting the trend of portraying New Orleans as a highly theatricalized urban space, a stage and a screen for celebrating role-play and fantasies that promulgate, or at times even challenged, racialized social hierarchies.

Movietone footage from Mardi Gras in 1928 and 1931 shows carnival parades separated by the color line. The Zulu parade is small but provocative, with participants wearing bamboo skirts and blackface. King Zulu sits on a wooden throne atop a wooden carriage shielded by banana leaves. Zulu, in opposition to the strictly organized white mainline carnival parades, illustrates what Mikhail Bakhtin celebrates as “temporary
liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”⁴ Since its modest yet provocative beginnings, Zulu has contributed to erasing racialized segregation and gradually inverted the economic racial stratification of New Orleans carnival. By now, Zulu is one the city’s greatest tourist attractions.⁵ In the Movietone footage of Rex, then an exclusively white carnival parade, only very few African-Americans can be spotted in the audience. A few white attendees are in blackface, underscoring how deep the rift was at the time between African- and European-American residents and revelers. Furthermore, comparing the footage of Rex from 1928 to contemporary coverage of Rex reveals that the style of the parade has visually not changed.

Since those early documentations of New Orleans carnival, the medium of film (and eventually its spin-offs TV and new digital media) has grown to be the dominant popular entertainment and the major form of disseminating information. Throughout the twentieth and increasingly in the twenty-first centuries, the performance traditions that I study have inspired very distinct treatment and coverage by fiction and/or documentary filmmakers. This has led to complex negotiations between performers and filmmakers as to how the former are to be portrayed and how to actively employ the media to construct a self-image and (thereby) an image of New Orleans.

⁵ In 1949, Louis Armstrong served as King of Zulu.
The dominant performance traditions of New Orleans are fueled by myths and/or histories of lineages that, although they span the oceans to Europe and Africa, are grounded in the cultural and geographical area of New Orleans. Illustrating J. Nicholas Entrikin’s argument that “our relation to place and culture become elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities,”’ pride in being a New Orleanian, perhaps even belonging to one of those New Orleanian families that date back several generations, adds to the mythologizing of the city. New Orleans as a physical and political space is a crucial aspect of these performance traditions. Encapsulating what Lipsitz called the “racialization of space and spacialization of race,”’ cultural groups such as Black Indians use entire neighborhoods as their performance space and thereby give literal rather than metaphorical meaning to the phrase “All the world’s a stage.”

Conducted by groups that foreground their racial identity and their specific concepts of gender roles, all of these performance traditions are based on strict adherence to specific customs. Such insistence on idiosyncratic customs creates and perpetuates group identities and separates groups from each other, emphasizing a sense of “otherness.” However, despite each group’s insistence on exclusivity, over time the various performative traditions have influenced each other, creating creolized cultures. This process of cultural creolization corresponds to the evolution of the city’s population. New Orleans is a portal city, which

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from its early days on allowed for a vibrant exchange with visitors, sailors, and merchants from other cultures. Over time, the city experienced several waves of immigrants, including Haitians, Italians, and Germans, who brought along their traditions, many involving music, religion, and carnival.

The importance of slavery in this process of creolization cannot be overstated. From 1719, when the first slave cargo arrived, Louisiana was a slave-holding colony and, after its inclusion into the Union and until the end of the American Civil War, a slave-holding state. New Orleans was an industrial port, and in the urban environment of New Orleans, slaves could be found working on the dock or as house servants. Like the rest of the state New Orleans was economically dependent on slave labor, in particular for the agricultural production (predominantly rice) of the plantation, and should therefore be regarded as a slavetocracy. Until 1763 Louisiana was a French colony. It was then transferred into the hands of the Spanish crown where it remained until 1800, only to be returned to France for a mere four years and then sold to the United States. Under the French reign (and with some variations continued under the Spanish government) the Code Noir that regulated the lives of people of color, as strict as it was, allowed enslaved people to purchase their freedom, made manumission possible, and permitted the passing on of inheritance to the offspring of sexual unions between slave owner and enslaved. These regulations, even though guarded by rigid rules that upheld the institution of slavery, created a third caste, the
free people of color, whose economic, social, and political development John W. Blassingame maps in *Black New Orleans*.\(^8\)

From the time the Americans took over Louisiana, rules for enslaved and free people of color were tightened. As theories of biological racism took hold that justified slavery and a two-tier division between the “races,” it became increasingly important for people of French and Spanish descent to define themselves as white and to shed the term Creole previously applied to them. In contrast, to strengthen their positions as a third “race,” free people of color emphasized their status as Creoles, which implied that they had French ancestors mixed in with their African ones. As a result, until Jim Crow laws were put into effect, New Orleans, unlike the rest of the US, was structured as a three-tier instead of a two-tier racial system, allowing a caste of free blacks and Creoles of color to emerge as a cultural and economic force. After the Civil War, these trends became even more significant and complicated. White Louisianans who had ruled New Orleans before the war felt humiliated to have to share political power on equal terms with those whom they had previously “owned.” The performance practices that took over during this phase therefore were born out of this crisis over power and identity.

In *Cities of the Dead* from 1996, Joseph Roach\(^9\) contends that a culture flourished in New Orleans under the superimposition of slavery that reinvented Africa within the

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European form, which in itself was a creolization of different European influences. Urban public spaces like marketplaces or burial sites (during slavery often the only opportunity for the enslaved to gather) served to canalize needs, desires, and habits in order to reproduce them—thereby establishing newly invented traditions. New Orleans was economically tied to the plantations of the surrounding parishes, many of which were owned by members of the city’s white elite. Despite the rigid and harsh oppression of the enslaved population, plantations were seeds for the creolization of Louisiana culture. For example, a tour at the Laura Plantation in Vachery near New Orleans informs visitors that enslaved workers of the ethnic group Bambara, who hailed from a region that is today part of Senegal, introduced architectural and engineering techniques (building without nails) which have withstood time and the humid climate. The big house on this French Creole plantation was modeled on French architecture but rested on Senegalese (Bambara) construction. Most important for my investigation, enslaved workers on the plantations merged music and performance traditions from their cultures of origin with those of the plantation owners.

The fiction films and TV shows that I examine engage with New Orleans’s performance cultures and the city’s creolized culture, yet in my research only New Orleans acknowledges Africa and plantations as heritages of African-American performance traditions. During Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday’s first performance in the film, the white nightclub owner, Mr. Duquesne, explains the origins of jazz to his love interest, a
white opera singer. The recounting of black history here is left to whites. This battle over who tells history and how is central to the construction of New Orleans’s image, by both major performance traditions and their depiction in the media. The cultural groups that conduct the city’s dominant performance traditions are all strongly motivated by the desire to reenact their collective and individual heritage, and New Orleans’s history is reenacted, manifested, and expressed in the performances and their media depictions. Because I investigate the social implications of the interplay between the performative and the mediatized/cinematic, Nietzsche’s historical categories laid out in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” guides (at least parts of) my analyses. Nietzsche, acknowledging the link between history and contemporary society as a dynamic process of cultural production, argues that the three modes of history—monumental, critical, and antiquarian—make history relevant to the living. The monumental mode gives hope for the future because it suggests that once upon a time greatness was achieved. The critical mode allows reassessments of social ills necessary for rejuvenation, and the antiquarian one grounds people in their time and place. Nietzsche contends that while each mode views and presents history from a distinct and biased angle, together the three modes contribute to social transformation.

Many of the films that I examine such as *Angel Heart* (1987) or *Jezebel* (1938) are set in historic New Orleans and engage (frequently through myth or allegory) with the city’s

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history, often glamorizing its darker aspects. In contrast, documentary filmmakers attempt to correct romanticized or one-sided historical narratives. For example, Rebecca Snedeker’s exploration of whites-only carnival balls *By Invitation Only* (2006) or Maurice Martinez’s film *The Black Indians of New Orleans* (1976), as well as the many films of street performances by Jules Cahn and Sylvester Francis, offer critical visions of the city’s history, racialized social structures, and the role performance cultures play in it. Employing and/or expanding Nietzsche’s categories, images of New Orleans are thus constructed out of the performance of its historical narratives.

In this text, I use the term “performative” to describe actual performance activities or spectacle involving at least one performer and an audience. Performer and audience, in my working definition, may be the same person (or a mirror), yet in the reality of New Orleans, more often performances take place on nightclub stages with larger audiences or on crowded streets in front of a community from which the performers emerge. My use of the term “theatrical” is more complex. While theatrical in this text often denotes performances and spectacle, I also use it to describe what is intrinsic to theatre, such as masking or role-play. This use relates to formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of estrangement, or *ostranenie*, in which he argues that a large part of life is experienced by the subconscious. To Shklovsky, it is the purpose of art to bring an object, a thought, or an experience to the consciousness of the spectator. Estrangement techniques call attention to the object they estrange; artistic (estrangement) devices that foreground what is inherent to the theatre
create and/or heighten theatricality. In film—unlike in theatre—estrangement devices can foreground both what is inherent to theatre, creating theatricality, and also what is intrinsic (only) to cinema, such as the camera angle, thereby creating the “cinematic.” The mere choice of a theatrical location, for example, raises the viewer's awareness of watching a play and/or a film that features a play, thus estranging the narrative and creating theatricality. Several films in this text incorporate stage or street performances. Some feature musical acts, such as Mae West in Belle of the Nineties (1934); others integrate actual theatre productions. Interview with a Vampire (1994), for example, includes an elaborate Grand Guignol production set in Paris as a reference to the origin of horror movies, the film’s genre.

This definition of theatricality (as well as that of the cinematic) presupposes the division between performer and audience, as Anne-Britt Gran notes “Theatricality arises through the cleavage of space. A cleavage can be undertaken by the performer and the spectator/beholder.” The division between actors and audience typically involves the act of looking. Both in the live performances and in the films set in the city, the act of looking plays a crucial role in constructing images of New Orleans as a spectacle with its inhabitants as performers. While performers such as Black Indians base the concept of their presentation on being seen, filmmakers such as Louis Malle use voyeurism as a device to create theatricality. However, Mardi Gras parades, Black Indian performances, or jazz

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funerals—when spectators join the performance activities—blur or even dissolve the division between audience and performer. In those instances, theatricality is created, as Anne-Britt Gran and Diane Oatley argue, by juxtaposing the mundane and the carnivalesque: “Theatricality arises in the relationship between the world of carnival and the world of everyday life, in the operation of reversal, as it were.”

Even though carnival in New Orleans since the end of the nineteenth century has been a formally organized institution, as I discuss in detail in chapter 2, Bakhtin’s definition of the carnivalesque as grotesque is relevant to analyzing, for example, the extreme violence in Interview with a Vampire. All of the African-American performances that I discuss are communal affairs based on long-standing traditions. As such they merge theatre and ritual. Several films highlight and even sensationalize the theatrical aspects of such African-derived rituals. For example, both Angel Heart and The Widow Paris (1992) include Voodoo rituals centered on moments of possession.

Frequently theatricality is created through the contrast between the natural and the artificial. Within this dichotomy moral judgment is almost always assigned. As Thomas Postlewait and Tracy Davis note in Theatricality: “Almost invariably, the polarity between the natural (or the real) and the theatrical (or the artificial) carries a moral as well as an aesthetic judgment, with the idea of the natural serving, of course, as the positive pole of

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12 Ibid., 255.
the equation.” While African-American performance traditions, in particular Black Indians, purposefully use exaggeration to create performances that celebrate black masculinity, often when conceived of as exaggeration and artificiality, theatricality is equated with femininity, and from this perspective femininity reads as devious and deceitful. Postlewait and Davis contend that it is the male gaze that assigns women “a talent for sexual display and deception” and that through which “women [are] portrayed (from the perspective of patriarchy) as duplicitous, deceptive, costumed, showy, and thus as a sex inherently theatrical.” This equation of femininity with artificiality is an expression of an antitheatrical stance. Some of the media productions that I examine, such as the film Double Jeopardy (1999), articulate such an antitheatrical position while at the same time exploiting the appeal of feminized spectacle. Others, for example the TV program American Horror Story: The Coven (2013), revel in camp aesthetics as an inversion of antitheatricality. A component of this negotiation between celebrating and denouncing theatricality is the metaphor of New Orleans as a “fallen woman” or a “dying beauty” in films such as the Clint Eastwood thriller Tightrope (1984). In Tightrope, Eastwood plays a detective and devoted father who is on the hunt for a serial killer–rapist. Eastwood’s character needs to learn to channel his desire for prostitutes so that he can engage in a relationship with a rape-prevention worker. In stories such as this one of white men coming of age by exploring their sexual fantasies, only rarely does a woman evolve

13 Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, Introduction to Theatricality (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.
14 Ibid.
through a dramatic arc. Instead, these films portray the city as a place where women (striptease dancers or prostitutes) perform for men.

While sexual relationships are crucial components of these narratives, expressions of black performance cultures are often instrumentalized to flesh out the main (white male) character and, as a result, perpetuate the image of New Orleans as a society dominated by a white male order. The music-driven *King Creole* (1958) featuring Elvis Presley is emblematic of this pattern. The film tells the story of high school dropout Danny Fisher’s rise to stardom as a music performer. Danny has great difficulty deciding between a homely but sweet young girl and an attractive older woman, whose lifestyle as the mistress of a mobster bar owner he rejects. Significantly, he can only become the “King of Creole” once he has rid himself of both women, the virtuous one and the seductress—the latter even needs to die. The music style in which Danny (and Elvis) excels and eventually succeeds is derived from black music genres such as the blues, R&B, and New Orleans jazz.

The film opens on long shots of street vendors in the French Quarter. To announce their goods, they sing a folk tune entitled “Crawfish.” Save for the vendors, the streets are completely empty, making the French Quarter and this prelude to the main action quintessential black spaces. The scene changes to a still of a Mississippi steamboat, over which appear the title of the film and the name of its star. An orchestrated version of the film’s theme song “King Creole” plays throughout the opening titles. It ends abruptly as the film cuts back to the French Quarter. Now, only one vendor, a black woman on a cart
played by Kitty White, occupies the space singing “Crawfish.” From inside his apartment on the top floor, Elvis joins her singing—she passes her music on to him, and he absorbs it. Their voices are accompanied by a band moving the sound closer to Elvis’s style.

At first, Elvis is seen through his window veiled by a gauze curtain. Leaning back in a familiar pose, he combs his hair. A couple of times, he looks through the curtain down to White. As the view through his window is reminiscent of a peep show, King Creole here calls attention to Elvis’s body, theatricalizing his sexuality. This perspective is from and for the film audience. His duet partner cannot see him from below until he steps out on the balcony. The camera captures medium shots and close ups of Elvis, while White is filmed in high-angle long shots from Elvis’s point of view. The audience thus experiences her performance through Elvis, privileging his position. However, their singing bridges the physical distance, and for a brief moment it creates a sensual unity since the arrangement is a call and response that culminates in a harmonized duet, symbolizing an interracial affair. White passes directly underneath Elvis’s balcony with her cart. When the song ends, he waves good-bye to her; she has passed his house, exiting as if on a stage and making room for the main plot, which takes place among white characters.

Through the interaction between the white protagonist and the black vendor, King Creole exoticizes New Orleans. Here, “blackness” and the performative create an image of New Orleans as “other.” This process of “othering” can be found in numerous fiction films and in documentaries, with the supposed “otherness” carrying various meanings, depending
on the film’s viewpoint and narrative. Typically, it is located in the city’s performative or theatrical qualities and in the insistence (or habit) of its residents to manifest their experiences from the mundane to the extraordinary in performances. This “otherness” runs as a red thread through my chapters as I analyze how the interdependence of the theatrical and the mediatized construct images of New Orleans.

In my writing the concept of movement through time and space is important. I am arranging this text into four chapters that reflect the chronology of my travels to different parts of the city (and surrounding parishes) and the performative expressions I encountered there. Chapter 1, “Black Indians—Filming Performance as Resistance,” takes me to what are considered traditional black neighborhoods: East New Orleans, Tremé, and the Seventh Ward. As I contextualize the Indians’ performance practices, I trace how they—after having been virtually absent from the media for most of their existence—since the late 1970s, and in particular since Hurricane Katrina, have extended their performance repertoire from the streets to the screen. Through close analysis of media productions, ranging from TV programs such as *Treme* to unedited documentary footage by Sylvester Francis, I examine how this expansion of the Indians’ position as a marginalized group has influenced the public perception of New Orleans and its racialized structure.

Despite quantifiable shifts in the city’s racialized power structure, New Orleans is spatially still largely divided by the color line, and so the parades by the traditional carnival organizations (the so-called main line krewes) always take place on Canal Street. In chapter
2, “Carnival on Screen—Looking at the Royal Gaze,” I analyze the manner in which those
carnival organizations, by utilizing the media to document their performance practices—in
particular their spectacular carnival balls—affirm their elite position in New Orleans’s
society. As a comparison, I contextualize Jezebel, the one fiction film I found that includes
a traditional carnival ball, as well as a number of varied media productions that either
promote or challenge these organizations’ image of New Orleans as a white-dominated
European enclave in the US.

Framed by a so-called haunted house tour through the French Quarter, fiction takes
center stage in chapter 3, “Ghost Town New Orleans—from Factoids to Fantasy.” In it, I
examine how films integrate performances of spirituality, magic, and horror, as well as
religious rituals from Voodoo and Catholicism, to create and/or perpetuate New Orleans as
a possessed place. In my analysis of movies such as Angel Heart and Interview with a
Vampire, the ghostly, mysterious, or haunted constitute a concept of New Orleans’s
“otherness” that signifies unrestrained sexuality and danger and that serves as a field for
projections of racist stereotypes. This concept has been avidly employed as a tourism
marketing tool.

For my fourth and final chapter, “Performing Remembrance” I visit different parts of
town and the Whitney Plantation Museum near New Orleans to explore the link between
performances of oppression that took place during slavery and commemorative
performances (particularly jazz funerals) and how they are represented in the media.
Arguing that jazz funerals function as acts of resistance to the dismissal of black lives, I examine movies, such as *Live and Let Die* from 1973, that exoticize the tradition and documentaries, for example Joe Budde’s film of jazz clarinetist’s Alphonse Picou’s funeral (1962), that underscore the lyrical and the political components of the ritual.

As I try to consider and employ the viewpoints of the participants of the performance cultures, to the best of my knowledge, I am using the titles and terms preferred by them. For example, I use the spelling “krewe” rather than the more common “crew” in accordance with Mistik Comus Krewe, the carnival organization that established it in 1857 and that aimed to give an “old” and mythological feel to the name. Black Indians are also referred to as Mardi Gras Indians and call themselves Indians or “Injuns.” This is not meant derogatory to Native Americans but simply modeled on their pronunciation. Unless when quoting song lyrics, I do not use the term “Injuns,” but I do alternate Mardi Gras Indians, Black Indians, or Indians. I begin my journey with them.
Villere Street in New Orleans’s Seventh Ward is packed on Mardi Gras Day 2012. Ecstatic cheers ring out as, at about 2 p.m., Darryl Montana, Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas, steps out on the stoop of his mother’s house. Chief Montana is wearing a suit made of long yellow feathers, decorated with heavy, three-dimensional ornaments of beads and rhinestones. A beaded peacock is fastened below his crotch. The chief raises his arms to greet the crowd, turns to the right, then to the left, shouting “Big Chief!” He descends the steps, rhythmically hitting a tambourine and addresses the crowd with a forceful rendition of the Mardi Gras Indian song “Sew, Sew, Sew.” A four-man rhythm group playing drums and tambourines accompanies him and the crowd—predominantly African-Americans—joins in on the chorus:

The Spyboy coming, the Flagboy run.
We’ll meet everybody when the morning come
Gotta little bitty boys all dressed in white
My gang this year
My gang come tight
I sew, sew, sew!

Chorus: Mardi Gras sew, sew sew
I woke in the morning by the ring of the bell
… to raise some hell!

Chorus

Mardi Gras sew, sew sew

One after the other, Chief Montana’s spyboy, his flagboy, his queen, and his wildman, all dressed in feathered and beaded suits, dance toward the Chief and bow to him to be embraced by him. “Indians!” Loud screams from the door pierce the chanting, and Chief Montana’s four grandsons, headed by the oldest, eight-year-old Ramond, rush out while hitting their tambourines forcefully. Dressed in white-feathered suits and headdresses with red and gold ornaments, they join their grandfather, dancing and posing with him in a display of their fierceness. The circle widens and Chief Montana’s crown bearer approaches with his headdress, the yellow feathered and beaded crown. The Montana signature piece echoes the headdresses of Prairie Indians, but instead of two strands of feathers extending to the right and the left, the feathers on Chief Montana’s crown are connected, forming a large oval. It weighs about sixty pounds, reaches at least five-and-a-half feet in width, and extends close to six feet in length, approximately Montana’s height. The drums reach a crescendo. Chief Montana pours his long dreadlocks over his shoulders and bends backwards. The crown bearer places the crown on his head. “Big Chief!” “My Chief!” You are the prettiest!” the crowd calls out. Over the cheers sounds the miked voice of the DJ: “Big Chief ‘MuttMutt’ Darryl Montana! Yellow Pocahontas 2012!” And Big Chief Darryl Montana has been recrowned. He spins on his axis and, as every year, from here on he leads his tribe and an ever-growing second-line of supporters through his
neighborhood to meet other tribes on Claiborne Avenue where on Mardi Gras Day since the late nineteenth century Indians\textsuperscript{15} with their performances have honored those Native Americans who aided their ancestors escape from enslavement.

These presentations are elaborate and artful reenactments of Native American warfare and thus manifestations of current and historical resistance to the system of white supremacy. They serve as counter-memory, as defined by David Scott,\textsuperscript{16} to the dominant historical narrative that presents New Orleans as a legitimate heir to a white European history and that largely omits African and Native American resistance. Theatricality here functions as a corrective tool. However, this corrective has only recently reached a white audience because, among other developments, for most of their existence, Indians have performed in virtual seclusion from larger (white and/or mainstream) society. As a result, they were rarely part of a public image of New Orleans that would exceed so-called black neighborhoods or even the city’s limits. The history of Indian tribes from their first formal organizing (according to Indian oral history) in 1869 predates the emergence of cinema by twenty-five years. The gradual growth of Indian activities to a dominant form of cultural expression within African-American communities in New Orleans and beyond overlaps with the evolution of film from the first moving images to our current digital age. Yet, until the late 1970s Indians remained outside of the media. Whereas nowadays photographers

\textsuperscript{15}“Indians” is the term most commonly used by the tribes.

and cinematographers battle for the best positions to capture a moment of Indian performances for the news, magazines, independent films, or simply to post footage on YouTube, in my research, it was difficult to even find snapshots depicting Indians dating from the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, while ignoring or being unaware of Indian culture, by drawing from African-American cultural practices, and by alluding to stereotypical emblems of Native American life, high- and low-budget fiction films and TV programs set in New Orleans developed a pattern of constructing the city as a quintessentially white urban space.

In this chapter, I trace how over the last forty years, since Indians gradually found their way to the small and the large screen, their relationships with the media has been one of complicated negotiations for control over how they are represented and who is entrusted with the task. Underscoring Diana Taylor’s\textsuperscript{17} argument that the archive is not solely the property of the hegemony, the response of some members of the Indian community to this conflict is to film their culture independently of media outlets, even managing to build substantial film collections with these materials. Indians’ struggle for appropriate media portrayals is emblematic of a larger battle that (the nationwide) African-American community is fighting. Yet, as a small and marginalized group focused on performing against (the history) of white oppression, theirs offers clues to the political efficacy of (live) archival work. Furthermore, each film or media program that as much as includes a single

\textsuperscript{17} Diana Taylor, \textit{The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
scene with a Black Indian (even when misrepresenting the culture) contributes to constructing images of New Orleans alternate to an exclusively white dominated society. The relationship between Indian performances and their mediatization, therefore signifies the dynamic between depiction and experience, and also the evolution of the public image of New Orleans.

In order to examine the relationship between Indians and mediatized representations of their culture and this evolution, I have selected one fiction film, *Easy Rider* (1969); one TV show, *Treme* (2010–13); the documentaries *The Black Indians of New Orleans* (1976) by Maurice Martinez and *All on a Mardi Gras Day* (2008) by Royce Osborn; and selections from documentary collections by Sylvester Francis (filmed from 1982 until today) and Jules Cahn (filmed between 1963 and 1980) that capture and explore Indian culture. Each of these programs offers distinct ways of including Indians in the image that they create of New Orleans and thereby (directly or indirectly) comment on the city’s racialized social hierarchy. *Easy Rider*, for example, integrates a seemingly random shot of an Indian Chief, which on closer analysis complicates the cult film’s version of New Orleans as a destiny for (self-) discovery. The TV show *Treme* engages a critical view of the image of New Orleans as a place defined by its whiteness. With its storytelling methodology of conflating facts and fiction, *Treme* creates an archive of the time period immediately after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans that appears authentic yet puts into question the entire concept of authenticity. The documentaries that I have selected
for this chapter fall into Nietzsche’s categories of critical or antiquarian approaches to history. Deeply concerned with the history of Indian culture, they challenge—directly or indirectly—the dominant view of history and its intrinsic racialized order implicit in the fiction films that I examine. In order to appropriately analyze and contextualize these media depictions of Indians, firstly I provide an overview of their culture.

**Performing Memory**

Although driven by fierce competition over which tribe’s chief is the prettiest, Mardi Gras Indian tradition has grown out of the desire to honor those Native Americans who aided their African ancestors escape from slavery, gave refuge to enslaved Africans who fled into the swamps, and formed so-called maroon societies with them. With few exceptions, all Indians are artists. They are expected to dedicate a large portion of their time to preparing their suits and to mask\(^\text{18}\) on Mardi Gras. While each Indian may express personal taste, he (or she) is expected to broadly follow the style of the tribe’s chief so that the aesthetics of the suits display tribal unity and identity and reflect the chief’s artistic leadership. Artistic excellence thus determines hierarchy and serves to glorify or praise the chief.

The first tribe that formed, the Creole Wild West, began as a downtown tribe, but for many years has been living and masking in an uptown neighborhood. The Yellow Pocahontas emerged from the Creole Wild West and is historically a downtown tribe.

\(^{18}\) “To mask” is used as a verb. It describes the complete process of putting on an Indian suit and performing in it.
located in the Seventh Ward, yet the tribe’s chief, Darryl Montana, who is at the center of my research, has been living in East New Orleans for several years. On Mardi Gras Day, he returns to his old neighborhood, where family members still reside. In Indian terms, this area of New Orleans is considered his territory, both symbolically as he claims it by parading through it on Mardi Gras Day, and actually, as he grew up there, most members of his tribe live there, and all other Indian activities, in particular drum practices, take place in the Seventh Ward.

Indian tribes identify with their neighborhoods and these geopolitical divisions are expressed by adhering to specific sewing and beading styles. Tribes like the Golden Eagles residing in New Orleans’s uptown area typically use wide plume feathers for their crowns. The beaded patches that decorate the suits are flat and feature narrative scenes from Native American and African-American history. While scenes displaying past lifestyles, such as living in tents and hunting buffalo, are common, most frequently the designs recall moments of conflict and crisis. Popular are battle scenes between white colonizers and Native American warriors or African-Americans struggling with enslavement or lynching. Downtown tribes, such as the Yellow Pocahontas, typically feature beaded ornaments reminiscent of West African design patterns that can protrude up from the suit for approximately twelve inches. The shape of these complex ornaments, including columns, staircases, and abstract constructs, are frequently influenced by architectural structures found in New Orleans. Crowns made by downtown tribes follow a Native American
(Prairie) model with slim long feathers. Through their suits, chiefs aim to be the prettiest and are expected to outshine their queens whose suits often seem modest compared to those of the chiefs. “Being pretty” integrates highest artistic skills, spiritual strength, and physical appeal and connotes embodying the male ideal through making and presenting the most elaborate suit. Don Conway-Long observes that in different cultures different steps are taken to make a man masculine, while it is frequently assumed that women naturally embody femininity. In Indian culture, making the suit is the process that makes the man masculine. The suits are an extension of the man, symbolizing strength, prowess, fertility, armor, and heritage, while the act of sewing is tied to testing a man’s strength. Both the grandeur and the goal to be pretty defy European notions of masculinity and therefore also the antitheatrical stance that equates femininity with artificiality and theatricality. The annual making of the suit therefore symbolizes and is actually experienced as a making or preparing of his self. Many Indians view the making of the suit as a battle with the self that requires determination to work through sheer endless hours and endure physical suffering. Indians report of scarred fingers from working relentlessly with thick needles and of actually bleeding into the fabric.

Both uptown and downtown Indians sew images of deceased family members onto their suits, creating effigies with costume and performance for their personal lineage and heritage. Chief Montana, for example, integrated a beaded puppet of his late father, Chief

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Allison Tootie Montana, on the front of one of his suits. These visual and performative manifestations of remembrance are acts of transforming and aestheticizing history into the historical, ultimately a way to estrange it. This is essentially theatrical, as Ann Nesbet has observed. Nesbet likens this process to looking at Medusa. The helpless onlooker, as Nesbet describes it, is forced to witness the transformation of chaos into an artistic but arrested historical tableau. The onlooker freezes and so becomes part of the spectacle that is Medusa, as Medusa is not only the snake-haired woman but the complete process and drama. A similar process takes place between Indian Chiefs and their audience. The grandeur and largesse of a chief’s presentations of his history is so arresting that the crowd cannot help but stare in awe and thereby become part of the aestheticizing process of transforming history into a living historical tableau.

As Indians indulge in heightened theatricalized display of glorified heroic figures and their deeds that gave life to the current culture, their performances of remembrance are historical spectacles of what Nietzsche defines as monumental. This monumentalism compensates for and at the same time challenges the demeaning roles African-Americans and Native Americans have played in US society. The aim of Indian performances consequently is to continue their ideals of heroism, and the chief’s role, above all, is to perform, even to embody the ideal of a warrior; an ideal of black masculinity rooted in the tribes’ remembrance—passed on through oral history—of their past. As the chief channels

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the past into the present spectacle, the separation between his person and his fresco—and therefore between past and present—blurs.

Since Indians not only reenact the elusive original Indian warrior but also the many Indians who before them reenacted that original, perhaps more than any other performers Indians embody the theatrical phenomenon Marvin Carlson describes as “ghosting”: “It [theatre] is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The presence is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recollection.”²¹ As the chiefs and their tribes pay tribute with their artistic output to their ancestors’ battles and sacrifices, they also carry on the legacy of resistance to the dominant white order. Attacks against a chief may come from other tribes but also from the New Orleans police, of whom Indians remain deeply suspicious. Their skepticism has grown out of years of violent clashes with the police on Mardi Gras Day when, through their processions, Indians symbolically claim their neighborhoods as “their territory.” Repeatedly, the police have understood these acts of self-assertion as expressions of defiance and have tried to disrupt them by forcing Indians off the street or simply arresting them. Aaron Walker’s documentary *Bury the Hatchet,*²² vividly documents a particular dramatic example. In a disturbing replay of the clashes between colonizers and natives, on

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St. Joseph’s Night 2005 police attacked, brutalized, and jailed a large number of Indians during their parade. In this and other clashes with the police, past and present conflate as Indians reenact their ancestors’ struggles with their oppressors and at the same time experience the struggle firsthand. Acting the role of Indian and being Indian here cannot be separated. An example of the constructive link between live and mediatized, Walker immortalizes these moments on-screen, using these scenes to support the violent image of New Orleans that Indians create in their performances.

**Hollywood**

The scenes in Walker’s *Bury the Hatchet* illustrate Indian performances taking place within constantly shifting and unpredictable circumstances that often require some degree of improvisation. Nevertheless, these performances are rigidly structured and intensely rehearsed rituals. Every Sunday from November to Mardi Gras Day, Indians practice their repertoire of songs at neighborhood bars. No drums are played at these so-called drum practices. Instead, members of the tribes gather in a circle, often stretching to a long oval, and accompany their singing and dancing on tambourines. The chief leads the practice that typically lasts between three to four hours and usually includes such staples as “Shallow

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23 The conduct of the New Orleans police was widely criticized, has led to a reassessment of relationships between Indians and the police, and ultimately caused the death of Big Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana of a heart attack when in 2005 he complained about police violence at a City Council meeting. His sudden death is documented in Aaron Walker’s *Bury the Hatchet* and Lisa Katzman’s *Tootie’s Last Suit*. 
Water, Oh Mama,”24 “I Sew, Sew, Sew,” and “My Big Chief Got a Golden Crown.” The music is intensely rhythm-based, and because of the repetitive patterns, each song can last between thirty minutes and an hour. Practices end with the Indian hymn “Indian Red,” during which the various members of the tribe dance in the circle or the oval (somewhat reminiscent of Soul Train) toward the chief, demonstrating with a series of improvised yet codified martial movements and gestures that they will defend him by any means necessary.

Through these folk songs the feats of heroic Indians and their tribes have entered legendary status in New Orleans’s black communities, and several of these songs25 have entered pop culture through interpretations and adaptations by bands and girl groups like The Meters, The Neville Brothers, or The Dixie Cups. However, despite their (indirect) influence on popular culture, select scholarly interest in their traditions, and their visually stunning appearances and dramatic presentations on Mardi Gras Day, for most of their existence, Indians have remained virtually absent from the big screen. Until the HBO show Treme popularized Indians with the figure of Indian Chief Albert Lambreaux, who fights for the survival of his people and traditions in post-Katrina New Orleans, Indians had not been included in any mediatized fiction about the city.

Reasons for the absence of Indians from the screen are twofold: Ward Churchill notes that Hollywood, in depicting Native Americans, focuses disproportionately on the

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24 “Shallow Water” is a Native American term for swamp. The song refers to slaves escaping into the swamps.
25 An example is “Iko Iko” by the black female trio The Dixie Cups, who were originally from New Orleans.
period between 1850 and 1890 when white settlers were winning their war goals of Native extinction. It is the interaction between Euro-Americans and Native Americans that occupies Hollywood to the exclusion of the aftermath of the genocide and of the long and varied history of Native Americans, as Churchill observes: “There is no ‘before’ to the story, and there is no ‘after.’ Cinematic Indians have no history before Euro Americans come along, and then, mysteriously, they seem to pass out of existence altogether.”26 The official forming of Black Indian tribes and their organized public presentations began after the Indian wars and the perceived Native threat to white culture were mostly over.

As noted, the police regard and treat Black Indians’ symbolic claims to their parts of town as provocations and “ghetto uprisings” rather than as purposeful political actions that could threaten white society. From 1896, when the Supreme Court ruled in Plessey v. Ferguson that separate but equal accommodations were constitutional, until the 1960s, New Orleans was strictly segregated. Indian activities were relegated to the so-called black parts of town, such as the Sixth and the Seventh Wards or the Lower Ninth Ward that famously flooded when the levees broke during Hurricane Katrina. Whites rarely visited these neighborhoods, and even today, Indian processions follow the traditional routes that never spill over into the white parts of town. Although white New Orleanians (and, since Hurricane Katrina, white newcomers to the city) have moved into black neighborhoods like the Tremé, beyond gentrification, no actual war over territory has ever taken place that

could, according to Churchill’s theory, spark the interest of white filmmakers. One reason for the absence of Black Indians in movies is thus the (almost) successful extinction of Native Americans, with whites having closed the chapter on them.

The second reason for their absence from the screen lies in Indian culture itself. While white society for the most part has ignored, dismissed, or been plainly unaware of Indian culture, Indians’ own strict honor code has contributed to keeping them out of the media. Sabrina Montana, Chief Darryl Montana’s wife, explained that Indian culture survived due to its secrecy: “Some things you shouldn’t show. Some things are just not meant to be shown, because it came out of a protest. […] To put a suit on; this is like sacred ground here. We have to maintain the integrity and authenticity of this tradition. And while we do want the world to know what we do, but there is something, we have to keep close, close to the heart. And I worry that because some folks wanting to get their names out, they will sacrifice what we do and how we do it.”27 Chief Dalcour of the Creole Osceolas shares Sabrina Montana’s concerns. At the end of an on-camera interview that I conducted with him, he invited his spyboy to join in. The chief praised his spyboy’s loyalty who only spoke with permission given by the after the chief first had heard my question. This appeared to serve the maintenance of a strict hierarchy within the tribe yet also allowed Chief Dalcour to monitor the information the spyboy might share. Indians’ vows to secrecy carry so much weight that the spyboy, who is employed as a prep chef does not disclose his affiliation with the tribe at his workplace.

Given the Indians’ vows to secrecy and the racialized structure of New Orleans, it is not surprising that Indians as characters only entered the screen—in the HBO show *Treme*—after the destruction of Hurricane Katrina threatened to wipe out their culture entirely. However, Indian Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana made an involuntary yet noteworthy appearance in the cult film *Easy Rider* released in 1969.

*Easy Rider*  Like *King Creole*, *Easy Rider* is firmly rooted in the time of its production, the late 1960s. It portrays the US as ruled by deeply conservative yet fraudulent mores while also engaging with alternatives lifestyles, such as communes, drugs, and free love. The story of *Easy Rider* is simply related: Two long-haired, white hipsters, Billy and Wyatt (Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda), ride their motorbikes cross-country, all the way down to New Orleans. On their path, they experience the rich panorama of love, joy, and hate that the country has to offer, time and again encountering violent opposition to their liberal lifestyle from small-town, conservative Southerners. At Mardi Gras in New Orleans, which here symbolizes a mecca of both hedonistic and spiritual pleasures, they attempt liberation from individual and societal constraints. After Mardi Gras, Billy and Wyatt leave New Orleans. On the road they fall victim to a drive-by shooting. The film leaves it open as to whether or not Billy and Wyatt die. The cultural war *Easy Rider* depicts—and in particular its shocking ending—has occupied scholars, critics, and fans since then and invites further discussion of how the film relates to current cultural split between liberals and
conservatives. For this discussion, I will focus on the events on Mardi Gras Day and how they contribute to constructing an image of New Orleans.

On that day, Billy and Wyatt meet two prostitutes in a brothel, and together with them they join the carnival festivities. In a fluid montage, the four walk around the French Quarter, a mainline parade on Canal Street, and a black neighborhood, until they end up at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in the Tremé—burial place for Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau—where they take acid and experience a trip that is both sexually charged and frightening. The montage expresses the subjective experiences of each of the four and at the same time shows the four protagonists enmeshed in a mosaic collage of their experiences. Ultimately, no steady point of view exists. Angles shift and change; Billy and Wyatt see each other yet also watch themselves like bystanders of their own experiences, and the film offers a rapidly shifting view of all of them. In the black neighborhood, an Indian procession led by Chief Tootie Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas passes them by. One of the young prostitutes (played by Karen Black) touches the glowing white feathers of his crown as he passes by as if they were strings of a harp. Her soft gesture and joyful, wondrous laugh and his majestic yet fleeting presence make him appear otherworldly—both through her eyes and from the film’s point of view. Incidentally, by communicating this sense of his otherworldliness, the film captures one of the essential components of Indian traditions: By embodying the glorified, larger-than-life image of a heroic prairie

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28 This parade is most likely Mystik Krewe of Comus, as it is at night and Comus is a night parade.
29 I return to the cemetery scene in chapter 3 of this dissertation.
Indian, Black Indians create a living myth that exists both within and without concrete historic time frames.

The montage and Chief Montana’s appearance relate: The space-time continuum for both is dissolved. The embodiment of the myth of a Prairie Native American chief parades down the urban streets of New Orleans, appearing real (tangible) and ethereal at the same time. Billy and Wyatt leave the brothel during the day, moments later party among torchbearers (flambeaux) at night, and encounter Chief Montana at daytime in an entirely different part of town—all on Mardi Gras Day. Yet because the montage is narratively and atmospherically successful, the constant change of time and location are hardly perceptible. With this, the radical differences between locales—black and white parts of town—and the explosive power of a black man wearing an enlarged Native American warrior outfit are lost. The film co-opts Chief Montana’s image to construct a mosaic of Wyatt and Billy losing themselves in the fantasies that carnival signifies to them. Moreover, only informed viewers are able to recognize Chief Montana or even detect him as a Black Indian. For the majority of viewers, he represents one costumed participant in the colorful world of carnival.

George Lipsitz, in The Possessive Investment in Whiteness from Identity Politics, sums up the tension that makes up this colorful world:

In contrast to the fantasy representations of pirates, birds, animals, and royalty played out by members of the city’s social elite riding along Canal Street on expensive floats on Mardi Gras Day, the Indians invert the imagery of western movies and wild west shows
to celebrate the radical solidarity and defensive resistance of warriors defending their home territory against outside aggression. They position themselves as oppositional and embattled. They move beyond the black-white binary that shapes the core categories of white supremacy in the United States to assert an affinity with another aggrieved racial group. On the day when members of the city’s social elite flamboyantly display their European heritage, the Mardi Gras Indians emphasize the new world realities of conquest and genocide.\(^{30}\)

None of this is acknowledged in *Easy Rider*.

The iconic carnival scenes in *Easy Rider* expressing the two young men’s desire for personal freedom and their thwarted fulfillment encapsulate a typical perception of what makes New Orleans “other” within the US and possibly the world. *Easy Rider* questions the American dream, the possibility of undermining it, and stages itself as a radical illustration of the troubles of an alternative lifestyle. This troubled alternative lifestyle is a white male one. Typical of films set in New Orleans, the young men experience their eye-opening encounters together with prostitutes, whose lives outside the borders of social acceptance give them permission to explore themselves. *Easy Rider* presents New Orleans as the destination and the platform for young white men to come of age, even if it means realizing that their hopes for a satisfying life outside of the establishment will remain unfulfilled. The 15-second-long scene in which Chief Montana appears and disappears could have easily ended up on the cutting room floor without altering the film’s direction. As it is part of the film, it encapsulates that this movie did not approach the mutinous quality that Indians represent. Nevertheless, *Easy Rider* includes footage of Chief Montana,\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\) Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 244.
and so, for the first time in Indian and in film history Indian culture was captured on film, moved from invisible to visible before the white gaze, and thereby entered an archive produced and controlled by the white majority. The image of New Orleans had changed.

**Treme** *Easy Rider* illustrates that even films that signal shifts in the mainstream white culture of the US by challenging the values of their fathers’ generation can be complicit in perpetuating old and rigid social hierarchies. In contrast, the HBO show *Treme*, built on multiple stories and viewpoints, creates an image of a racially and politically complex New Orleans that counters the prevalent concepts of the city as white male dominated, evident in the examples *King Creole* and *Easy Rider*. However, the show also demonstrates how deeply tropes of this concept are burned into the collective imagination. *Treme* is the brainchild of producers Eric Overmyer and David Simon, who rose to acclaim with *The Wire*, a show that was located in a specific cultural and geographical setting (Baltimore, Maryland) and that explored the dynamic between police, criminals, and ordinary citizens. *Treme* continues this pattern, yet *Treme*, unlike *The Wire*, is more concerned with everyday struggles than with dramatic developments, and most important, *Treme* is a history show. Named after the traditionally black neighborhood of Tremé, the show is set in New Orleans right after Hurricane Katrina and the breaks in the federally funded levees that devastated the city. Over four seasons the show follows a diverse cast of characters—directly or indirectly connected to each other—as they struggle
through the aftermath of the storm and the slow and troublesome rebuilding of New Orleans. Similar to the other two fiction examples, *Treme* functions as an archive by creating an on-screen illusion of reality. Yet, *Treme*’s approach to the history of New Orleans is decisively critical, both in creating the world of the recent past as well as the historical developments that led to it. Here, the show’s makers clearly favor marginalized and oppressed groups. For example, one scene is staged in the Backstreet Cultural Museum, giving its curator Silvester Francis the opportunity to highlight Indian heritage and cultural production. Representatives of the white elite, particularly those who host carnival balls, are not afforded any screen time to share their performance practices. It thus appears as if the show aimed to close an information gap and correct misrepresentations of cultural groups who have helped to establish the city’s social hierarchy.

Frequently based on actual events, the narratives place characters in the firestorm of actual issues haunting New Orleans’s society, such as police corruption, rampant gun violence, real estate frauds, and insurance schemes, weaving personal stories together with politics at large that reach directly into current times. Thereby, the show transforms all of New Orleans, now and then, into a filmed stage that dissolves the boundaries between fiction and reality. Fictional characters interact with real New Orleans personalities, such as trumpeter Kermit Ruffins, who play themselves in situations that closely resemble their real lives, while fictional characters are presented so much as part of the fabric of New Orleans that fiction appears real and reality becomes heightened. Varied characters cross over into

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31 I discuss the Backstreet Cultural Museum in a later section of this chapter.
the actual New Orleans, and many real New Orleanians have extended cameos, yet the focus of the theatrum mundi concept rests on fictional Big Chief Albert Lambreaux of the Guardians of the Flame tribe, played admirably by Clarke Peters.

The Guardians of the Flame are real and led by the young Chief Brian Harrison Nelson under guidance from his mother, Big Queen Cherice Harrison Nelson, who inherited the tribe from her father. Queen Harrison Nelson appears in several scenes and is acknowledged as queen. Other than her, no female Indians appear in the show—Indian culture is depicted as an exclusively male affair. Lambreaux himself is a composite of several Indian chiefs, and his family and their stories synthesize occurrences that actually took place in New Orleans. During production, Clarke Peters was frequently approached on the street as “Chief.”

In the public eye, the show replaces the image of actual Indian chiefs with that of an actor whose character was written by white screenwriters based on their ideas and ideals of an Indian chief. The Lambreaux character is written as a hardheaded fighter and a woman’s man. He is shown winning the hearts of three women with ease and beating a young intruder almost to death with his bare fists without remorse. Repeatedly, Lambreaux is shown heroically fighting the ailments of modern urban living, yet because of his inferior weapons, he always fails.

In a telling example Lambreaux attempts to secure housing for members of his tribe. After the storm, approximately 100,000 New Orleanians were evacuated. One of their difficulties in returning home was a housing shortage. Many houses were destroyed, and

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insurance companies did not come through with money so residents found it difficult to rebuild. Some of the shortages, as Treme demonstrates, were man-made. The federal housing projects, where large numbers of low-income New Orleanians lived, did not flood and were left almost completely intact after the storm. Residents were banned from returning to their homes and eventually the projects were torn down. Chief Lambreaux becomes a central player in this battle. In season 1, he occupies one of the apartments in the projects. After a series of TV interviews and a meeting with a police chief ironically responsible for community interaction, police officers arrest him. As they enter the apartment, Lambreaux greets them politely and agrees to be handcuffed. The officers yell at him to kneel down. True to his Indian honor code, Lambreaux refuses to bow down. One police officer shouts: “This Injun shit! Take him down!” The other four officers throw themselves at Lambreaux, punch him repeatedly, force him on the ground, and handcuff him.

No matter how often he fails, or how deeply his opponents try to humiliate him, Lambreaux never forgoes his own sense of dignity. With these character traits, a representative of an oppressed outsider group is made the main identification figure onto which male viewers of all ethnicities can project their desires for everyday heroism. However, while Lambreaux is often depicted as the moral winner, his insistence on traditions of honor and pride single him out as both noble, stubborn, and lacking in sophistication. Hence, Treme’s use of the figure of the Indian chief exploits the now
historic trope of the noble savage, whose innate goodness resists corruption by civilization and who fights with weapons far inferior to those employed by representatives of said so-called civilization. Terry Jay Ellingson notes that the trope of the noble savage is a product of the white imagination that emerged in the early days of colonization, served to enhance beliefs in white superiority, and legitimized colonial crimes. For example, defining inhabitants of Africa or South America as savage allowed colonizers to ignore traditional forms of interaction because “wild people” could not and would not be viewed as ruling sovereign states. The use of this cliché is complicated for Indians. Their own ideals of a courageous and dignified Indian may in part resemble the trope, yet seeing themselves cast in such a reductionist mode may also shape Indians’ image of themselves.

The perceived authenticity of Lambreaux’s role is supported by the inclusion of actual Indian chiefs. Chief Darryl Montana, for example, appears in three episodes and served as an adviser to ensure accurate portrayal of Indian customs. In episode 1 of season 1, the fictional Chief Lambreaux gathers a group of Indians to mourn a fellow Indian whom he found dead on his property. The group includes, among others, Queen Harrison Nelson and Chiefs Montana, Dalcour, and Boudreaux. As they chant in front of their comrade’s house in the Lower Ninth Ward, a tour bus stops and disrupts their ritual. Both fictional and actual Indians order the driver, who quickly consents, to leave. This scene is a poignant comment on the commercialization and exploitation as a tourism destination that black neighborhood have experienced since Hurricane Katrina, suggesting the importance of

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respecting the privacy of Indians’ activities. At the same time, by staging this scene in a
dynamic manner and by placing it at the end of the show’s very first episode, the producers
raise particular interest in these secret rituals. Joining actual with fictional Indians
contributes to this effect. The dramatizations of real events and the integration of real
people in the drama create the impression of absolute truthfulness, as the cameos of real
people seem to testify to their supposed accuracy and significance. Because accuracy and
authenticity are performed, rather than a purely realistic version of New Orleans, the show
creates a highly theatricalized image of the city. However, in select scenes the high levels
of theatricality offer a different, artistic truthfulness. In the same episode Lambreaux tries
to woo his neighbor to rebuild his tribe for Mardi Gras. One night, dressed in a suit made of
orange and yellow feathers, Lambreaux dances and chants in front of his neighbor’s house.
After the reluctant neighbor has agreed to serve as Lambreaux’s trail chief and, with his
wife, disappeared back into their house, Lambreaux keeps dancing and chanting. This
moment of Lambreaux performing in the darkness of the actual New Orleans street for
himself, only concerned with his own existence as an Indian, transcends the boundaries of
fiction and documentary and expresses the poetic splendor of Indian artistry.

_Treme_ offers the first fictional representation of Indians and their history and makes
great effort to contextualize their current situation resulting from the racialized history of
New Orleans. Placing a representative of a marginalized cultural group as a key character
of a commercially successful show that was distributed internationally\textsuperscript{34} moves Indians out of their notorious invisibility and as a result broadens the public image of New Orleans. The two examples, \textit{Easy Rider}, and \textit{Treme}, represent the gradual change of media images produced by white filmmakers of New Orleans from a white male to a racially complex yet still male-dominated urban space. As I will discuss in the following, documentary filmmakers—both of color and white—have produced radically different concepts of New Orleans.

\textbf{The Black Indians of New Orleans} In \textit{Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History},\textsuperscript{35} Evgeny Dobrenko states that the truthfulness of historical reality is found in the time of a film’s production and not in the era it portrays. The landmark documentary \textit{The Black Indians of New Orleans} from 1976 by Maurice Martinez, retired Professor of Education at the University of North Carolina, corrects the prevalent historic narrative and at the same time reflects the time in which it was produced. Prior to Martinez, only Alan Lomax had filmed Indians for his ethnographic projects. Martinez produced his film (partially funded by The National Endowments for the Arts) during tumultuous political times that marked dramatic shifts in the racialized power structure of the US. As such, the making of \textit{The Black Indians of New Orleans} became an act of resistance and of change itself. A Creole from New Orleans, Martinez found acceptance by the Indian community. However,

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Treme} was released in the US and in Europe.
suspicious of white outsiders, several Indians insisted that he work with an African-American crew, as Martinez explained in an interview in April 2012: “The guardians of the culture, Jerome [Smith], Fred [Johnson] ‘We want an all-black film crew.’ That was during the time [mimics two fists meeting], you know. Where the hell am I going to get an all-black film crew in 1976? Or ‘75 it was, when we shot it. Thank God for the riots in Harlem. Major networks were allowing black filmmakers, soundmen and all to get a union card. You had to have all of that to go in. Because they didn’t want to go in there and get footage.” Because white film crews were reluctant to film riots in black parts of town, opportunities for black filmmakers opened up, and as a result, Martinez was able to hire a trained black cinematographer. Significantly, Indians insisting on an all-black crew was the first active step by Indians to control their representation in the media.

With his one-hour documentary Martinez paints a portrait of New Orleans as a portal city with strong roots in both Europe and Africa, thereby undermining the Eurocentric view of New Orleans’s history. Using archival images of maps and city sights, interviews, footage of performance activities, and voiceover narration, Martinez situates Indian culture as an important element within the city and traces Indian heritage to West Africa, enslavement, and the joining of Africans and Native Americans in the swamps of Louisiana. To explore the interdependence of Indians’ social structure and their complex performance practices, he films scenes at the home of the chief of the White Eagles as the tribe prepares for Mardi Gras Day and cheerfully work together to get the suits ready.

36 Maurice Martinez, interview with author, April 15, 2012.
Instead of widespread images of broken African-American and Native American families, with these scenes Martinez presents Indians as self-sufficient, family-based tribes centered on a big chief that function independently and parallel to white society and the dominant cultural order. His depiction of the making of suits as a family affair corresponds to David Elliot Draper’s observations in his dissertation from 1973.\(^{37}\) In his expansive research, Draper examines the labor division among gender lines in Indian families. Draper notes that women typically do not participate in the main circle at drum practices and only seldom join in the chorus. He observes that men are responsible for designing, constructing, and decorating their suits, including all the bead and feather work, while women (wives, mothers, girlfriends, sisters) sew the suit worn under the decorative suit. This “under suit” is usually made of silk or a similar material in the dominant color of the exterior suit and constructed on a sewing machine. In my own fieldwork, I witnessed that Chief Montana’s wife Sabrina and his three adult daughters took on many different tasks in addition to sewing the under suit, for example applying sequins and constructing three-dimensional ornaments. Chief Montana designed the suit, completed all the beading, and delegated the work, making sure every detail met his artistic vision.

While showing the importance of women and of family life in Indian culture, Martinez moves the black male body directly into view, thereby countering the exploitation of blacks and/or black culture as a channel for white desires. On Mardi Gras Day 1975,

Martinez captured one of the most memorable moments in Mardi Gras Indian history. In this scene, Chief Tootie Montana’s feathered crown is lowered through a window because it is too large to fit through the door. As the crown slowly descends, the chief smiles with deep satisfaction and the crowd cheers in awe. The crown’s magnitude symbolizes the chief’s magnitude and communicates through its enormous adornment that he, like his crown, is too grand for his humble home. Even if only symbolically, in this moment the chief’s reign extends beyond the confines of neighborhood and explodes the city’s social and racial stratification, elevating all chiefs and thereby all Indians with its grandeur. In an interview with me, Chief Tootie Montana’s sister, Madeleine Luster recollects Chief Montana’s experiences presenting himself to his community on Mardi Gras Days: “I think he felt he was a king coming out that door.”

From the scene showing the lowering of the crown, Martinez cuts to a scene in the middle of the Mardi Gras Day festivities. The crowd celebrates Chief Montana singing “Big Chief Tootie Has a Golden Crown,” as two women simultaneously pose with him for a photo and for Martinez’s film camera. Here, Montana is shown as the center of the party, not unlike a pop star. Celebrating Montana’s success temporarily liberates the people of his community from the oppression of their daily lives. Being filmed experiencing this liberation heightens the experience as the participants simultaneously act for themselves and perform for the camera knowing that filming immortalizes them. Performing for the camera is a deliberate (or at times unconscious) act of pushing against the temporal

limitations of human existence. Because of its function to record and store the moment and because by recording it overcomes the ephemeral nature of performance, the camera takes on the part of what I call the absolute audience, both human (operated by a person) and mechanical, subjective and totally objective. Although performing for the camera cannot completely erase the split between inner actor and spectator, its presence tends to force the performer to focus on it and can thereby release the performer from watching him/herself. The presence of the camera thus extends the moment of glory and liberation infinitely and intensifies the sense of self. By making these two scenes central in his film, Martinez communicates support of the monumental approach to history expressed in the chief’s performance of his own glory.

At the end of the ecstatic Mardi Gras party, Martinez interviews Montana on what it takes to achieve his heights of public approval.

MM: “How many hours straight have you been up now?”
TM: “Since Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.”
[Martinez whistles.]
TM: “In those four days, I bet you, I didn’t get three hours of sleep.”

Here, Martinez gives Montana the opportunity to reflect on himself. Montana proudly verbalizes the sacrifices he makes to his health and well-being, thereby adding to its significance, because what is only a comment in real life becomes a statement in film. Tootie Montana’s son, Chief Darryl Montana, echoes this experience of physical deprivation mixed with elation in an interview Sunday before Mardi Gras 2012:

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Let me say this: When you put on the suit, if you got an ailment—if something is hurting you or whatever—once you put that suit on, you don’t even feel it. Your adrenaline be flowing. Even if you’re tired. Like with me, on Mardi Gras morning, they be telling me “You gotta eat something.” I can’t eat. I can’t eat. Once I put that crown on, then I can eat me something. […] Making these suits. I’m not big, but I know I lost weight. I do it every year. And I eat, but my body burns it up so fast. I’m steady using them cells, thinking, trying to figure it all out and just burning it all up. […] Oh, it’s a sacrifice. Yes it is. You know, I say that anybody who gives up an hour of their life to do this you got to respect them, because life is short and they could have done something else with that hour of life.”

From these statements it can be concluded that, beyond the physical hardship, experiences of mental and emotional suffering are part of the process to earn the position of Indian chief. Relating Girard’s theory of the emergence of ritual, I hypothesize that the sacrifice required has to be so immense, not only because being chief is the highest honor but also because it is the greatest transgression. In fact, the role of chief is the highest honor because it is the greatest transgression. According to Girard, the king, or here the chief, is the paragon of transgressors, the man who holds nothing sacred, who assumes every form of hubris. The processes of preparing the suit, performing and thereby expressing his true self as a tribal chief in a white-dominated society that is traditionally hostile to both African and Native American cultures transgresses the socially sanctioned boundaries of racial hierarchy. Even if Indians’ vows of allegiance to their chief and to God before any loyalty to the US are understood symbolically rather than literally, they nevertheless render the white power structure secondary to the chief and supplant it with their own model of power

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40 Darryl Montana, interview with author, November 14, 2011.
hierarchy, thereby heightening his transgression. Martinez allowing Montana to engage in contemplating his own sacrificial role and indirectly his transgression is an act of undermining the dominant power structure. Martinez’s whistle signals that he is impressed—the only scene in which he reveals his presence—tying filmmaker and performer together conspiratorially. Making The Black Indians of New Orleans was thus an act of transgression in itself.

Further, by moving the black male body and the intense physicality of Indian performative practices into the center of the frame, Martinez offers his reading of their heritage. With footage of drum practices, Martinez shows Indians as highly physical singers and dancers who enter trance-like states, giving themselves completely to the music they perform. The depictions of trance states in particular during drum practices are reminiscent of spirit possessions in religious practices, such as Voodoo, and thus contextualize Indian cultural expressions in a larger African historical and ritualistic frame. With texts and images depicting enslaved Africans performing in Congo Square—possibly the only space within the Americas where enslaved Africans were allowed to practice their traditions—and photos documenting the intermarriage between Africans and Native Americans, Martinez argues that Indians are genetically and culturally linked with both Native Americans and Africans. He contends that Indians chose to mask as Native Americans as an opportunity to express their African retentions, while at the same time paying tribute to their Native American ancestry. This view of Indian heritage serves as a
corrective of the historical narrative of Native American and African-American roles in US history. While there is general agreement among scholars and Indians that Indian tribes have been masking since the late nineteenth century, Indian heritage has been a contentious issue, emblematic of the marginalized and politically disempowered position Indians have held throughout their history in Louisiana society.

Martinez’ film has been widely viewed by Indians, screened at festivals in Europe and the US, and received reviews by daily papers like *The New Orleans Times-Picayune.* The Black Indians of New Orleans is thus the first film to move Mardi Gras Indians out of obscurity. That Martinez is a New Orleanian Creole is significant, as his personal heritage was a mark of self-empowerment—people of African descent telling their own stories from an inside perspective. Black Indians of New Orleans thus contributed to an increased sense of self through a stronger awareness of African heritage. Martinez created an image of New Orleans ruled by white men but only against intense opposition by black men, who found strength in their African and Native American customs.

**Royce Osborn—All on a Mardi Gras Day** After the success of Martinez’s *The Black Indians of New Orleans* and up until after Hurricane Katrina, no documentaries exclusively on Indians were produced that reached prominent film festivals or acquired commercial distribution. Three documentaries, Royce Osborn’s *All on a Mardi Gras Day,* Aaron

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Walker’s *Bury the Hatchet*, and Lisa Katzman’s *Tootie’s Last Suit*, began production before the storm and were distributed or screened after the storm, when interest in Indian culture peaked. It must remain conjecture why three very different films about the same cultural group were developed at the beginning of the millennium without any particular political event that might have sparked the filmmakers’ interests. All three films are built on the historical viewpoint expressed in Martinez’s *The Black Indians of New Orleans*.

Walker portrays three different chiefs, Monk Boudreaux of the Golden Eagles, Victor Harris of FiYiYi, and Alfred Doucette of the Flaming Arrows to give insights into Indian life in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Lisa Katzman, who filmed during the same time period, builds the drama of her film on an, as it seems, exaggerated rivalry between Tootie Montana and his son Darryl. Of the two films, in particular, *Bury the Hatchet* with its economic storytelling and focus on three respected male figures in the community, was well received by Indians. The depicted competition in *Tootie’s Last Suit* caused discussions among Indians whose meaning for the community are difficult to gauge. Both Walker’s and Katzman’s films are admirable efforts to honor the Indians’ place in New Orleans’s society and thereby create images of a culturally and historically complex New Orleans where traditions have grown out of struggles. However, for this discussion, of greater interest is the documentary by an insider, New Orleanian Roy Osborn’s *All on a Mardi Gras Day*.

It’s been called the greatest free show on earth, a Catholic celebration with pagan roots, a farewell to the flesh, a last hurrah before the abstinence of Lent. For over two hundred years, Mardi Gras in New Orleans has attracted visitors from around the world, but there is
another Mardi Gras which has remained elusive even to some natives of the city. This is the story of New Orleans’s black carnival.\footnote{Royce Osborn, \textit{All on a Mardi Gras Day} (New Orleans: Spyboy Pictures, 2008).}

With these lines, Royce Osborn opens his documentary \textit{All on a Mardi Gras Day}, stating clearly that he intends his film to fill a gap in information that has perpetuated the idea of New Orleans as a city steeped in European rituals only. Thereby he sets out to correct the discourse about New Orleans’s myths, imagery, and perceived realities, placing his film in the category of critical history. Osborn divides his film into four sections; Black Indians, the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, Baby Dolls, and Skeleton Men.

In a brief introduction, Osborn illustrates the historical events that led to Africans arriving in Louisiana and their efforts at retaining their traditions. In this section, Osborn only interviews men. Women are shown dancing in colorful outfits and through their dancing transmitting the elegance of African cultures. Their bodies fill the frame with seductive moves and poses, yet they are never allowed to voice their views. As a result, they appear as objects rather than as subjects of the male gaze. Osborn then devotes approximately twenty minutes of screen time to Black Indians. Using interviews with experts, such as Maurice Martinez, scholar Kalamu ya Salamu, and Charles E. Siler, Program Curator of the Louisiana State Museum, Osborn tells Indian history chronologically and contextualizes it within Louisiana and US political history. He addresses topics ranging from the cultural and genetic mixing of Native Americans and Africans that ultimately led to the formation of Black Indian tribes, to the differences
between African and Native American design patterns that are reflected in Indian suits, to the possible influence of the Buffalo Bill Show on Indian masking practices. Importantly, the interviewees interpret Indian masking on Mardi Gras Day as political activism, with Martinez calling it a civil rights movement in itself. Finally, Osborn portrays Tootie Montana as personifying the zenith of the Indian artistic and social movement.

*All on a Mardi Gras Day*, counters the public image of New Orleans as a white male–dominated world with a black male–dominated world. In the section on Indians, even more so than in the introduction, the lack of female participants is striking. All the interviewees, Indians and scholars alike, are male, and no female Indians are shown in any of the varied Indian activities that Osborn captures. Even when explaining the various roles that make up a tribe, such as spyboy and wildman, Osborn neglects to mention the queen. This omission of female influence and participation creates an image of a black male–dominated culture celebrating black male beauty in all its complex meanings, from intellectual strength to physical appeal. This resonates with Nicole Fleetwood’s theory\(^4^4\) that the black visual has been framed as masculine and inadvertently positioned the black female as its excess. In Osborn’s film, the black male is not only the frame but at the same time its center, leaving little or no room for black female screen space.

Significantly, Osborn disregards female participation only in the section on Indians. The reasons for his choices are speculative; however, the martial nature of Indian culture

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lends itself to celebrating masculinity, challenging the stereotype of the submissive, passive black male that has dominated popular culture since the early days of minstrelsy. In the film’s chapter on the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, which with its use of mock blackface has historically staged the most subversive parades—and by now the most commercially successful—Osborn takes note of the Zulu queen. He also devotes a section on the Baby Dolls, an all-female black tradition, allowing female carnival practices screen time.\textsuperscript{45} Yet, with overall screen time, depth of discussion, and choice of interviewees, Osborn privileges black male contributions to carnival and thus to the social and political engagement of black communities, creating an image of a black-dominated New Orleans that seems oddly incomplete.

Similar to Martinez’s \textit{Black Indians of New Orleans}, Osborn’s \textit{All on a Mardi Gras Day} on the one hand offers a critical approach to the historic narrative of New Orleans and on the other praises the monumentalism essential to Indians’ self-presentation and presentation of their history. As a result, the films both glorify and demystify Indians. They shed light on neglected and/or suppressed aspects of American history and, by offering African-American perspectives of history, challenge the notion, for example, that rebellious black men are criminals. These documentaries create an image of a city divided by its history into white and all other colors, an urban space in which carnival is alternately a political battleground, a tool to cope with this battle, or a way to disguise the battle.

Through the filmmakers’ active engagement with African-American communities, both

\textsuperscript{45} I will discuss both the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club and the Baby Dolls in chapter 2.
films involve members of these communities shaping their own way of telling history and contemporary stories, which reflects their own social status and position. As a result, the making of these films are teaching tools for taking agency. Osborn’s film has reached cult status among black carnival participants and aficionados—it is screened ritualistically every year around Mardi Gras.

However, Martínez’s and Osborn’s films were not exclusively geared toward black or brown audiences. *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, for example, aired on PBS, reaching a wide and diversified audience. Educating and entertaining white and nonwhite audiences may be a positive result of such public screenings, yet they also place the films and their makers in the conundrum typical of ethnography: Explaining a minority culture to the majority emphasizes the minority’s otherness and thereby risks exoticizing them. Packaging the culture for an outsider audience affords that outsider audience great weight and makes Indian culture—as many Indians fear—vulnerable to exploitation. Films tend to generate more films, and the media attention of Indian activities, especially on Mardi Gras Day, has grown exponentially. The over presence of cameras at gatherings of well-known tribes, such as the Guardians of the Flames or the Yellow Pocahontas, as I described in the beginning of this chapter, has altered Indian performances in so far as Indians are challenged in making their way through the crowds of cinematographers. Secret rituals that are essential to maintaining a stance of resistance for those tribes can no more be conducted
on the streets on Mardi Gras Day. Whether welcomed or loathed by members of black and Indian communities, these developments broaden the public image of New Orleans.

From the Streets to the Archive

Similar to Martinez and Osborn, Sylvester Francis, long-time member of the Mardi Gras Indian tribe FiYiYi (that grew out of the Yellow Pocahontas) and a cousin of Darryl Montana’s, is concerned with establishing permanent records of the insider perspective of Indian culture. Francis is one of the founders and the curator of the Backstreet Cultural Museum, instituted in 1999 in the Tremé neighborhood and dedicated to preserving African-American culture. The Backstreet Cultural Museum serves as the first archive of Indian culture and heritage. It houses the largest collection of Indian suits and is the only place to display complete suits by different tribes next to each other. It also exhibits artifacts and costumes used in second-line parades. Emphasizing the links between Indian traditions and sewing techniques and traditions from West African cultures, the museum also exhibits select beaded works by African artists. Essential to the museum’s archiving effort is its film collection.

Since the early 1980s, Sylvester Francis has been filming Indian activities (Mardi Gras Day, St. Joseph’s Night, drum practices, etc.) and jazz funerals. Francis burns the unedited footage onto DVDs, catalogues them meticulously, and makes them available to interested visitors at the Backstreet Museum. Once a year at his booth at the Jazz &
Heritage Festival, he screens the DVDs on a large-screen monitor, attracting a small but steady and very interested audience. In a personal conversation, Francis told me that he has no time or interest to edit the footage nor is he looking for ways to distribute it more widely. He documents, collects, archives, and displays Indian culture primarily for members of his community and those people who are interested enough to seek him out. The significance of Francis’s film work lies both in precisely the fact that he chooses not to alter his footage by editing and in its exclusivity, which Francis as a member of the Indian community is able to gather. An expert on the designing of Indian suits, Francis devotes ample screen time to showing the suits in motion and the (typically enthusiastic) responses they elicit in the crowds. Francis’s camera technique is centered on capturing as much of the most dramatic action as possible, even if it requires getting dangerously close.

An example that reveals Indian traditions and the significance of Francis’s film archiving is the footage he filmed on Mardi Gras Day 1998. After fifty years of leading the Yellow Pocahontas, Big Chief Tootie Montana “passed the stick” on to his son Darryl Montana. Indian chiefs carry a staff, and so passing on the stick or staff both literally and symbolically means handing over the leadership of the tribe. The ritual signified an (as it turned out temporary) end to Tootie Montana’s public appearances—he returned to masking a few more times. Born December 16, 1922, Allison “Tootie” Montana was the great-nephew of Becate Batiste, the founding chief of the first organized Indian tribe of New Orleans, the Creole Wild West. According to Darryl Montana, Becate Batiste was
“the offspring of a Native American and a slave.”46 Tootie’s father, Alfred, was the first Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas. Tootie began masking with his father in 1947. In 1949 he formed his own tribe, the Monogram Hunters, as Kalamu ya Salaam47 has recounted, only to take over the Yellow Pocahontas in 1956. In the years to follow, Montana changed the tribal confrontations from violent gang fare to design competitions.

Because of the legacy and because of Tootie’s achievements, this passing of the stick was regarded as a milestone within the Indian culture and, as Francis informed me, one of the Indian rituals that takes place less and less frequently. On this Mardi Gras Day, Francis was able to capture a heated encounter in medium shots and medium close-ups that might have been difficult to film at such close proximity for outsiders. Indian culture is shaped by strict, well-known yet unwritten rules that are supposed to ensure order within the tribal hierarchy and between the competing tribes. One rule geared toward enforcing territorial respect among the chiefs stipulates that on Mardi Gras Day a tribe may only pass the house of the chief of another tribe after that chief has come out and presented himself to his community. This means that on occasion a tribe has to change routes in order to avoid the block where the other chief resides. This poses obstacles for the tribe to reach its desired destiny—especially if it is large and surrounded by a spread-out second line of

46 Darryl Montana, interview with author, April 15, 2012
supporters. Theoretically, it allows chiefs to time their presentations strategically and thereby inconvenience other tribes.

In Francis’s footage, on the street in front of the Montana house, a block party is in full force, with the crowd waiting for Chief Darryl Montana to show himself. By early afternoon, the tribe of the Black Seminoles arrives. The flagboy of the Black Seminoles asks the wildman of the Yellow Pocahontas—who wears a cap with sharp horns, attire typical of a wildman—permission for his tribe to pass the Montana house. The wildman of the Yellow Pocahontas bears the responsibility to guard his chief. He refuses. The flagboy insists. They exchange heated words. The wildman motions the flagboy to back off. When the flagboy refuses, with a quick move the wildman cuts the flagboy’s forehead with his horns. Blood gushes out of the flagboy’s wound. He has lost the fight. The wildman orders the flagboy to fall on his knees. The flagboy hesitates. Then, with a pained expression on his face, the flagboy concedes and briefly does so. When Francis showed me the footage, I commented that the flagboy will not forget this moment for a long time. Francis replied, laughing: “Not his whole life.”

In Indian culture, bowing to anyone but God and the chief is humiliating and demeaning to manhood.

Girard argues in Violence and the Sacred that sacrifices protect the entire community from its own violence, as it prompts the collective to choose a victim outside of itself or its highest members and their foil. In Indian culture, the highest member is the

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48 Sylvester Francis, interview with author, April 14, 2013.
49 Girard, Violence and the Sacred.
chief and his foil is the wildman. By protecting the chief, the wildman risks his own well-being for the safety of the community, which otherwise would fall apart from internal violence. Internal violence would occur if aggression from the outside cannot be successfully fought; when violence has been committed that cannot be cured otherwise. Following Girard’s theory that violence generates ritual, I speculate that tribal warfare served to maintain peace within each tribe and to protect its internal hierarchy. Rituals, whether sewing in the style of the chief or singing his praise, appear to have grown out of the desire to protect the internal structure and stability of the tribe. This encounter that Francis filmed illustrates that, although Indian culture now is centered on designing suits, performative rituals, and symbolic mock battles, it was born out of violence, and inter-tribal violence can still flare up. In discussing the shift from violent encounters to design competitions, Joseph Roach theorizes that the urban underclass in a turbocharged capitalist world lacks resources to practice excess. In the absence of money, they can almost only practice excess through violence, literally through spending blood. The elaborate suits, (incidentally sewn by spending blood, sweat, and tears) are substitutes for the actual wasting of blood. Roach notes:

For the urban underclasses in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, violence is one of the few forms of excess expenditure available in the absence of money. People spend their own and one another’s blood. For this kind of investment, however, Mardi Gras Indian suits offer themselves as a substitute. [...] The suits should not be thought of as artifacts but as performances in themselves. They
seem to want to move out of the closed arena of curatorial manifest
destiny and into the streets.\textsuperscript{50}

By capturing footage that most likely would have been unavailable to outsiders, Francis makes an important contribution to ethnographic films, reminiscent of Jean Rouch’s approach from 1961 when he turned the camera on his own community of Parisiennes in \textit{Chronicle of a Summer}. Together with those Indians who donate their suits and participate in his filming, Francis moves the suits from the streets into that “closed arena,” adding the “curatorial manifest destiny” as a third function to the steps of making and performing the suits. Museum exhibitions and archival films invite reflection on the displayed objects and their artistic and social-cultural context. The Backstreet Museum’s exhibits and Francis’s films encourage Indians to contemplate their own culture, specifically their culture’s path from violence to competing with suits as a substitute for it. The immediacy of performed memory has been given a site for remembrance (chosen and initiated by members of the community), and so the performance itself is made a piece of the collective memory that can be viewed and replayed endlessly.

Francis’s displays in a publicly funded institution\textsuperscript{51} stimulates artistic exchanges as it gives Indians the opportunity to compare each other’s suits in detail, increases the perception of the suits’ value, and gives them a sense of validation. The more the suits are viewed as precious, the less likely violent encounters are to occur that could potentially

\textsuperscript{50} Roach, \textit{Cities of the Dead}, 206.
\textsuperscript{51} The Backstreet Cultural Museum is funded by individual donors and organizations such as the Ford Foundation, National Film Preservation Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.
destroy them. While acknowledged among Indians as a positive contribution to their culture, the concrete impact Francis’s filming has on Indian practices is difficult to measure since Francis does not keep track of how many Indians have come to watch his footage. I find the actual importance is in the mere fact that Francis does film and archive. Participating in Francis’s project adds Nietzsche’s antiquarian history approach to the monumental approach that Indians perform. As Indians know how and where Francis screens his footage, being filmed by Francis means purposefully contributing to the act of archiving, providing a history available to future generations and contributing to what Lipsitz calls the alternative academia: “By themselves, alternative academies cannot produce substantive re-alignments of political or economic power, but as repositories of collective memory, sites of radical solidarity, and sources of moral and political instruction, they hold enormous potential for the development of collective mobilization and struggle.” On the one hand, this participating demonstrates self-determination and agency, and on the other, the willingness to move into the mainstream and find acceptance by the dominant culture. While remnants of street culture, such as the encounter between the spyboy and the wildman still occur, those too become part of a larger archive. This archive operates parallel to the mainstream culture and at the same time as part of it: correcting historical narratives and celebrating Indian culture, while communicating with the mainstream and thereby gradually broadening the image of New Orleans to one that is inclusive of varied historical narratives and contemporary experiences.

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Jules Cahn on the Streets

Francis’s film and archival work has one significant predecessor and was quite likely inspired by him: Jules Cahn (1916–95), a New Orleans businessman, between 1963 and 1980 accumulated more than 100,000 feet of 16-mm film footage. Predominantly, he captured street-performance traditions. The Historic New Orleans Collection houses all of Cahn’s films and makes digital version available on-site. Although Cahn was well known in New Orleans and the merit of his film work has been acknowledged by performers and scholars alike, no serious study of the impact of his films on the performance cultures he documented has been undertaken. Because of the scope of Cahn’s collection and the diversity of his films, my dissertation can only touch a portion of what deserves to be examined. Cahn filmed all types of performative activities prevalent in New Orleans, ranging from carnival parades by the mainline krewes to jazz funerals to second lines. Indian performances make up the bulk of his collection. Indians (for example Darryl Montana) have proudly pointed me to Cahn’s work in the collection and recalled him fondly. Before Francis, Cahn served as an unofficial archivist of Indian culture.

“The Mardi Gras Indians” from 1970 (16 mm, color, silent, 17 minutes) exemplifies Cahn’s unique style. The film appears incomplete, perhaps a rough cut only. The editing is very choppy. There is no recognizable narrative or structure, but an apparently free-flowing stream of images that capture Indian activities. Unlike Martinez, or later Walker and
Katzman, Cahn does not focus on or overstate the role of the chief. He includes shots of various chiefs in his films, yet neither in this film nor in any other does he subtitle the footage with the chiefs’ names. The Historic New Orleans Collection notes that Chief Jake Millon of the White Eagles is featured in “The Mardi Gras Indians.” Chief Tootie Montana of the Yellow Pocahontas appears in both “St. Joseph’s Night” from 1970 (16 mm, color, sound, 17 minutes) and “Indian Funeral” from 1972 (16 mm, color, silent, 19 minutes), but only viewers knowledgeable of Indian culture would be able to identify any of the chiefs. In “St. Joseph’s Night,” Cahn plays two famous Indian songs, “My Big Chief Got a Golden Crown” and “Eh Paka Way.” The music is played too fast (possibly a technical glitch) and does not appear meant to be in sync with the various activities shown, such as dancing, walking, and singing. The footage shows people singing a different song, at times clapping their hands or moving in an entirely different rhythm. Chief Tootie Montana is shown posing while “Eh Paka Way” plays. With a few wider shots Cahn here allows room for Chief Montana’s artistry yet makes no attempt at glorifying him, rather filming him like any other Indian he managed to capture. Instead of highlighting the role of the chiefs, Cahn shows Indians as a community of people who share the task of sewing and beading the suits, who socialize on Mardi Gras Day and St. Joseph’s Day, and who march and dance along the streets.

Of great importance in these activities is a drum practice by the tribe of the White Eagles because drum practices were typically not available for filming at the time. As in all
of Cahn’s films, participants pose freely and joyfully for the camera. In fact, a distinct feature of Cahn’s films is that participants perform for the camera, showing off their bodies and dancing, often with proud or even triumphant expressions on their faces. Cahn seeks out those performances, welcomes, and invites them. These interactions with Cahn and his camera illustrate that Cahn, although white and from a middle class background, was accepted and trusted in the black communities. Moreover, Cahn’s camera helps the participants (performers or their second-line supporters) display pride in their own bodies, allowing them to fully and deliberately express their own beauty and sensuality through movements and stances that signify the defiance inherent to Indian traditions, a defiance against the dominant cultural hierarchy that defines white as beautiful. It is the immediate interaction with the camera that adds layers of meaning to the performances, historicizing and framing their moments of joy for the future—as in Francis’s work, the performances for Cahn’s camera are acts of archiving. The desire to be captured on camera, calculated or spontaneous, with its carnivalesque claim of “Look at me” extend to “Keep looking” and thus are conscious and unconscious acts against black invisibility in white spaces.

In *Troubling Vision* Nicole Fleetwood\(^\text{53}\) examines how performances by black artists are tied to the black body stereotypically and thereby reduce the black person to a body and his/her body to a field of projection, which ultimately reproduces normative notions about blackness. Being the field of projections by white spectators joins blacks in a

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\(^{53}\) Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision.*
group or community without their choosing. Being a projection field for the white gaze makes blacks both very visible, identified by their “blackness,” and at the same time curiously invisible. As Cahn vividly illustrates, Indians break this scopic regime devised by the white male gaze, as Fleetwood defines it, by making themselves visible and by displaying themselves as both part of a group and as individuals. Cahn filming Indians with reserved appreciation offers them a platform for self-exhibition; his filming becomes a liberating gesture of complicity. Precisely because Cahn did not seem to have been concerned with creating a specific narrative or explaining Indian culture, his films appear effortless, leaving a lasting impression of the artistry and grace of the participants. Instead of creating ethnographic studies and thereby risking the exoticization of Indians, Cahn captures the essence of Indian traditions, the expression of their spiritual selves.

Cahn, like so many filmmakers, was fascinated by New Orleans’s street performances and through his films perpetuated the image of New Orleans as an urban space of spectacle and a place of liberty where people are free to express themselves through their bodies. However, Cahn’s New Orleans is black, both male and female, and devoid of the hierarchical structures that determine the city’s social interactions. Cahn’s recreation of a black New Orleans on film acts as a counterpart to Indians’ transgression through their theatrical presentations. In their collaboration with Cahn, Indians transcend their own history and enter a timeless frame—the ultimate transgression. Unlike Francis, whose unedited footage nevertheless observes the chronology of the event and thereby
follows a narrative, namely that of the performance, Cahn disregards limits or rules of time and place. He focuses completely on the moment. Instead of organized carnival activities that glorify individuals, Cahn presents performative chaos, a stream of performances that simply seem to be happening without a clear beginning or end. This continuous stream of performances not only breaks the white scopic regime but ignores whiteness altogether and thereby fundamentally disrupts the social order that white carnival and its mediatized presentations celebrate.

While during the act of filming Cahn quietly collaborated with the street performers in creating their image of themselves and their own city, the path his films took contributed to dissolving the rigid segregation between black and white carnivals or even cultures. Cahn’s persistent and completely noncommercial interest in Indians made him a signal of hope for appropriate recognition and an end to exploitation, as well as a sign of possible equal interactions. The fact that his documentations of performative expressions of marginalized cultures are archived in The Historic New Orleans Collection alongside cultural productions by members of the dominant cultural order affirms this marginalized cultural group’s sense of importance and serves to compensate in part for the neglect from which Indians suffer. Integrating this marginalized culture into the world of scholarly pursuit serves to affirm the significance of these traditions beyond the actual participating groups yet also constitutes another step to move Indians out of their resistance and into the mainstream.
A Note on Change

Attention from filmmakers has raised Indians’ awareness of their own performances and traditions and of their role in society. From Martinez’s documentary *The Black Indians of New Orleans* to Cahn’s free-flowing images to contemporary documentaries like *All on A Mardi Gras Day*, Indians have gradually begun to see themselves not only through the eyes of members of their community and those of the (frequently) hostile police—two groups that confirm the Indians’ determination to preserve their traditions, one by approval, the other by opposition—but through the eyes of audiences removed from New Orleans and Indian culture. These audiences come from all possible social, political, and ethnic backgrounds. It remains to be determined how the increased media coverage and the awareness of being seen by a broad public influences Indians’ traditions over longer stretches of time. At this point, however, it can be assessed that engagement of Indian performance traditions and films via their respective history modes are causing the gradual transformation of public images of New Orleans from a white-dominated to an ethnically complex urban environment.
2. CARNIVAL ON SCREEN—LOOKING AT THE ROYAL GAZE

In 1955, an unknown filmmaker captured a brief moment in the parade of Rex, New Orleans’s largest carnival organization. In his documentary, simply entitled “Rex Parade” (16 mm, color, silent, 12:34 minutes), a large, colorfully decorated wooden float flanked on both sides by crowds of carnival celebrants (some costumed, some not) makes its way down Canal Street in the heart of New Orleans. At the top, shielded by a red awning, sits Rex, King of the 1955 carnival, on a golden throne. He is a middle-aged white man wearing white tights, a pearl-studded top, a fake beard, and a crown on his blonde, bob-cut wig. The float is brought to a halt. A middle-aged white man in a black frock coat climbs on. He greets Rex with a deep bow. They talk amicably and with great familiarity. A younger black man in a black frock coat, carrying a tray of champagne glasses, climbs up the ladder onto the float. The white man helps him up the last steps. The black man serves champagne. Rex and the white man drink. Rex toasts the crowd. The black man smiles to the crowd and to Rex and the white man. Rex holds out his glass for a refill without looking at the black man. The black man refills it. Rex empties the glass in one gulp and throws it into the crowd. The black man climbs down the ladder. Rex laughs to the crowd, and the float moves on. This small moment encapsulates how Mardi Gras festivities ritually celebrate the social-political hierarchy of New Orleans, based on a tacit agreement on the supremacy of white hegemonic masculinity. Chris Lukinbeal and Stuart Aitken contend that the “embodiment of ideal patriarchal orders maintains a status quo by reinforcing the

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54 Unknown filmmaker, “Rex Parade” (February 2, 1955), archived at The Historic New Orleans Collection.
myth of the ideal man at all scales (from muscular bodies to political muscle). Hegemonic masculinities are continually reaffirmed in relation to what they are not, and so their relations to both subordinate masculinities and to women are important."\(^{55}\) How the media is both used and actively contributes to affirming and at times challenging this hegemonic masculinity that shapes New Orleans’s social structure is the topic of this chapter.

New Orleans is a city divided by racialized politics, and during carnival season when everyday social interactions are heightened, this becomes particularly apparent. Indian processions take place in the black parts of town, and carnival parades by so-called old-line krewes like Rex dominate the white parts of town. Several of the old line krewes, the main protagonists of this chapter, were originally exclusive to white members, even though in 1991 the city council decided that, since the parades relied on taxpayers’ money to use the streets, the police, and the fire department, parades had to integrate. Krewes like Rex complied and opened their membership to all, while others like Mistick Krewe of Comus stopped parading and limited their activities to private carnival balls. Since members of old-line krewes constitute the city’s social elite, these balls are high-society events. In the early twentieth century an African-American organization, the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, troubled the all-white carnival landscape by starting its own parade led by the Zulu king down the same route as Rex, mocking white stereotypes of black people through wearing banana-leaf skirts and painting their faces black. Over the course of

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the twentieth century, large krewes that are inclusive of all New Orleanians, such as Endymion and Bacchus, and all-female krewes, such as Krewe of Muses, have formed. However, these newer krewes are all either modeled on the old-line krewes or a response to their exclusivity. The new-line krewes fulfill a need and enjoy great popularity, but they have not replaced the social-political status and importance of the old-line krewes.

The founders of the first krewe, Mistick Krewe of Comus, understood that in order to shape the rather chaotic and rambunctious New Orleans carnival and to use carnival as a tool to establish their own social position, they needed to control their public image. From early on they relied on a strategy of mystery and dramatic public display, as James Gill describes in *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*:

“Suddenly a host of black men materialized waving flambeaux, and two small but exquisite floats set off in a blaze of light, flanked by elaborately costumed maskers on foot and bands playing martial music.”

Rather than “the joy of change and reincarnation” that Bakhtin proclaims a defining element of carnival, the masks in Comus connoted a hiding of the maskers’ identities. Membership was (and still is) secret and by invitation only, yet even Mistick’s first private ball was reviewed in local newspapers. After the Civil War, other krewes formed following Mistick’s model, and gradually the organizations extended their efforts to include film and subsequently broadcast television and eventually digital media/the Internet in order to institutionalize their role in New Orleans society.

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To fully appreciate the socio-political significance of carnival balls, they need to be viewed in relation to the members’ foundational idea of their European heritage. “One of the finest fictions sustaining celebration of Mardi Gras is the notion that people here are heirs to a gay and aristocratic French mode of life found nowhere else on the continent,” Samuel Kinser notes in *Carnival American Style*. This self-perception grew out of opposition to other ethnic groups and in relationship to the institution of slavery. Brion David Davis observes that between 1880 and 1950, the time period that saw the end of Reconstruction, the institutionalizing of “separate but equal,” and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, a strong, pastoral nostalgia of plantation life dominated the popular white view of the antebellum South. Blockbuster films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Jezebel* (1938) that take place on plantations where happy slaves toil, were produced at the tail end of this period. At the beginning of this phase, the carnival krewes rose to prominence and the myth of “white supremacy” found its way into the artful celebrations of carnival parades and balls. The krewes drew tropes and aesthetics from entertainments, such as Jacobin court masques and European fairy-tale worlds, signifying two of their defining components: power and fancy. These cultural references—even if not recognized by all krewe participants—directly and indirectly link the krewes with the claimed aristocratic European legacy. Since officially these entertainments are no more than that—

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fanciful entertainments—the glorification of aristocracies expressed in them never challenges New Orleans’s official democratic system. However, through exclusivity, familial ties, and ritualistic annual repetitions, the krewes create a sense of bonding among their members that ultimately ties them together as groups similar to royal courts.

Diana Taylor argues that ritualized repetition—like New Orleans carnival balls—transform the ephemeral into a repertoire, noting that the archive and the repertoire are not in opposition.\textsuperscript{60} According to Taylor, the archive does not represent the hegemony nor does the repertoire represent its challenger. Both the archive and the repertoire exist together and parallel to each other, both belonging to and being used by those in power and by those who are not. In the previous chapter, I traced how Mardi Gras Indians over time, through their relationship with film, TV, and digital media, extended their repertoire—their performative traditions—to the archive and thereby expanded their oppositional role in New Orleans’s society to one of a cultural group with at least some political impact. In this chapter, I argue that the relationship of the carnival organizations to the media is a crucial component of establishing and maintaining their elevated status. By carefully utilizing the media to document their repertoires and create archives of them (for the public and for themselves), the krewes construct an image of New Orleans as a European enclave in the US and a legitimate heir of European courts dominated by white men and beautified by white, virginal women. African and Native American influences in this strongly patriarchal image are omitted or presented as subservient to the white-dominated elite. Significantly,

\textsuperscript{60} Taylor, The Archive and the Repertoire.
since the krewes perform a fantasy world that only alludes to ties to factual history, they explode Nietzsche’s categories of antiquarian and monumental history. It is precisely their divorce from facts and actuality that makes the krewes' annual performance–film events so effective in establishing and maintaining political power.

In this analysis, I examine different types of media or moving-image content, ranging from home movies to documentaries, Hollywood productions to TV programs. The various carnival organizations have produced and/or commissioned a number of films that are now on view in The Historic New Orleans Collection. These films range from amateur footage to professional coverage of balls and parades. Original distribution beyond the krewes’ members remains uncertain. For outsiders these films are informative of the manner in which the krewes celebrate. For insiders—the target audience—beyond the joy of reliving a special event, they serve as reminders of the accepted code of conduct, thereby contributing to maintaining exclusivity. Some films and programs directly support the promotional efforts of the krewes. An annual TV program produced by New Orleans’s major public broadcasting station, WYES, documents the Rex Carnival ball as the highpoint of the social season. This is arguably the most effective media program in New Orleans. Very few films challenge the krewes’ celebration of their institutionalized positions of power. The Hollywood movie Jezebel, set in antebellum New Orleans, for example, throws a critical light on gender politics within the social elite. Yet although the film includes a debate about abolition, it does not openly question the legitimacy of the
social order. Rather, the film instrumentalizes performance traditions of enslaved African-Americans to flesh out the white main characters. *By Invitation Only*, a small-scale documentary by Rebecca Snedeker, the daughter of a member of one of the most prominent krewes, is the only film that I was able to find that investigates behind the scenes and explores the racialized construct that the krewes’ festivities perpetuate.

**Authentic Royalty—Real and Fake: “Laissez les bon temps rouler”**

New Orleans’s carnival traditions are widely viewed and promoted as French. The popular slogan “Laissez les bon temps rouler” advertising Mardi Gras speaks to that. Yet, masked balls became popular entertainments at the beginning of the Spanish reign and marked political and racialized tensions, as Kevin Fox Gotham has outlined.⁶¹ Because the wearing of face masks allowed for mingling between different groups that were officially divided by class and race, which could possibly lead to rebellion, the Spanish government banned them in 1781. The potential for licentious behavior encouraged by veiling one’s identity kept masked balls a contentious issue. The American government of Louisiana, eager to clean New Orleans of its Creole impurities, even banned masked street parading in 1805. This ban was only lifted in 1820; from then on increasingly masked parades and masked balls dominated Mardi Gras festivities.

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The carnival celebrations that have ruled New Orleans since the mid-nineteenth century and shaped its reputation are neither French nor Spanish but an Anglo-Saxon invention. In 1857, a small group of businessmen, none of whom had been born in New Orleans, founded the carnival organization Mistick Krewe of Comus. Prior to the founding of Mistick, New Orleans carnival embodied what Bakhtin defines as the quintessential qualities of the carnivalesque: “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal.”  

Enslaved and free workers of all ethnicities celebrated together, temporarily overturned social hierarchies, and entertained themselves by throwing feces, stones, and flour at passersby, indulging in what Bakhtin refers to as the “grotesque,” the concern with the lower stratum and bodily functions. With the rise Mistick Krewe of Comus, Bakhtin’s version of carnival gradually disappeared from the streets of New Orleans and, with the exception of some French Creole elements, such as selecting a new queen every year, the Anglo-Saxon rituals prevailed. Freewheeling carnival chaos was exchanged for a complex sequence of acts that symbolize reign and rulership.

The carnival krewes’ direct and indirect references to cultural models, in particular those from the Renaissance, offer a key to understanding this development, exemplifying Diana Taylor’s argument that “performances travel, challenging and influencing other

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performances. Yet they are, in a sense, always in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them.” The use of the mythical figure of Comus as an emblem for the first krewe, the Mistick Krewe of Comus, is of particular significance. Comus, god of revelry and son of Bacchus and Circe, embodies unabashed indulgence in physical pleasures. However, theatrical interpretations have expanded Comus’s symbolic function to wrestling with such desires. Comus appears for the first time in theatrical literature in Ben Johnson’s masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* from 1618, yet he is only made widely known with John Milton’s court masque *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, written in 1634. Milton’s masque uses the pastoral genre with a setting in the woods and Comus appearing in the form of a shepherd to explore the conflict between vice and virtue. Comus aims to seduce a virtuous lady, but in a rather intellectual exchange about good and evil and free will, she, speaking very independently, refuses to give in to his temptations.

This conflict and the ultimate rejection of vice is reflected in the style and outlook of Mistick Krewe of Comus. While the krewe’s name “Comus” clearly refers to the mythical god, the title of Mistick’s first parade, “The Demon Actors in Milton’s Paradise Lost,” pays homage to Milton and thereby implies an awareness of the conflict he assigns to Comus in his famous mask. As Samuel Kinser observes, these references signify a “sense of trespass which for Americans of Protestant background is nearly inseparable from

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merrymaking.”

Rather than engaging with the complexity Milton expresses, according to Kinser “orderly magnificence was their aim and they achieved it, integrating elements near and far in time and space to the earlier Carnival customs of New Orleans.”

Further, this “orderly magnificence” ignores or even dismisses that *A Mask...* served as a way for Milton to criticize absolutism, as Guilherme Ferraz and Thomas H. Luxon argue: “*A Mask* seems to be critical of the very court culture that generated and patronized masques. Unlike the lavish settings of Inigo Jones, *A Mask* opens on a plain dark setting, and the masque only makes use of ornamental artifice during the bacchanal Comus throws for his half-bestial guests.”

Instead, Mistick aligns itself with English court masques that were typically designed to celebrate the monarchy. A good portion of the Stuart reigns (1603–1714), during which the popularity of court masques peaked, coincided with the empire of Louis XIV (1654–1715), the first ruler of Louisiana, and his court festivities at Versailles. Both serve as models for celebrations of carnival royalty. Samuel Kinser notes:

> Insofar as slaveholding planters regarded themselves as an aristocracy, a miniature extension of the European courts they had left behind, they had an obligation to continue the masking and dancing which since the sixteenth century were standard parts of royal and aristocratic behavior. The court-as-spectacle was an integral part of policy, a demonstration of princely superiority: The balls and masques which since medieval times were clustered in England and France around the

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64 Kinser, *Carnival American Style*, 89.
65 Kinser, *Carnival American Style*, 97.
festive times of Christmas and Carnival were part of the colonial memory and the colonial ideal.67

From their very beginning Errol Laborde notes that the krewes operated in secrecy. While Indians and their more officially organized counterparts, the black social aid organizations that flourished during this period,68 very likely drew from examples (carryovers) from West African secret societies, the white krewes and the Pickwick Club, the organization behind Comus, were directly influenced by European, in particular British, secret societies.69 These European forerunners were exclusively male. The increase of krewes after the Civil War suggests that the balls served to celebrate the importance of the white male members and their families, compensating for and alleviating their fears of losing status and political power. Such fears were directed against black citizens—specifically against black politicians who during the brief period of Reconstruction held leading posts in the government—and were framed as the need to protect white women from the alleged unrestrained sexuality of black men. The most famous example of using carnival as a tool against the black population is the theme “The Missing Link to Darwin’s Origin of Species” of the Mistick Krewe of Comus ball of 1873. Printed on invitations and floats, it included racist caricatures of black politicians as monkeys playing musical instruments. James Gill charges that the krewe members’ sympathies lay with the Ku Klux

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67 Kinser, Carnival American Style, 32
68 Black social aid organization filled the need for cultural exchange and entertainment but also, and perhaps more important, functioned like insurance companies.
Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia, linking the krewes directly with those violent marauders who threatened and murdered black voters and politicians: “The leading lights of those ‘patriotic Louisianians’ were to be found in the gentlemen’s clubs and the Carnival krewes of New Orleans.”

Intrinsically tied to the notion of “white supremacy,” the festivities expressed a longing for an elusive Golden Age before the Civil War. Harry Levin notes that there is a connection between “the spatial and the temporal concepts, between the great good place and the good old days, between the ideal landscape—Arcady, Sicily, or wherever else—and the ideal epoch, whenever that may have been or might be.” This links an elusive, fluid, and past temporal unit with a space that can be assigned a specific cultural location, in this case New Orleans, and, as we will see, through pastoral imagination, the city’s surrounding plantations. Alexander Pope observes in his Discourse on Pastoral Poetry that the “pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden Age.” Hence the krewes have three points of historic connections: Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the bygone era of the slaveholding South. These points in time are manifest by three geographic locations, the third being New Orleans, where the Golden Age finally found its Eden. The aesthetics of this nostalgic longing have been repeated almost unchanged since the early days of the krewes.

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70 Gill, Lords of Misrule, 93.
Carnival balls follow strict rituals centered on the king and queen. A new king and queen are selected every year. The queen, always a very young woman, is chosen from the families of krewe members. In contrast, the king typically is middle-aged and a respected member of society and of the krewe. The selection of king and queen takes place in secrecy, and the reveal is greatly anticipated. A video of a carnival ball from the 1980s provides insights into the structure of the event and creates a very specific image of New Orleans’s social elite. This tape was commissioned by the krewe for its members. Its function was to create memories for the participants and their families yet also to obliquely remind viewers of the exclusivity and racialized social status of the group: The only African-Americans present are servants. The video illustrates the typical structure of carnival balls, which resembles that of court masques. As Ferraz and Luxon assert in the introduction to Milton’s *A Mask…*, the structure of court masques “served to neutralize potential threatening energies in the political unconscious of the court, and the authority of the King was reasserted through the imagery of absolutist patriarchy represented by the virtuous body of the Queens and their attendant ladies.” These royal entertainments were usually divided into antimasque and masque. The antimasque depicted farcical characters (frequently satyrs), vulgarity, and chaos. The sequence of masque following antimasque indicates that the general storyline was that of disorder transformed into harmony through

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73 In order to protect the krewe’s identity, I keep this anonymous.
74 Ferraz and Luxon.
royal beauty and authority. The dramatic climax was not, as in a classic narrative the solution of a conflict, but the actual entrance of the representatives of harmony.

Like the masques, the ball in the video begins with a humorous entertainment. Several cross-dressed men, wearing garish dresses, high heels, and longhaired wigs, perform a parody of a popular TV show. The men overact, stumble, and make physically sexual jokes. Backstage, they pose, shaking their legs and with one man mooning the camera. The humor of this parody is based on denigrating sexually active and desirable women. By feminizing themselves, the men appear ridiculous, thereby depreciating women and strengthening the patriarchal order embodied by the king. Similar to the masque, after the comedic sketch the ballroom is quickly cleared, giving way to the harmonizing element of the royal ruler: The curtain at the backside of the dance space opens and reveals the king standing in front of his throne (elevated on a stage), who greets his court by waving his scepter. The camera is placed opposite the king (costumed in white and gold, complete with tights, crown, and fake beard), capturing him and most of the ballroom in a high-angle wide shot.

Fanfares ring out, and the queen, accompanied by a gentleman in a black frock coat enters the ballroom. She circles the ballroom, nodding to the court and waving her scepter. Her dress is white and pearl-studded, with a high collar that extends far beyond her crowned head and a reportedly very heavy velvet train extending to at least three meters. In the center of the room, the queen turns to the stage and slowly walks towards and up the
stairs. With the help of two pages, she positions herself next to the king to greet the crowd. Her virginal appearance contrasts starkly with the performances of the sketch, or antimasque.

“In traditional masques, the Queen is able to neutralize the negative forces of the anti-masque revelers because her virtue emanates from the King; therefore, the woman is simply a vessel for the absolute power of the monarch,”75 Ferraz and Luxon note. This ideal of pure femininity that merely serves to compliment the king is at the heart of the carnival balls, signifying health, purity, and rejuvenation. Here it is performed for the continuation of this group of New Orleanians, but it presents an old and oft-repeated concept. In The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance Harry Levin discusses Francis Bacon’s notion that the continual growth of life (flowers and plants) all year-round is “the privilege of the golden age.” He argues that although “this privilege may be its greatest impossibility,…it is also one of its most potent attractions; for to exist without season is to be suspended in a state of timelessness, which would be humanly inconceivable except in an earthly paradise.”76 However, longing for this timeless state of bliss depends on repetition and continuity to avoid stasis, as Levin observes: “Nostalgia for a happier day would be a sterile emotion, if it merely sighed for what was not; encouraged by the rotation of the seasons, it is transfigured into a hope for recurrence.”77 The rigidity of costume and code of conduct preclude an actual sexual relationship between the royal pair and thus

75 Ferraz and Luxon.
77 Ibid., 5.
recurrence and renewal, even though the queen’s youth, beauty, and her dress fashioned after a wedding gown allude to it.

King and queen sit on their thrones and welcome the guests, who file in two by two to pay their respects from below the staircase, first bowing and curtseying, then dancing. The court masques perfected the central positioning of the ruler with the invention of perspective sets so that the audience was always watching the ruler watch the stage presentation. Here, the king and queen are placed on a stage to be filmed and to be looked at by the guests, while they in turn are watching them. As in a masque, the royal presence at the ball is the spectacle itself. In a masque (and on a larger scale in a monarchy), the monarch is the hero and therefore the object of the audience’s desire. Worshipping the monarch could be experienced as pleasurable by identifying with him as a hero. Celebrating the hero-monarch then ultimately means celebrating oneself, or at least the fantasy of oneself in his role. At the same time, this pleasure is amplified by the obvious limitation of not being able to touch the hero. In real life, as well as in a masque, the monarch remains out of reach. During a masque, the monarch sits tantalizingly close and in full view of all spectators but is forever at a distance.

The guests at the ball may dance for their own pleasure but also to perform for the king and queen. Only through guests and royals watching each other from a distance is the spectacle of the carnival royal presence achieved—the performance event depends on a mutual exchange of gazes. Cameras filming royals and courtiers add a third gaze. With the
exception of the cinematographer, who experiences and creates the third (cinematic) gaze, for the audience the performance event only transforms into a performance–film event after the ball is over. It is by default a piece of the past and a memory; time that has passed removes the viewer from the main object, the Carnival king or queen. At the ball, the participant might lose him/herself in the act of celebrating the moment, while when watching the film, time is experienced through the act of remembering. Hence, the experience of watching reminds the viewer of the passing of time in which always lies the awareness of mortality. The absence inherent to cinema removes the viewer once more from the Carnival royals, as Christian Metz explains:

> The specific affinity between the cinematic signifier and the imaginary persists when film is compared with such arts as the theatre in which the audio-visual given is as rich as it is on the screen in the number of perceptual axes involved. Indeed, the theatre really does “give” this given, or at least slightly more really: it is physically present, in the same space as the spectator. The cinema only gives it in effigy, inaccessible from the outset, in a primordial elsewhere, infinitely desirable (=never possible), on another scene which is that of absence and which nonetheless represents the absent in detail, thus making it very present, but by a different itinerary. Not only am I at a distance from the object, as in the theatre, but what remains in that distance is no longer the object itself, it is a delegate it has sent me while itself withdrawing.78

Through the “absent presence” of the object (carnival royals), the cinema intensifies the viewers’ desire to be close to the object and thereby acutely humanizes the process of watching.

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At the same time, the cinema dehumanizes the process, as it keeps the object mechanically separated from the viewer, who (while longing for the object) can study it (him/her) critically, in fact can scrutinize each and every move that is highlighted and enlarged in medium shots and close-ups. The object of desire is objectified according to a list of criteria of perfect conduct. Beyond serving as memories of joyous events, films commissioned by the krewes remind the select viewers of rules and roles that make this community of royals and courtiers exclusive. Emphasizing through close-ups how precise each gesture has to be communicates the possibility of failure, which carries with it the threat of ramifications, such as humiliation or even expulsion—the exact opposite of carnival fun. “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behavior,’”79 Diana Taylor notes. These films of “vital acts” or rituals pass on how members of this elite can legitimize and maintain their elevated place in society. Devoid of the Bakhtinian role reversal, these films’ subliminal message is that the carnival rituals of the elite require strict and anxious protecting and consequently that the image of New Orleans as an outpost of European aristocracies is carefully constructed.

To meet these standards, carnival royals painfully rehearse gestures that are to signify their role, including bowing, waving, or nodding the head gracefully. They are part of a rigid set of conventions that the performers need to execute as flawlessly as possible to achieve a perfect image, reminiscent of what Marvin Carlson describes as the kata of

Japanese Kabuki performances: “By definition an action does not become a *kata* until it is set and repeated a number of times, to the point where it becomes a recognizable entity and is handed down to posterity.”\(^{80}\) Although Europe serves as the model for performances by New Orleans carnival kings and queens, the strict repetitions more closely resemble Asian than European theatrical traditions. Even stage roles like Hamlet or King Lear that are haunted by the many performances actors have given over the years, challenge the performer to put his own stamp on them. In Kabuki, in comparison, as Carlson explains, “what is handed down from actor to actor is not only a set of established business and vocal inflections but often the entire interpretation of a role, which includes the use of a specific inherited wig, costume, and makeup.”\(^{81}\)

The Rex organization, for example, archives and documents costumes and props meticulously as models for the following set of costumes, and it exhibits pieces in the Rex den that are deemed particularly well crafted. Whereas the kings’ costumes show hardly any sign of change over the years, the queens’ dresses allow for some minor differences, such as appliqués or types of lace.

Like Mardi Gras Indians, whose performances carry along the ghosts of previous Indians and often very literally incorporate signs referring to those ancestral performers, such as images of former chiefs stitched on suits, the performances by carnival kings are highly “ghosted,” to apply Carlson’s concept outlined in *The Haunted Stage*. Carnival kings emulate past carnival performances and the many performers in carnival balls who

\(^{80}\) Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 82.  
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 98.
play-acted kings. The “ghosting” phenomenon in carnival balls is embedded in a culture of viewing and depicting royalty that spans time and continents, from New Orleans to actual places in Europe, such as Windsor Castle or Versailles and, more important, idealized notions of such places. Performances by carnival kings (including intensely rehearsed gestures, postures, and use of props, as well as the elaborate costumes) are directly inspired and at the same time unconsciously influenced by the countless theatre royals that have occupied European drama, fairy-tale royals described in the Brothers Grimm collections, news broadcasts of actual royalty, and ultimately by movies incorporating all of these models and tropes. The queen herself is an amalgamation of queens and princesses from Disney movies, such as *Sleeping Beauty*, and depictions of royalty at weddings and coronations where actual queens or princesses may wear exquisite white dresses. Very little individual differences are permitted, and ultimately this is a materialistic interpretation of aristocracy, literally made up of materials and externals that signify the image of royalty and therefore suggest that the image of New Orleans as white-dominated and its social hierarchy are interdependent.

This process of ghosting is circular, as it grows out of a dynamic with real living aristocrats who can never escape the media portraits of royals—in fiction or news—and so their public presentations very likely also emulate royal appearances that they themselves

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82 *Sleeping Beauty* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1959).
83 The high collar is decidedly reminiscent of paintings of Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen who carefully constructed a hard-to-believe image of herself as virginal. Films like *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* challenge this image by telling the story of the woman behind the image yet also take pains to replicate high-collared costumes from paintings, which one must assume were idealized depictions of the Queen to begin with.
have seen on TV and in the movies. These performances then in turn inspire performances by other royals and by carnival royalty. Joseph Roach defines such performances as consisting “of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions.” His phrase “effigies fashioned from the flesh” captures the corporeal quality of these ghosted rituals and encapsulates death and renewal inherent to them. Performances by carnival royalty are pieced together out of repeatedly copied actions and appearances—a mirror cabinet of images that together construct a larger image of an idealized, white-dominated New Orleans situated in a whimsical universe populated by virginal women and old men with big bellies and fake beards. This whimsical component glosses over the racist undertone of the exclusiveness of the events, and as a result, aids in perpetuating it. With their emphasis on virginal femininity as one part of a desexualized couple, the krewes create a gendered image of New Orleans yet stray from the metaphor of the city as a sinful woman.

Films of the balls and their ghosted performances, highlighting beauty, fancy, and perfection, augment the events’ (racialized) exclusiveness. Filming the ritualized performance repertoire freezes it in time and thereby transforms it into an archive. The archive is linked to three points in time: an elusive idealized forerunner (Renaissance court masques) that the balls evoke, the moment the ball takes place, and the time when the archive is accessed. Watching this filmed archive connects the (select) viewers with the two points in the past (the ball and the court masques) and motivates them to keep performing.

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84 Roach, Cities of the Dead, 16.
the repertoire. Archive and repertoire are therefore linked with each other, both perpetuating and channeling this nostalgic, fanciful, and segregated image of New Orleans.

**Rex on Screen – The King in All Homes**

In order to fully appreciate how instrumental the mediatization of the carnival krewes’ performance–entertainments is in constructing this image of New Orleans as an outpost of European aristocracy, it is useful to take a closer look at Rex, the second-oldest carnival organization in New Orleans. Founded in 1872 as the Rex School of Design with the motto *Pro Bono Publico*, the organization comprises wealthy and successful members of society and has been the face of the official New Orleans carnival since 1872. The year the first Rex parade took place, the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia visited New Orleans at the same time that the British singer Lydia Thompson famously performed the song “If I Ever Cease to Love.” Legend has it that the Russian duke and Thompson were romantically linked and that the Rex band performed the song for the alleged couple. While this is speculation, it has been established that the song was played for the first Rex as he paused to watch the parade. The song has been a staple of Mardi Gras ever since and firmly embedded Rex in popular culture.

Every Lundi Gras, the Monday before Mardi Gras Day, Rex arrives on a float at the Mississippi harbor. He is then handed over the key to the city and for one day serves
symbolically as King of New Orleans. Early on Mardi Gras Day, the Rex parade rolls through the main section of town. The parade is led by the *boeuf gras*, a larger-than-life white bull, surrounded by Rex members disguised in white cooks’ costumes. The boeuf, costumes, and the intricately designed floats are constructed in the Rex den, which is open to visitors. The festivities, and thereby Mardi Gras season, conclude with the highly anticipated Rex ball, which culminates in the meeting of the courts of Rex and Mistick Krewe of Comus. Originally, like all mainline krewes, Rex accepted only white men as members, but it opened its doors to all New Orleanians in 1991 after the city determined that activities that take place on the city streets and benefit from taxes paid by all citizens must therefore be open to the public. Although the organization is now officially integrated, no black member or guest could be detected at the TV broadcast of the 2013 Rex ball. In a photo series published by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* of the 2015 Rex ball, there was only one black couple. This dearth of people of color is due to the long history of excluding African-Americans, and as a response to the exclusion, for more than one hundred years, people of color having flocked to the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club. Over the course of the twentieth century, Zulu transformed itself from a renegade group

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85 Ideally Rex starts at 10 a.m., but often the parade is delayed because of the earlier Zulu parade.  
86 According to Rex archivist Stephen Hale, it is a French tradition to have cooks follow the Carnival bull. Interview with author, March 7, 2011.  
87 Hale proudly explained in the interview with me that floats and decorations are still manufactured in the same way as in 1872.  
with a king in a banana leaf skirt to a fierce competitor to Rex, drawing large crowds and hosting an extravagant and arguably more trendy ball than the old-style Rex.

In 1955, an unknown filmmaker captured the final moments at the house of Darwin S. Fenner, that year’s Rex, before Fenner and his family leave to attend the annual Rex Carnival ball. This home movie, titled “1955 Comus and Rex Ball” (16 mm, color, silent, 11 minutes), provides a unique look behind the scenes. The filmmaker, presumably a member or close friend of the Fenner family, documents a lighthearted, joyful gathering in the living room and entrance hall of an elegant upper-middle-class home. Approximately six white adults, three white children, and two black servants (an older woman and a middle-aged man, both dressed in black-and-white uniforms) are the protagonists of this little film.

The two servants offer champagne. People drink, talk, and laugh. A fully costumed Rex, accompanied by two pages, makes a satirically dramatic appearance at the top of the stairs. He descends, gesturing with great exaggeration and laughing at himself and his “court.” Some of the women curtsy mockingly, some more seriously. To Fenner’s great amusement, one woman blows cigarette smoke in his face. These scenes leave the impression that Fenner does not take his role too seriously but instead rather enjoys

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90 Unknown filmmaker, “1955 Comus and Rex Ball” (archived at The Historic New Orleans Collection).
parodying his role as “King.” The film then cuts to scenes shot from the car driving down Canal Street, where the parade of Mistick Krewe of Comus rolls by.\textsuperscript{91}

At the ball the filmmaker appears to have had a privileged position. The camera is positioned stage left and shows medium shots and medium close-ups of Rex Fenner and his queen, Harriet Smither. Some shots are out of focus, but overall they provide a clear view of a Rex who is talking, laughing, and greeting members of “his court.” From time to time, Rex interrupts his official duties to smile, wink, or laugh at the cinematographer. Home movies are made for an audience of family and friends. While they can contain fictional elements, characteristically home movies depict their protagonists in real-life situations outside of everyday experiences, such as celebrations or vacations. Through the filming the mundane situation becomes an event heightened in meaning—literally extraordinary. Typically, like Rex Fenner, protagonists show that they are aware of being filmed by waving to the camera or talking to the (frequently amateur) cinematographer. This breaking of the screen, or the fourth wall, is an important component, as it creates a community between the filmmaker and his/her subjects and makes a communal event of the filming and the performance. As in cinema verité, the filmmaker is a protagonist.

Immortalizing the Rex ball on the home movie screen transforms the ball’s ephemeral quality and its status as a performance repertoire into a family archive, thereby constructing a history of the evening specific to this filmmaker and the Fenner family.

\textsuperscript{91} That this is Comus is not readily available from the footage; The Historic New Orleans Collection states this in the film’s information.
Information provided in The Historic New Orleans Collection states that the theme of the ball was “Washington’s Birthday and Life.” However, the film concentrates on Rex Fenner and omits any visual signifiers of the theme. History and the historic figure of George Washington celebrated at the ball in this film serve as backdrop for Fenner’s performance as Rex. The film, rather than celebrating Washington, instrumentalizes Washington to make Rex Fenner a historic figure within the lineage of Rex performers—the fake monarch upstages the democratic president. As a result, the film contributes to an image of New Orleans as a fantasy monarchy within the larger United States republic. However, since the protagonists are real and chosen from a select group of upper-class New Orleanians, by celebrating their make believe, the film affirms the city’s power structure.

While home movies like “1955 Comus and Rex Ball,” despite their significance, only have an impact on small audiences consisting of members of New Orleans’s elite (or those desiring to belong to it), the annual live broadcast by New Orleans’s public TV station, WYES, of the Rex ball serves to cement the established social order. Sponsored by a list of prominent New Orleans banks, companies, and taxpayers, in this program real-life influences (economic, political, military) outweigh fun and fantasy. The citizens pay for the televised celebration of their monarch, and through the symbolic ruler they celebrate (or are at least exposed to) their colonial history—pre-revolutionary and pre-democratic. The four-hour live broadcast “The 2013 Rex Ball and the Meeting of the Courts Rex and Comus,”
featuring Bill Hines as Rex and Nina O’Brian Sloss as his queen, is only interrupted by short commercial breaks; special segments, such as a portrait of the young queen; and interviews with city celebrities and politicians, such as Mayor Mitchell Landrieu, who join the host and Mardi Gras scholar, Errol Laborde, at a decorated table in the Sheraton Hotel where the ball takes place.

The Rex ball omits the opening cabaret typical of carnival balls. Instead, the evening starts off with a presentation by a military band, the Marine Band. The Rex organization is proud to hold close ties with the military and encourages members who have served to wear their highest-ranking uniforms at the ball. The tradition of including military performances has a long history and can be seen, for example, in the 1960 “The Glorious and Colorful New Orleans Mardi Gras [Rex Parade]” (16 mm, color, silent, 12:54 minutes) produced by Pan American Films and commissioned by the Rex Carnival Organization.  

Here, the cinematography resembles that of news footage, focusing on the most prominent objects and spectacular moments. The camera captures medium and wide shots of the queen (Stella Ebans Farwell) waving to the crowd from across the street on a large stand on Canal Street. Before the float of Rex, a battalion of soldiers in white uniforms carrying rifles marches by, followed by a group of oversized female puppets (about three times the size of real women) wearing navy dresses and four dukes on horses—wearing face masks—who wave victoriously to the excited crowd. As symbolic

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93 The theme of this parade and ball was “The Wonderful World of Let’s Pretend.”
ruler of New Orleans, Rex incorporates everything that a real king would have in his kingdom in order to make the fanciful event as believable as possible. The closer the display is to a performance of power by a real king or statesman, the easier it is for audiences to suspend their disbelief. The more convinced the audience is of the authenticity of the presentation the farther Rex’s symbolic territory expands through the cinematic space/TV space.

At the 2013 TV broadcast of the ball, after the military band, the king and queen enter and preside over the event from their thrones. The court presents itself to them. Debutantes are escorted in by their fathers or other male members of the family. This portion of the festivities, in particular, elucidates how the krewes utilize the media to create their own sense of history: The show’s host introduces each debutante and the male family member accompanying her to the TV audience by name, college and military affiliation, and family involvement in the balls. When discussing Sloss, the program cuts to an interview in the young queen’s home during the weeks leading up to the ball. Conservatively dressed with immaculately set hair, the young woman is seated on the couch in her family’s upper-middle-class home. In the interview she expresses the great honor she feels at having been selected because her great-grandfather, Joseph Merrick Jones, was Rex in 1959; her grandmother, Eugenie Killian Huger Jr., née Penick Jones was queen; and her aunt, Deborah Hopkins Valentine, née Huger, was queen in 1979. Black-and-white photos of the grandmother posing for the organization illustrate this. The host
repeatedly states that the queen’s family is distinguished because of their contributions to social causes and their continuous active support of the balls. What is displayed is the benevolence of a self-proclaimed ruling class. Legacy is power, the display of legacy underscores this, and the TV portrait is a celebration of that legacy, contributing to an image of New Orleans as governed by a historically legitimized white elite.

After the debutantes all other ball guests present themselves to the king and queen, curtsying or bowing to them. Some do so with earnest eagerness, some with exaggerated gestures and laughter. The tight connection between media and Rex becomes evident when the host presents herself to the king and queen. This makes the program reminiscent of home movies and not all that different from “1955 Comus and Rex Ball.” The TV producers position themselves as experts who share with their audience the know-how that they have gained through closeness to the carnival royals, creating the impression of a large community that extends from the exclusive ballroom through the TV screen into the homes of regular citizens. At the same time, by highlighting the event’s glamour and the exceptionalism of the participating personages, the program reaffirms that what is displayed is a world apart from the regular TV viewer, who may know about it through a chosen agent—the producer–host—but who may never enter. The presence of cameras here creates the impression of an open society that reveals itself to the public, yet because they do not investigate what is behind the glitz and glamour, possibly revealing the structures that are in place, they emphasize the event’s surface beauty and thereby conceal the fact.
that the good manners that are displayed are not enough to gain an entry ticket. Borders are confirmed.

The fourth hour of the ball is taken up by actual dancing of courtiers, costumed dukes, and regular guests, while the king and queen and their pages watch until dukes and pages from the court of Mistick Krewe of Comus enter and hand over a scroll inviting Rex and his queen to the Comus ball. That Rex is required to pay respect to Comus confirms the hierarchy between the krewes, but it is useful to view Rex and Comus not as two distinct entities but rather, despite their individual differences, as two components that make up a complete spectacle. In this view Rex represents outreach to the public and Comus represents the mysterious forces behind the surface. As Rex and his queen cross the street on a red carpet from the Sheraton to the Marriott Hotel, where the Comus ball takes place, the cameras follow them like movie stars. This raises suspense and expectations, yet within the dramatic structure of the event, the actual meeting of the courts is anticlimactic: Comus (who never lifts his face mask) and his queen greet Rex and his queen. Together they sit on thrones positioned similarly as at the Rex ball, from where they watch the members of the courts dancing the fox-trot or similar ballroom steps. What flickers across the screen appears more like footage of a tableau vivant than a party, so rigid that it is difficult to imagine that before the cameras were turned on the party could have possibly included the indulgence in pleasure that Comus originally represented. After approximately one hour, the two pairs leave the ballroom—again greeting the crowds gracefully. Before his exit,
Comus drinks a large gulp out of a goblet. Dukes line up, the curtain closes, and the camera zooms in on the sign of Mistick Comus Krewe, as if the entire spectacle had only been staged for a TV audience.

Disseminated into all homes across Louisiana, the live broadcast makes Rex (and to a lesser degree Comus) omnipresent, almost inescapable, a household acquaintance and yet, despite the familiarity, forever at a distance for those (the majority) whom he rules and who are not invited to celebrate with him. In “Body of Law: The Sun King and the Code Noir,” Joseph Roach observes that the physical body of Louis XIV

…served him as a symbolic iteration—through the spectacular fêtes at Versailles and kindred state performances—of his other body, the one that can project its power over time and distance through the medium of his law-abiding subjects (the body politic). This body physically exists in the performance of itself by an ensemble of actively affiliated bodies—their gestures, actions, utterances, and attitudes—which may be transmitted across vast territories as custom or handed down as tradition. By making the one into many and the many into one, such communications were vital to the expansion of the medieval dynastic state into the modern imperial nation state, which Benedict Anderson has described so influentially as an “imagined community.”

The live broadcast transmitting the dual performance of Rex–Comus—fake monarchs and representatives of New Orleans’s ruling class—through which the physical body of the king and the body politic are channeled, performed, displayed, and received, has over the years become a tradition in itself, asserting and confirming that “imagined community.”

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The symbolic power of the ruler of carnival buttresses the social status of the class he belongs to, manifesting it through his “governance” of the scopic regime, underscoring Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that “symbolic relations of power tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space.”

Scholars like Kinser, Gill, and Laborde have well established that the founders of the Mistick Krewe of Comus purposely changed the structure of carnival in New Orleans to benefit their social, political, and economic aspirations. It is far less clear if current members and organizers of the old-line krewes deliberately and with conviction perpetuate the white heteronormative image of New Orleans (which clashes with the diverse expressions of the city’s many cultures) or if they adhere to ritual at least in part out of deference to a seemingly self-evident norm and out of self-preservation within a strict system of power relationships in the manner Pierre Bourdieu describes: “More concretely, legitimation of the social world is not, as some believe, the product of a deliberate and purposive action of propaganda or symbolic imposition; it results, rather, from the fact that agents apply to the objective structures of the social world structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture the world as evident.” By Invitation Only, a documentary by Rebecca Snedeker that manages to peek behind the scenes, offers some insights into this question.

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96 Ibid.
Membership or even participation in New Orleans’s carnival organizations has traditionally been open to men only, and gender-inclusive mainline krewes are a fairly recent addition to carnival. Krewe of Orpheus, founded in 1993, permits male and female membership, and Krewe of Muses, formed in 2001, operates as an exclusively female organization. However, women assuming agency within the festivities dates back to at least the Jazz Age. For example, since 1912 with some interruptions, women of color—so-called Baby Dolls—dress up as baby dolls to literally dance against stereotypes of gender and race and thus broaden the image of New Orleans carnival. During this era, several female writers challenged the prevalent white patriarchy that dominates portraits of New Orleans, as Violet Harrington Bryan observes in *The Myth of New Orleans in Literature*. Writers like Grace King, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson have offered images of New Orleans that differ from male constructions of the city, telling stories from female protagonists’ points of view and engaging with issues of gender and race. Dunbar-Nelson, who was of African-American, possibly Creole descent, and whose mother was born a slave, is particularly remarkable in this group. According to Harrington Bryan, “King, along with Chopin and Dunbar-Nelson, worked to reshape the southern patriarchal myths of women as fragile creatures, the nurturing forces in the household, therefore unable to leave the home for careers. Their ideal southern woman was independent, innovative, sometimes even the

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breadwinner.” By comparison, in cinema and TV, the most influential mass media, women have not been as successful. It speaks to the extent of white male domination of the screen that, even close to one hundred years after the peak of King’s and Chopin’s creative output, only a few female filmmakers have been able to put their visions of New Orleans on the screen. With her documentary By Invitation Only from 2006, Rebecca Snedeker is one of those exceptions. Snedeker, like King and Chopin, is from a privileged white background, and she is also the daughter of a member of one of the most prominent krewes. Snedeker was supposed to partake in a carnival ball but decided against it. Instead, in By Invitation Only Snedeker directly challenges the white patriarchal order represented by the krewes, their racist underpinnings, and the position they hold within New Orleans’s society.

Using her voiceover narration to guide the audience, Snedeker composes her film as a personal journey into the world in which she grew up. With her camera she accompanies her cousin, queen-to-be, to the many events and parties that lead up to the final ball, shedding light on the intricately ritualized character of the process. Along the way, Snedeker interviews family and friends about the various components that make up the tradition and the significance they hold for them. In the vein of cinema verité, she frequently positions herself in front of the camera as if to testify to the truthfulness of her

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99 This phenomenon is not limited to New Orleans and, in fact, extends to the entire US. Scholarly debates on the reasons for the low numbers of women in positions of influence in cinema range so widely that they would exceed the scope of my dissertation.
investigation, and in her voiceover she reflects on her own filming. Snedeker can be seen filming, interviewing, and at the end of the film, even dancing at the ball. Reflecting on the implications racialized hierarchies still have for New Orleans’s carnival, Snedeker integrates carnival footage she captures in 2004 with archival footage of the city council debates of 1991 that forced krewes to integrate their parades. Several krewes—Comus, Momus, and Proteus—quit parading, and Snedeker took this as the reason not to come out as a debutante. As she reports appreciatively at the end of the film, the Krewe of Proteus, which initially stopped parading and reduced their activities to their private balls, a few years later gave up their resistance to integrating and returned to the streets.

At one of the pre-ball parties, Snedeker asks the host, Oliver Delery, if he believes the tradition will continue in the same manner. He responds that the events are not exclusive of a particular group but exclusive to family and longtime friends: “There is a big perception that you have to be a blue blood to be in this ball or in that ball. A lot of it is the fathers’ near friendships and who they basically hang out with; the different groups. There are no real barriers to entrance to the balls.”\textsuperscript{100} In contrast, Snedeker’s father expresses his dismay at his krewe’s refusal to accept black members, yet he is not willing to take a stand for integration or “prepared to leave the organization.”\textsuperscript{101} Snedeker’s mother served as queen and holds an ambivalent view on her participation in a ritual she considers

\textsuperscript{100} Rebecca Snedeker, \textit{By Invitation Only} (Palmetto Pictures, 2006).
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
patriarchal: “You’re queen for a day, but it takes a lifetime to get over it.”

She continues: “I was well aware that I was queen of this ball because someone was paying an honor to my grandfather. I was the queen, but he was the one being honored.”

The most dramatic aspect of By Invitation Only is the role Snedeker’s boyfriend at the time plays. He is African-American and, expressive of the film’s theme of exclusion, never appears in person. His absent presence is felt acutely as he is only shown in (video) images and as a topic of conversations: Snedeker’s uncle refuses to accept her boyfriend in his home as her companion. He predicts that Snedeker when she is older will learn to appreciate the krewes’ merits, dismissing her critical stance and her relationship as immature. In her voiceover narration Snedeker concludes that “part of why these traditions are so private is because we know there is something wrong. Our camaraderie, our group identity, the way that we have fun together is linked to this fantasy idea that white is better.”

WYES’s broadcast of the Rex and Comus balls and the films commissioned by the krewes indulge or at least accept the version of themselves, and by extension the image of New Orleans, that the krewes promote to the public. In contrast, By Invitation Only reveals that not all krewe members believe in this public image. More important, by sharing her personal experiences with family members and old friends, Snedeker invites her audience to critically analyze the structures underneath the image and the culture she documents. By

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102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
Invitation Only does not, and probably cannot, provide comprehensive answers as to why the old-line krewes preserve or at least tolerate the racist pattern ingrained in their exclusive patriarchal world. The film caused a small scandal among the people portrayed. However, as Snedeker takes agency, her voice, her narration, and ultimately her physical presence in her own film represent a break with the scopic regime that determines a white-dominated, patriarchal construction of New Orleans is normative. The city she reflects is governed by a powerful elite of white men and decorative young white women but allows room for questions and challenges. Snedeker’s image of New Orleans with its indebtedness to past and traditions is not stagnant. It is in flux because some groups and individuals like her confront how the city’s history of segregation still influences present-day society and helps keep its hierarchies in place. Metaphorically and practically, these hierarchies are rooted in the plantation.

Jezebel: Plantations, Pastorals, and Carnival Balls

New Orleans is surrounded by plantations. Since the Civil War, the city has extended its borders, and the geographical space of what is now New Orleans proper used to contain plantations. The Joan Mitchell Center in the Faubourg Tremé, for example, was built in 1800 as a Creole plantation. Plantations are maintained carefully according to their original style and are easily distinguishable according to the culture of the owners. French Creole plantations like the Laura plantation in Vacherie near New Orleans were colorfully painted,
while those that were owned by Anglo-Saxons, such as the San Francisco plantation, were painted in white. Creole plantations may have been very lucrative, yet the master houses were typically small and modest, as Creole culture frowns upon displays of one’s wealth. In contrast, master houses on Anglo-Saxon plantations were typically large and lavishly furnished and decorated, architectural signposts of wealth and power. Frequently, plantation owners had houses in New Orleans, where they participated in the social life of the city’s power elite. Even though, as Daniel E. Walker details in *No More, No More*, slavery was a large component of New Orleans life and the close proximity to the master in the tight urban environment made life for slaves there often particularly difficult, the plantation epitomizes the concept of slavery and a social hierarchy based on “white supremacy.”

The plantation looms large in US culture as both a metaphor for oppression and a pastoral idyll, as historical sites (architectural archives), as movie locations, and as luxurious retreats for weddings and similar festivities. The Southern Oaks plantation, for example, aggressively advertises as a wedding location, using the trope of a pastoral idyll.

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105 During its most successful phase, by the 1850s the Laura plantation housed a total of 175 enslaved workers and house servants.
107 In January 2015, the Whitney Plantation near New Orleans opened its doors to the public. I will discuss this unprecedented memorial–performance archive for enslaved black laborers in chapter 4.
108 Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) was filmed on the Evergreen Plantation and Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013) on the Magnolia Plantation; both are located in Louisiana near New Orleans.
where wedding parties can experience the lavish joys of Southern plantation life. Like the carnival balls, the two commercial videos for weddings on the Southern Oaks Plantation website replicate a Disney fairy-tale aesthetic with the bride styled like a queen, black musicians, and a black chauffeur. The first one shows several white couples getting married. The second of the two includes a black couple. Their presence completes the transformation of history into fantasy and liberates the experience from historical facts. That a black couple is presented as enjoying the fantasy of plantation life veils the violence these restagings of plantation life repeat and thereby perpetuate.

Although New Orleans, with its plantation culture and its infamous nightlife, invites musing on the links between city and country and between urban and pastoral, among the myriad of films set in New Orleans, surprisingly few consider the existence of plantations or incorporate the fact that the city was once economically dependent on them. The Hollywood melodrama *Jezebel* from 1938 is an exception.\(^{110}\) *Jezebel* was produced by Warner Brothers and directed by William Wyler to compete with *Gone with the Wind* (1939),\(^{111}\) as well as to capitalize on the public interest in the South that Margaret Mitchell’s book had raised. Based on a play by Owen Davis, which ran on Broadway for thirty-two performances, the screenplay went through several incarnations by writers Robert Buckner, Clement Ripley, Abem Finkel, and John Huston. The film offered Bette


\(^{111}\) *Gone with the Wind* premiered in 1939 and was widely released in 1940. Pre-production and the elaborate casting process for the role of Scarlett O’Hara had already begun in 1936 after producer David O. Selznick bought the rights.
Davis, who had been considered for the role of Scarlett O’Hara, an opportunity to showcase her talent at playing a similarly young, headstrong Southern belle.

*Jezebel* tells the story of Julie Marsden, whose rebellious attitude about the role of women in society drives the film’s narrative and ultimately leads to her downfall. In the beginning of the film, Julie appears as a trailblazer who ignores or even dismisses conventions. For example, she shows up late to her own engagement party in a riding outfit rather than in the appropriate dress. As we learn from this early scene, Julie’s outfits signify her relationship to society. At the end of the film, Julie is humbled and chooses to sacrifice herself. *Jezebel* is an (arguably politically progressive) example of the so-called woman’s film. Films categorized in this subgenre of Hollywood (melo-)dramas rose to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s and were geared toward female audiences. They typically feature women as main protagonists and story lines concerned with relationships, domestic matters, or family life. With components from popular culture, such as song and dance to underline emotional content and to create additional appeal, and a narrative centered on a natural disaster (an outbreak of yellow fever), *Jezebel* harks back to nineteenth-century American melodrama and its European predecessors. These formal alignments with the theatrical genre underscore, if not even perform, the artistic connections between theatre and cinema and the historic ones between Europe and the US.

The film takes place in the New Orleans of 1858, on the eve of secession and the Civil War, and on a nearby estate called Halcyon Plantation. Two pivotal scenes use New
Orleanian performance traditions to channel the main character’s conflict. The first one takes place at the Olympians’ carnival ball. It begins at twenty-nine minutes into the film. The second scene features the main character singing together with enslaved black servants on the plantation at one hour and thirty minutes into the film. The complete film is one hour and forty-four minutes long, and so the two performance scenes are placed at opposite ends of the film, mirroring each other. Together these scenes illustrate the aesthetic and conceptual link between city and country and the plantation—pastoral and carnival balls.

The Ball        Julie’s fiancé Preston Dillard (played by Henry Fonda), a young Southern banker, has for some time garnered work experience in the North and presents himself as a progressive. While dedicated to Southern manners, he endorses a modern way of fighting yellow fever (draining the swamps) and at least nominally supports the abolition of slavery. Julie expresses neither views on these issues nor any interest in them. She is solely concerned with Preston. The two are passionately in love but argue a lot about their roles in the relationship. The couple’s quarrels escalate on the night of the Olympians’ carnival ball. Preston misses a date with Julie because he is held up in a meeting at the bank. Enraged by what appears to her as dismissive behavior, Julie interrupts the meeting. A woman entering a business establishment violates Southern conventions and embarrasses Preston. Unsure of how to assert himself with her, Preston follows the advice of Julie’s uncle to beat her. He takes a stick to her room, hesitates, and finally leaves it at the
doorway. Julie opens the door and notices the stick. She hides her shock and hurt feelings and pretends to make up with Preston. However, to retaliate for the insult, Julie wears a flamboyant red dress to the Olympians’ carnival ball despite Preston’s strong objections. At the Olympians’ ball unmarried women are expected to wear white, and Preston warns of the scandal Julie is causing by wearing red. It exceeds her expectations by far.

For historical accuracy it should be noted that Olympians formed after the Civil War. The Mistick Krewe of Comus was the only carnival krewe in operation in 1858, and so it appears that director Wyler replaced the names. Comus was also only founded in 1857, but the film presents the ball’s conventions as old and unshakeable, when in actuality they were just being established during this period. The Olympians’ carnival ball that Wyler created for the screen is a formal and purist affair with barely any resemblance to actual New Orleans carnival balls: The dance floor takes up almost the entire large ballroom. As in a circus arena, a low balustrade surrounds it, behind which guests sit and watch young couples dance. Men wear black suits with frock coats, and the women wear, without exception, white hoop dresses. Opposite the entrance, also behind the balustrade, is the orchestra. This is where typically the king and queen would be seated, yet this carnival ball does not feature royalty. Here, the guests are not performing to and for a fake monarch but to and for each other. Their observance of code is just as strict, if not even more ruthless, than in actual carnival balls. When Preston and Julie enter, the other ball guests stop and stare with indignation. A few friends and acquaintances greet them briefly but
then turn away. In the face of the humiliation of being shunned, Julie very quickly loses her courage and begs Preston to leave. Stone-faced, Preston refuses and, as if to teach her a lesson, drags her onto the dance floor. The other couples clear the space, and Julie and Preston are left to dance by themselves. Julie pleads with Preston to let her go, but he strongly holds onto her arm. By forcing her to perform/dance, he puts her “wantonness” on display and turns his own embarrassment into her shame.

Significantly, *Jezebel’s* audience can only know that the dress is red because characters in the film repeatedly talk about its color.\(^{112}\) The film is black-and-white, and this contrast is the most expressive sign of the underlying issue of race relationships. By wearing the red dress that appears black in the film, Julie in effect becomes “black” and thereby visually and narratively an outcast. Wearing the “wrong” color, she is viewed as “other,” and her dark color denigrates her merits as a woman. Importantly, the dress not only aligns Julie herself with blacks and thus positions her as an outcast, it also indirectly enforces racial stereotypes. The red dress suggests sexual liberty. As a promised gift to her enslaved black servant, it suggests that such liberal sexuality is assigned to black women, while white women are to be virginal.

Through gender politics the film communicates racial politics. This first part of the film constructs an image of New Orleans as sterile and rigid, in which the white patriarchal

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\(^{112}\) Depending on the saturation, red reads as grey (or black) in black-and-white films. The actual dress used in *Jezebel* was bronze-colored to achieve the desired dark and shiny appearance, according to Turner Classic Movies. Accessed March 7, 2015. http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/673/Jezebel/notes.html.
order harshly punishes those who violate it by ostracizing them. After the ball, Preston brings Julie home and ends the relationship with her. She has proven herself to be an unfit wife to a man of his standing and, as the film tells us, traditional hierarchies win out.

**The Plantation**

Most of the second half of the film take place on a plantation and invokes a pastoral idyll. Preston leaves Julie and the South. They don’t meet again until one year later on the Halcyon Plantation owned by Julie’s family. After living as a complete recluse, Julie has rescinded her rebellious ways and accepted that she will have to submit to Preston to win him back. As a manifestation of her submission and purification, Julie meets Preston wearing the white dress she refused to wear to the Olympians’ ball. Transformed into the virginal bride that Preston desired, she falls on her knees before him, only to learn that her pleas are coming too late. Preston has brought along his Northern wife. In the midst of these dramatic moments of their relationship, Preston is called in to New Orleans to help fight the rapidly spreading yellow fever. He leaves his wife on the plantation with Julie, her family, Julie’s admirer Buck Catrell, and his own brother. Preston’s wife is astonished at the Southern customs she encounters, which leads Julie, backed by Buck, to incite a verbal duel. Preston’s brother defends his sister-in-law and challenges Buck to an actual duel the next morning. The doctor who is going to administer the duel blames Julie for having provoked it. In this moment of crisis, we hear in the background a chorus singing a spiritual. Julie, and we with her, sees groups of enslaved black servants run to the house.
In a clichéd adaptation of black Southern dialect, Julie sings, “Come, come, chillun” and waves to the children to sit with her. They do so cheerfully. In a grand gesture of defiance, Julie sits down on the entrance steps of the main house, her dress draped over the steps. Slaves, young and old, male and female, gather in a semicircle in front of her. Julie tells them to change the song to “Lets Raise a Ruckus Tonight.” They change the song immediately and sing with her in an upbeat, happy manner while she gestures to them like a conductor to sing at a moderate level. Bette Davis’s high-pitched voice is the lead overpowering all others, clearly illustrating her dominance over the group. She matters as an individual; they function as an anonymous group.

The gaze of the protagonists directs this scene. Preston’s wife looks on with obvious consternation, while Julie’s aunt looks on with a worried face. Both women’s gazes signal that Julie (yet again) is violating expected codes of behavior. Although Preston’s wife and Julie’s aunt hold different views on slavery, both seem to disagree with Julie’s closeness and familiarity with the enslaved servants. Julie responds: “Let’s sing, Aunt. Have the little Yankee join in.” She stares challengingly at the two and continues: “We have such charming customs down here.” The other woman turns and exits into the house. Her aunt stays, and Julie says to her, as if fighting tears: “That’s why I wore my white dress tonight. I’m being baptized.” Julie continues singing but with an even greater tremble in her voice that contrasts with the happy chorus of her servants. Their cheerful tone and manners

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113 Wyler, Jezebel.
114 Wyler, Jezebel.
suggest that they have accepted her request to be baptized and thereby be part of their
group. Julie, again rejected by her peers, has found a group that embraces her and that she
can control. The scene ends with Julie smiling under tears, her eyes directly turned to the
camera. In the final close-up of the scene, Julie embodies a South that is traditional, well
mannered, immoral, and sad as she faces her loss. Julie reaches the state of purity that she
rejected during the Olympians’ ball through her baptism by the “natural” Southerners, the
black servants whose simple ways are presented as submissive and stereotypically
primitive. The scene encapsulates one of the axioms W. H. Auden compiles in “Arcadia
and Utopia” from 1948 for his definition of Eden: “Whatever the social pattern, each
member of society is satisfied according to his conception of his needs. If it is a
hierarchical society, all masters are kind and generous, all servants faithful retainers.”115
Glorifying pastoral life and the (allegedly) loving relationship between master and servants
was a typical element of nineteenth-century French melodrama. While Julie here embodies
“Southerners,” formally the scene builds on its main character’s European heritage.

In the ball scene rebellious Julie wore her red dress in order to be different, to be the
“other.” As the red dress reads black in the black-and-white movie, her “blackness”
signifies her outsider status. In the plantation scene the whiteness of Julie’s dress joins her
with black characters. As Richard Dyer points out in White: Essays on Race and Culture,
“What appears to be symbolism (white for virginity, colour for sex) within a universally

Macmillan, 1984), 92. Originally published as “Dingley Dell & the Fleet” in The Dyer’s Hand and Other
applicable communication of white with chastity is inextricably tied to not being dark and colourful, not being non-white, and the defiance and vitality narratively associated with Julie’s wearing of the dress is associated with the qualities embodied by black women, qualities that Julie as a white woman must not display, or even have.” Without acknowledging this directly, by mere use of color (or lack thereof), *Jezebel* engages with the issue of the racial divide and hierarchy and thereby indirectly challenges the expectations and demands of Southern movie audiences. As Rick Jewell explains in the featurette *Jezebel: Legend of the South* that is part of the special features on the *Jezebel* DVD, before the Civil Rights Movement filmmakers faced strong opposition when they attempted to portray slavery or racism in the South:

> Part of the reason filmmakers were hesitant to show slaves the way they must have been was the audiences in the South expected these kinds of stereotyped portrayals and responded badly when anybody tried to show them in a more kind or enlightened fashion. One of the things that would happen is that the censor boards in places like Atlanta and Birmingham would cut that stuff out and ruin the continuity of your film. And then complain how Hollywood was trying to tell Southerners how they should treat the African-Americans among them.  

It is difficult to evaluate from our contemporary point of view if Wyler had more creative freedom available than he took.

*Jezebel* ends with Julie undergoing a final transformation. Preston has fallen sick with yellow fever. With the aid of one of her slaves, Julie travels through the swamps to

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117 Rick Jewell, interviewed in *Jezebel: Legend of the South*, (Warner Brothers, 2006).
New Orleans crossing the fever line. She stays with Preston, nursing him, and eventually accompanies him to an island where the sick are quarantined from the healthy population, while Preston’s wife stays behind. The final shot shows her sitting next to the feverish Preston on a wagon, riding with the desperate through the streets of New Orleans where random fires illuminate the scene dramatically. The fires make the city appear like a war zone and are cinematically only matched by the burning of Atlanta in Gone with the Wind. Julie here personifies the old South that has to give way to its own destruction. The female metaphor of New Orleans as a “Jezebel,” or sinful woman, has been changed to one of sacrifice. Julie’s rebellion against gender conventions is purged by the disease and transformed into sacrifice and submission. Michael B. Bibler in “Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourse of a Doomed Southern City” argues that “the film thus marks not only Julie, but also the city itself as a ‘Jezebel’ who has caused her own disgrace and terrible demise.”

The image of New Orleans that Jezebel paints is contradictory. The film clearly establishes that the connection between plantation life, slavery, and carnival balls forms the foundation of the upper class that ritualistically celebrates its distinction from the people it keeps enslaved. Jezebel employs the metaphor of the city as a sinful woman, yet it also sympathizes with its main character’s struggle against gender inequality and the role assigned to her. Jezebel touches on the injustices of slavery, and it suggests the need for

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modernity but also the importance of traditions to hold a society together. Julie’s rebellion, although only a small personal one that is quickly thwarted, serves as a symbol for the explosive powers of change. While upholding the gendered and racialized hierarchy, the film taps into the revolutionary potential inherent to the genre of melodrama that, as Daniel Gerould explored in his essay “Melodrama and Revolution,” appealed to the “theatrical left” as “the most effective means of conveying revolutionary sentiments to mass audiences.”

The final image that Jezebel leaves with the audience is of a lost Eden, “a past world,” according to W. H. Auden, “in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen.” Longing for Eden is nostalgic, not only because that “happy place” is located in the past but also because, as Auden points out, “…the backward-looking Arcadian knows that his expulsion from Eden is an irrevocable fact and that his dream, therefore, is a wish-dream which cannot become real; in consequence the actions which led to his expulsion are of no concern to his dream.” Hence, nostalgia allows New Orleanians to reminisce about their past free of guilt. It is this guilt-free wish-dream of the past that the krewes repeatedly celebrate at their balls.

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120 Auden, “Arcadia and Utopia,” 90.
121 Ibid., 91.
A Note on Omission

From the fires that ruin New Orleans at the end of *Jezebel*, I move on to those lighting up Mardi Gras in order to close this chapter with a note on omission. To this day, *flambeaux*, or torchbearers, illuminate the nighttime parades of the old-line krewes. Their role in the circus that is New Orleans Mardi Gras elucidates the city’s complex racialized politics. Until the end of the Civil War, flambeaux carriers for the Mistick Krewe of Comus parade were enslaved. The onlookers threw them coins and marveled at the grace with which the flambeaux carriers picked them up without dropping the heavy torch. Reports vary, but even today flambeaux carriers only receive a rather small fee (approximately $100) considering the danger and physical challenge. The wooden staffs, on top of which are fastened four to six openly burning torchlights, extend approximately one meter. The staffs are attached with a belt around the men’s hips and held up with their hands. On their backs they carry canisters with fuel that are connected to the torches. Although a service to the white krewes, over time flambeaux carriers have developed their walk into a dance-like performance, yet their spectacular feats have hardly received any media attention. A search for recent news coverage led to only a few sparse articles and photos. An all-female group that called itself Glambeaux and marched with the all-female Krewe of Muses in 2014 fueled a heated debate about white newcomers appropriating hard-won black performance traditions and, as a result, briefly increased interest in the flambeaux carriers. Glambeaux
did not return to the streets the following year. Thus media attention directed towards the flambeaux carriers dried up.

It speaks to the low social status of the flambeaux carriers and the racial divide that still marks Mardi Gras that cinema has neither in documentaries nor in fiction films found a substantial way to integrate this visually stunning tradition. Rebecca Snedeker includes some footage of torch carriers in By Invitation Only. The Pan American Films documentary “Parade of Comus and the Comus Ball” from 1954 (16 mm, color, silent, 23:55 minutes) shows torchbearers in passing. The camera focuses on how the lighting effects illuminate floats that are decorated with large sunflowers and followed by marching bands and army battalions, but it ignores the carriers. The soldiers perform simple dance moves (kneel, turn, twirl rifles) that pale in comparison to the moves the audience can glimpse from the accidental shots of the torchbearers.

A video by the New Orleans Times-Picayune titled “Flambeaux Light the Way for Krewe of Muse, Mardi Gras 2015,” three shots lasting approximately fifteen seconds at the beginning of the Mardi Gras montage in Easy Rider, and Jules Cahn’s short documentation film “Freret/Babylon/Zulu, Mardi Gras” from 1960 (16 mm, color, silent) are the only media representations I found that pay tribute to the flambeaux carriers. The Times-Picayune video is only one minute and twenty-six seconds in length, but it vividly

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122 “Parade of Comus and the Comus Ball” (New Orleans: Pan American Films, 1954).
demonstrates the skill and courage necessary to dance with a long and heavy torch attached to the body. Moreover, the camera gets close to and at times singles out one flambeaux carrier to showcase his dancing, so the audience is able to see his moves and proud expression at the cheers of the onlookers.

Cahn’s “Freret/Babylon/Zulu, Mardi Gras” contains scenes from the parade of The Knights of Babylon. Cahn uses little footage focused on the floats but instead concentrates on the torchbearers. He shows them laughing, dancing, running, stopping, turning. While in the Pan American film the torches add to the glorification of the mystic power of Comus, Cahn makes the flambeaux carriers the stars of his film and elicits awe for their almost acrobatic performances. Not only does Cahn highlight them as the most captivating artists on the street at this moment in time—yet again privileging African-American cultural expressions over white ones—he also shows that without them and their dramatic lighting the mystery of Comus disappears. Cahn reveals how the magic effect of Comus is achieved—and thereby demystifies it. Showing the mechanism illuminating the seemingly all-powerful discloses them as only apparitions of might. Cahn offers an image of New Orleans that is magic because it frames out those who claim to rule: kings, queens, and their courtiers.

That magic and mystery serve both powerful and less powerful groups. In the next chapter I explore further the gendered and racialized commodification of New Orleans’s spiritual world.
“Sin and salvation, sin and salvation,” exclaims the guide of the haunted house tour as we tread along the rainy streets of the French Quarter. The tour begins with sin. From legendary Pirate Lafitte’s tavern to St. Mary’s Italian Church, souls who cannot find peace roam the old houses that were built during the Spanish colonial regime after most of the original French houses had burnt down in two massive fires in 1788 and 1794. Whichever way we turn we encounter a house haunted by sinners or their victims. Memories of bloodshed and romance, sex and violence, unfulfilled revenge, hopes, and dreams keep those spirits restless: enslaved servants of Madame Lalaurie, whom she tortured and murdered in her beautiful mansion, or the quadroons who frequented the balls in the Bourbon Orleans Hotel—women of color whose fate depended on the goodwill, fortune, and hopefully affection of the white men who picked them at the balls but who, by law, were not allowed to marry them. To those sensitive to their plight, the restless souls make their presence visible as orbs, the guide assures me. He encourages me to experience an orb, or better yet to catch one with my camera, because on foggy nights orbs are known to reveal themselves in photos.

The final stop of the haunted house tour brings us to the corner of Orleans Street. The guide points to a churchyard at the end of the street. In the center of the yard, a

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125 Built between 1722 and 1732, Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop Bar is believed to be the oldest tavern in the South. Pirates Jean and Pierre Lafitte allegedly used this shop to sell their smuggled goods.
dramatically lit, larger-than-life statue of Jesus throws a magnificent shadow. After all the crimes we encountered on this tour, the trope of sin and salvation here comes full circle, the guide explains. As promised, an orb floats across the image that I capture of Jesus in the pouring rain.

On the surface, the manner in which the tour offers an abundance of historic information fits Nietzsche’s antiquarian mode of writing and reading history. As I discuss in chapter 1, the antiquarian mode aims to archive and disseminate facts. However, the tour’s narrow interpretation of each and every occurrence as supernatural explodes formal historicizing. Strategically scheduled at nightfall, the haunted house tour turns rainy evening streets into a mysterious space reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s assertion that “space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.”

As fellow walkers, the audience members of this site-specific performance—the tour—become active players, performing interest and belief in direct and immediate interaction with the main performer, the guide. The interdependency and closeness between performer and performer–audience allow for improvisation yet also make it difficult for the audience–performers to maintain a critical distance from the guide’s insistence on authenticity. Both such insistence on authenticity and its counterpart, absolute dismissal of the need for it, characterize portrayals of New

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127 Nietzsche, “Uses and Disadvantages of History,” (see intro., n. 12)
Orleans as haunted by spirits, specters, and vampires in travel reports, articles in local papers, novels, TV shows, contemporary social-media sites, and movies.¹²⁹

“Haunted” is one of the main criteria that classify New Orleans in the public eye as a place of “otherness”—both within the US and beyond the actual map of North America. The definitions of this “otherness” assigned to New Orleans are varied and rarely precise. In the context of “haunted,” they claim that New Orleans is a place so mysterious that the existence of the supernatural is believable and, even more so, to be expected. Ghosts and vampires, so the claim, can only be at home in a place as old and crumbling as some parts of New Orleans, and the visible structures city seem to hold secrets that modernized places have long forgotten. This perceived “otherness” thus is located in a vague sense of nostalgia for a past that most likely never existed. It suggests worlds beyond the tangible reality of the everyday. The hope of catching a glimpse of New Orleans’s mystery draws thousands of tourists each year to the city. As a major American tourist destination, New Orleans is viewed as a place to visit (similar to Walt Disney World) rather than as one in which to live, which is, I believe, one crucial aspect that made the neglect in times of disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina, possible: The public (or its responsible representatives) was slow to recognize that a city whose major merit was to perform its “otherness” for its visitors was real enough to require saving.

¹²⁹ The Facebook page “Vodou, Voodou, Vodoun, Vodun” is an example of a site that focuses on New Orleans and Haiti. Followers join from all over the world. Posts range from in-depth discussion of the loas worshipped in Voodoo rituals to alternative healing practices and dream analyses. https://www.facebook.com/groups/76948840706/
In this chapter, among the various forms of media that have contributed to constructing New Orleans’s unreal and haunted “otherness,” I concentrate on the role films have played. Michael Fried contends that, when viewing a work of art, self-awareness impedes absorption in the artwork, resulting in theatricality. Consequently, the more theatrical an artistic event is, the more difficult it is for the viewer to suspend disbelief and achieve total absorption. While this sets the act of watching a film apart from the act of watching a live theatre performance, other components overlap. Specifically, films that focus on one location, here New Orleans, function for viewers similarly to the performances of walking tours: The films take their viewers to a place unknown, unknowable, and exciting precisely because of its “otherness” from where the viewers like tourists can safely return and dream of evermore.

These film journeys are also travels through time, using New Orleans as a concrete and as metaphorical location. Production of the six films that I discuss in this chapter—The Widow Paris (1992), Belle of the Nineties (1934), Pretty Baby (1978), Easy Rider (1969), Angel Heart (1987), and Interview with a Vampire (1994)—pre-date Hurricane Katrina. With the exception of Easy Rider, the films (or the major part of their plots) take place significantly earlier than their production time and show great effort in creating distinct visual and atmospheric interpretations of historic New Orleans. Through these constructions of the bygone New Orleans, the films reflect specific, at times nostalgic,

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visions of the past and of the city’s place in American history. Rather than as archives of the actual performance practices that the films include, the films are archives of fantasies of New Orleans. As such archives, they contribute to the staging of New Orleans as a place of spectacle and theatricality.

In the previous chapters, I examined how the physical body in Mardi Gras performance traditions (Black Indians and whites-only carnival balls) plays a central role as an object of desires and as a carrier of history and remembrance. Unlike in theatre or Mardi Gras festivities that capitalize on the live human body, in film the body is by default a reflection or a specter. In this chapter, through the performance of spirituality, magic, and horror in films set in New Orleans, the body takes center stage as a specter, as a monstrous representative of unrestrained sexuality, as a field for projections of racist stereotypes, and as a manifestation of the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque and the grotesque. In all of these variations, the body—or more precisely its mirror image on film—is exploited as a conduit for otherwise elusive (for example, spiritual) concepts or as a point of reference for the viewer: The gender and the color of the presented bodies, like the dress in Jezebel, indicate political hierarchies and alliances, alert the viewer directly or indirectly to conflicts and crises in the social order, and confirm or challenge the status quo.

The films that I have selected for this chapter (as well as many others) show white people, members of both the upper class and the underclass, encountering New Orleans as a stage to explore their eroticized spiritual (soul-seeking) desires and to engage with African-
derived religious practices. The white male gaze dominates these films and frequently constructs New Orleans’s “otherness” out of the contrast between white characters and black cultural practices. However, while this perspective allows for the exoticizing of people of color and of (black or white) women, the films also question sexual and gender stereotypes, codes, and conventions. For example, *Interview with a Vampire* plays with family values by presenting a family of two male vampires and their vampire daughter. *Angel Heart* focuses on one heterosexual white man finding his own identity through encounters with highly eroticized black spirituality. Despite the distortion of an African-derived religion, *Angel Heart* creates a world in which African-Americans, women in particular, are influential. In *Pretty Baby*, Louis Malle places a young (white) girl center stage in the famous Storyville red-light district to examine concepts of sexuality and amorality and thereby challenges his viewers to reflect on their own desire for nostalgia.

Since the selected films exploit religious rituals for their efforts at constructing New Orleans as a haunted city, in order to place them in their sociopolitical context, it is necessary to briefly look at the role religion plays in New Orleans as a social force and as a commodity.

**A City of Rituals**

Voodoo and Catholicism are the two dominant religions in the New Orleans. They represent the history of colonization and creolization foundational to New Orleans, while
offering spiritual paths and practices to cope with the ramifications of those historic struggles and developments. Both religions integrate rituals that are highly performative, and therefore, for the purpose of this investigation, I consider them as performances. Voodoo, in particular, includes singing and dancing. More so, as I describe in detail in this chapter, in moments or phases of possession—a crucial feature of Voodoo—worshippers act out the persona of a specific loa, or god. Although the worshipper cannot choose to do so, the precise enactment of the loa’s characteristics aligns possession with the work of actors, making the ritual inherently theatrical. In 1947, Maya Deren, who had assisted the Haitian-inspired African-American choreographer Katherine Dunham, received a Guggenheim scholarship (the first ever to be granted to a filmmaker) to film Voudon rituals in Haiti. Deren became an avid worshipper herself and was eventually initiated as a priestess. Her footage and her writing on it are illuminating of Voodoo’s performative quality. As if the camera were a mask, Deren captured moments of possession, the most intense moments of worship. Moving along like a dance partner, Deren filmed both women and men “being mounted” by a loa, revealing how, at the moment of possession, the worshipper experiences acute terror, presumably because s/he surrenders their identity and cannot control his/her actions or even body movements, which follow a pattern or script typical of the “personality” of the loa.

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131 Deren’s book and film, both titled Divine Horsemen, are invaluable sources. Although Deren died before completing her film, and the edited version by her husband, Teiji Ito, has been widely criticized for violating Deren’s concept, the footage she gathered is unmatched.
The relationship between Voodoo and Catholicism can be traced back to Haiti, as Deren explains in Divine Horsemen, where the social elite follows Catholicism and rejects Voudoun as primitive. However, according to Deren, the Haitian masses have only superficially accepted Catholicism and avidly practice Voudoun: “Where, at first glance, it might seem that Christianity had triumphed over Voudoun, it becomes clear, on closer study, that Voudoun has merely been receptive to compatible elements from a sister faith and has integrated these into its basic structure, subtly transfiguring and adjusting their meaning, where necessary, to the African tradition.” The most poignant example Deren gives is the comparisons between the Voudoun loas and the Catholic saints: “Like the saints, the loas were once human and are the immediate guardians of the people. Like the saints, they have special provinces of action. Is it so strange, then, that failing other images, the Voudoun serviteur today covers his altars with Catholic pictures of the saints, which he understands as representations of the loa?” The documentary Voodoo from the Inside (1996) echoes Deren’s observation and shows that a similar process took place in New Orleans. There, Voodoo worshippers can be practicing Catholics, such as prominent Voodoo priestess Ava Kay Jones, who in this documentary freely speaks about her belief in Catholicism and is seen lighting candles for saints at her local church as well as for loas in her prayer room at home.

132 “Voudoun” is one of the spellings used in Haiti. “Voodoo” is typically used in New Orleans.
134 Ibid.
According to Robert Farris Thompson, the roots of New Orleans Voodoo stem from Congo, Dahomey, Yoruba, and Haiti. While Dahomeyan traditions integrated Yoruba deities through various contacts (cultural and military) for hundreds of years prior to the slave trade with Europe, Thompson states that Haitian Vodun “reblended” religious concepts and deities of the three major African cultures that were forced together by slavery in Haiti (French Santo Domingo). What he aptly calls a “creole” religion is divided into two components. One is the Rada, the so-called “cool” side of Vodoun, which represents peace and reconciliation and is derived from Yoruba and Dahomey. The other is the “hot” one, the Petro, which is primarily derived from the Congo and denotes spiritual fire for healing or attacking evil. Thompson points out that the “hot” potential of Yoruba deities were reassigned to Petro sides of Vodoun, signifying the religion’s ability to synthesize. To him “Vodun, which was first elaborated in Haiti, is one of the signal achievements of people of African descent in the western hemisphere: a vibrant, sophisticated synthesis of the traditional religions of Dahomey, Yorubaland, and Congo with an infusion of Roman Catholicism.”\(^{135}\)

Historically, New Orleans Voodoo blossomed because of the Haitian revolution. As Paul Christopher Johnson notes, “After 1793, the gens de couleur libres faction became dominant, and ten thousand royalist whites, together with as many of their slaves as

possible, set sail for North America, many of them to New Orleans.”

Furthermore, Johnson states “Vodou was carried to New Orleans, with the exodus from Haiti of ten thousand planters and their slaves. It became an ‘American religion’ early in the nineteenth century, as the Louisiana Purchase dramatically transcultured the religious field of North America.”

Throughout this process of transculturation, the European religion of Catholicism became regarded as white, pure, and free of witchcraft, while the African one was associated with blackness and therefore with danger. Thompson argues that “superficially understood by Westerners since the eighteenth century, voodoo (vodun) has been reviled as abominable primitivism and vulgarized and exploited in countless racist books and films.”

In her book *A New Orleans Voodoo Priestess: The Legend and Reality of Marie Laveau*, Carol Morrow Long outlines how these exploitative depictions are intricately linked to the ways in which the religion established itself in New Orleans as a sociopolitical force and reflects the city’s racialized dynamics. As Long describes it, during the nineteenth century, free women of color dominated the religion. Their considerable influence extended from their immediate congregations directly and indirectly into all spheres and classes of society and, in particular, their public ceremonies attracted attention.

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137 Ibid., 167.
Extant accounts of their activities were all written by white male observers, who projected their own sexual desires onto what they observed, sparking the racialized sexualization that is still prevalent in depictions of Voodoo and that is used in films set in New Orleans to construct the city as both enticing and dangerous.

Comparing white religious practices to black practices allowed the white writers and readers to view their own white culture favorably and even define a pure white religious identity. Additionally, sexualization diminished the role women of color played in establishing Voodoo. By demeaning the women in charge of the religion and their positions of influence in the city, the white male gaze maintained an image of New Orleans as male dominated. The most famous example in this context is nineteenth-century priestess Marie Laveau (a free woman of color), who until today is so revered that a tombstone that may hold her remains serves as a place of worship and as one of the most popular tourist attractions.

The many versions of Laveau’s persona that circulate—ranging from saint to ruthless madam of a brothel to snake dancer at Congo Square—have shaped the public imagination of Voodoo; she has been worshipped and demonized in books, songs, and movies. One of them is The Widow Paris, produced by film students at Louisiana State University under the guidance of film professor Steve Hanks. This inexpensively produced film depicts Laveau’s transition from Catholicism to Voodoo as an act of emancipation

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140 Marie Laveau has been immortalized with songs in different genres, such as jazz (Papa Celestine), funk (Doctor John), and country (Bobby Bare).
from the white order. Laveau in this version is a naïve young wife devoted to her husband Jacques. When Jacques is caught by a spell, Laveau follows Voodoo priest Doctor John’s instructions to save him and thereby discovers that she has been chosen to be the Queen of Voodooists in New Orleans. As a result, she leaves the Catholic church. Significantly, Laveau in *The Widow Paris* is not shown exhibiting her power and influence, which made her such a remarkable figure in New Orleans. Moreover, she moves from one male mentor, a white Catholic priest, to another one, the black Doctor John, without whom she would not have discovered her calling. The image of New Orleans that *The Widow Paris* constructs is at once Eurocentric and male dominated, but it is more critical of white supremacy than of patriarchal structures.

As Carol Morrow Long describes, even though no relationship can be established between Marie Laveau and Doctor John (a man of African descent who came of fame as a Hoodoo, or Voodoo, doctor in New Orleans in the nineteenth century and whose biography mostly remains conjecture), from Robert Talland’s novel *The Voodoo Queen* (1956) to Jewell Parker Rhodes’s *Voodoo Dreams* (1995), writers have cast Laveau and John as either a pair or in opposition to each other.¹⁴¹ In the latter constellation, commonly Laveau is portrayed as a positive figure and John as a con man or sorcerer. Although European colonizers had brought witchcraft practices along with them, as Dwight Webster, Senior Pastor of the Christian Unity Baptist Church, explains in the documentary *Voodoo from the

Inside, within the city’s racialized structure, “white magic” had no place. Instead, witchcraft was transferred to African-derived practices, giving birth to so-called “black magic.” True to the tradition of European witches, who are typically female and often dangerous (while magicians tend to be male and benevolent), in the media Hoodoo practices—with the notable exception of Doctor John—are assigned to women. This blend of gendered and racialized European and African rituals and belief systems is the source of what is repeatedly and relentlessly perpetuated throughout popular media as New Orleans’s spirited and ghosted “otherness.” Yet, this “otherness” is far more often attributed to Voodoo or anything “africanized” than to European influences.

The sensationalism and sexualization of these types of accounts of Voodoo ceremonies that reappear in films set in New Orleans increased in the early twentieth century, spurred by the American occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. As Long describes it, “The Marines were deployed for the stated purpose of ‘stabilizing’ Haitian politics and protecting American interests during World War I. They were soon engaged in quelling an indigenous rebellion and suppressing ‘voodooism.’” Reports and memoirs now emphasized sexual orgies, such as this one Long cites: “Under the passion of the hour, the women tore off their garments, and entirely nude, went on dancing.” While such portrayals sexualized Voodoo, during this phase (early to mid-twentieth century), Long

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143 Long, A New Orleans Voudou Priestess, xxxii.
144 Marie B. Williams, “A Night with the Voodoos,” Appleton’s Journal (March 1875): 403–4, quoted in Long, 100.
notes, Voodoo was predominantly regarded as a fraud from which ignorant blacks needed to be protected, further disempowering people of color.

In response to this demonizing and sensationalizing of Voodoo, Black Spiritual churches arose in New Orleans that incorporated some of the components of Voodoo in their practices. Even today, it is not common among people of African descent to publicly associate with the religion. In an interview with me, Black Indian Chief Alfred Doucette talked about his relationship with Marie Laveau as very personal and positive: “Marie is a good spirit to me.” Chief Doucette, who is also a singer, credits Laveau for bringing songs to him in his dreams. According to Jessie Gaston Mulira, this occurrence is typical in Voodoo: “Songs acquired while sleeping are seen as coming from a spirit’s revelation.” Nevertheless Chief Doucette identifies as Catholic and does not have any connections to Voodoo.

Starting from the mid- to late twentieth century, capitalizing on how well thrills and sex sell, Voodoo has been appropriated as a tourist commodity. Countless gift shops line the French Quarter, specializing in pseudo-Voodoo objects like dolls and cigars and garden-variety spiritual items like incense, candles, and tarot cards, as well as t-shirts and posters. At the end of the twentieth century, Voodoo is recognized as a legitimate religion by scholars, resulting in a great output of publication. Such careful study is praiseworthy

147 Alfred Doucette, interview with author, May 2011.
yet poses the risk of another form of appropriation: Preserving living practices transforms them into archives and thereby moves them from the present into the past. Practices that are then modeled on what is preserved in archives are more staid than practices that grow out of experiences. This is complicated by the racialized structure of academia, with white scholars outnumbering those of African descent and frequently assuming leadership position as experts in the field, while the general African-American population often lacks access to this scholarship. Furthermore, white female scholars have found Voodoo a rich ground for feminist issues, joined Voodoo, and even have become priestesses, thereby extending white influence into Voodoo itself. Frequently, these white American priestesses and scholars, like New Orleans priestess Sally Ann Glassman, refer to Deren as a role model.

Because Vodoun priests in Haiti and in New Orleans have been careful to guard the actual religious practices from outside observers, few firsthand accounts are available of ceremonies, in particular of possession, the component of Voodoo rituals that has fascinated outsiders the most. Several of the films that I discuss in this chapter integrate possession rituals. The films in this chapter that include moments of possession do not resist the appeal of sensationalizing these complex rituals. Even films that make an effort at presenting the rituals respectfully produce problematic results, as the following scene in *The Widow Paris* illustrates: The first Voodoo ceremony that Marie Laveau attends is held for the loa of love, whom Doctor John inaccurately refers to as the Goddess of Love. It
takes place in a secret opening in the woods. A group of worshippers is dancing around a fire. Laveau is overwhelmed by the new impressions and slightly disoriented. She sees her husband Jacques in the center dancing with an embodiment of the loa, who, as Doctor John informs Laveau, has possessed him. This is confusing because loas do not appear next to the possessed but rather overtake him/her. In fact, the astonishing aspect of possession is that the possessed acts out and embodies the characteristics of the loa. When Laveau calls Jacques, he turns to her, his face distorted by anger, and viciously hisses at her, reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s zombie character in the “Thriller” video.\textsuperscript{148} The estrangement effect shocks, draws attention to itself, and thereby heightens the scene’s theatricality. Jacques then walks away into the woods with the loa, again as if they were two people. Cultural references like these that emphasize the part the undead play in Voodoo contribute to the image that frightening and uncontrollable creatures haunt New Orleans. Even though European history is rich with myths of the undead, zombies are predominantly associated with Haiti and West Africa.\textsuperscript{149} Scenes like the ceremony in \textit{The Widow Paris} thus evoke the impression that it is people of color who haunt New Orleans and that it is Africanization that sets it apart from other US American cities. As African, or black, is placed in opposition to European, or white, the image of New Orleans as “other” in \textit{The Widow Paris} is rooted in its “blackness.” Since Marie Laveau emancipates herself from her Eurocentric socialization, she finds her true self in Voodoo. Despite the above and other brief moments

\textsuperscript{148} Incidentally, “Thriller” was aesthetically influenced by the zombie classic \textit{Night of the Living Dead} (1968).

\textsuperscript{149} Haitian sorcerers have been accused of using poison to put their victims into catatonic states.
of sensationalizing, the film’s depiction of African-derived cultures and their impact on the city is decidedly positive.

**White Women, Sex, and Black Religion**

*Belle of the Nineties* Even before white female scholars became interested in Voodoo at the end of the twentieth century, white women had been attracted to black religious practices. The films *Belle of the Nineties* and *Pretty Baby* present two very different examples of how white women relate to black practices and, as a result, paint two very different pictures of New Orleans. Neither film portrays New Orleans as an unusually spiritual or religious city, yet through their main characters’ relationships with black rituals, both contribute indirectly to its reputation as “other.” Both films play with the metaphor of New Orleans as a sinful woman, feature female main protagonists who defy traditional women’s roles, and approach sex in a nontraditional manner. *Belle of the Nineties* takes place in 1892, five years before the official designation of “the District,” or Storyville, nicknamed named after City Councilman Sidney Story, who wrote the guidelines to control prostitution that was rampant in the New Orleans of the time. New York Times reviewer Andrew Sennwald refers to the period as the “Naughty Nineties.”

Pretty Baby, on the other hand, is set in 1917, shortly before Storyville is closed down.

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Belle of the Nineties is a star vehicle for the indomitable, sharp-witted Mae West. The project ran into trouble with the censors and therefore went through several incarnations. As both Gregory D. Black and John C. Lyden point out the Catholic Church was instrumental in founding the Legion of Decency, which attempted to control any signs of eroticism on screen. Lyden notes that “even before the advent of sound film, Roman Catholic leaders had been among the most vocal in the denunciation of popular films.” 151, 152 That Mae West, with her highly sexualized sense of humor, caused opposition is no surprise. The film’s original title was It Ain’t No Sin, and when, as Black describes it, “Paramount erected huge billboards on Broadway advertising IT AIN’T NO SIN, Catholic priests countered with placards announcing ‘IT IS.’” 153

The plot of Belle of the Nineties is both simplistic and convoluted, relying on the appeal of West’s provocative humor and looks. West plays the vaudeville star and nightclub singer Ruby Carter, a siren with a sharp tongue and a heart of gold. Ruby moves from St. Louis to New Orleans after her beau, prizefighter Tiger Kid, breaks up with her because his manager made him believe she cheated on him. Ruby begins to perform at Ace Lamont’s Sensation House, arousing great admiration in all the men who cross her path—in particular Ace—and jealousy in his girlfriend, Moly Brant. Soon enough, Ruby is entangled in complicated schemes involving a fixed fight that brings Tiger Kid to New

Orleans, jewelry theft, the burning down of the Sensation House, and Tiger being accused of having murdered Ace. Because the censors demanded that *Belle of the Nineties* endorse traditional values, the film ends with Ruby and Tiger getting married after Tiger is cleared of the crime.

The scene of greatest interest for this discussion takes place halfway through the film. Ruby is in trouble with the men who romance her and worried about her reputation. She learns from her black maid that a prayer meeting is going to take place and gives her money to add to the collection so that the preacher will say a blessing for her. Taking a rather patronizing slant, Ruby admonishes the maid not to spend it on herself. Ruby then watches the ceremony from a balcony (in full black evening dress with a huge hat) as it is conducted directly underneath her. She appears to be located near the Mississippi. It is night and very dark, yet in the light from her house, a river can be made out in the background. This scene is a musical number without dialogue; it consists only of song and dance. With the exception of Ruby on the balcony, all participants in this scene are black.

Calling his congregation to join him in prayer, the preacher—a thin man wearing a dark suit—announces that the meeting is supposed to drive out the Devil. The worshippers, men and women of different ages, form a circle around him. Some of the women wear conservative dresses and hats, while others wear head wraps. Some men are dressed in suits, some in ragged clothes. Together they make up the chorus and join the preacher in a gospel song “Troubled Waters,” composed by Arthur Johnston for the movie and
performed by the Duke Ellington orchestra. The scene begins very orderly and grows more and more chaotic, as the worshippers are overcome with religious fervor and dance and gesticulate with erratic motions while grimacing in exaggerated ecstasy. One woman is possessed with the Holy Spirit and falls into the crowd. Following her, as if her possession were contagious, more worshippers appear to be taken by the spirit.

Among the chorus are young men who lift heavy bales to the rhythm of the music as if on a loading deck at the harbor. It is speculative if the film was directly inspired by the stage musical *Show Boat* from 1927, of which this element is reminiscent. However, as a Broadway musical featuring a black cast that did not wear blackface, *Show Boat* was highly influential and difficult to ignore. In *Show Boat’s* Act 1, scene 7, the character Joe sings “Ol’ Man River.” The stage directions read: “Joe rises and comes down C[enter], while 8 COLOURED MEN enter from L. and 7 from R. carrying boxes and bales.”154 Those men then join Joe as a chorus. That they are working loading goods fits the environment and makes the scene more tangible. As contrast, in *Belle of the Nineties* the merging of a prayer meeting and physical labor moves the scene from the realist style of the film to an abstract one, from a concrete place—the harbor—to a non-concrete one. This abstraction stereotypically encapsulates aspects of black life—hard work and church.

More than commenting on the hardship of black life, the abstraction of the scene aids in expressing Ruby’s state of mind. After watching for a while, Ruby joins the singing. Her light and pretty voice is now the lead, as she contemplates her role in this world. She

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matters as an individual caught in an erotic-romantic maze, and the black religious practice serves to channel her worries. This scene mirrors Elvis’s opening duet with Kitty White in *King Creole*—quite possibly inspiring it. Both Elvis as Danny Fisher and West as Ruby are placed on a balcony from where they (literally) look down on people of color and then connect with them through their music. When the white stars join the singing, their presence takes over the scenes, and the content of the black music, whether about crawfish or Satan, and its style are sexualized to articulate the white characters’ personal conflicts and desires.

Indicative of Ruby’s (and West’s) relationship to African-American culture, she does not direct the singers. Moreover, Ruby’s skintight black dress, which is only decorated with a single line of white leaves, visually aligns her with the congregation. At the emotional peak of the scene, shots of Ruby are superimposed on the black worshippers, indicating that Ruby is one of them. Mae West’s famously unrepressed relationship with African-American culture enhances this visual unity, as West’s personality and her on-screen persona overlap. Rumors persist that West’s grandfather was of African-American descent. This cannot be verified, but the influence of Bert Williams on West’s acting has been established. In *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*, Jill Watts describes that from childhood on West admired Bert Williams, who once made a surprise visit to her home that allowed her an unexpected view of him without blackface. According to Watts, this suddenly apparent duality of the man and his mask initiated West’s deeper understanding.
of performance and inspired her to emulate Williams’s persona: “When impersonating him, she became a white child pretending to be a black male signifying and mocking white society. This was a critical step in the construction of her stage personality during a formative period of her development.”\textsuperscript{155} Williams’s acting technique was, as Watts notes, built on “signifying.”\textsuperscript{156} According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as he explores in \textit{Signifying Monkey}, in the black vernacular one does not signify some thing, one signifies in some way, which requires encoding of the message and which leaves room for an alternative message.\textsuperscript{157} West’s deliberate emulation of Williams can be considered an act of signifying—on the construction of racial and gender roles. It certainly created a purposeful artifice that positions West’s acting in the realm of camp, defined by Susan Sontag, among its other aspects, as “Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.”\textsuperscript{158} This artifice adds to the scene’s theatricality and reminds the viewer that while there is artistic truth in Ruby’s singing, both character and the locale of New Orleans are constructions.

However, New Orleans does not emerge with much specificity; rather, the image \textit{Belle of the Nineties} presents of the city seems smothered. Many scenes (between the white characters) take place in generic hotel rooms—nightlife and gambling exist, but this New

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 13.
Orleans is not notably different from St. Louis, where Ruby performed previously. Black culture is barely a background element throughout much of the film. Very few African-Americans have speaking roles, and all of them are servants. Even though clichéd and not necessarily distinguishable as rooted in New Orleans heritage, the spiritual musical scene seems like a return of this repressed black culture. West’s character joining an ecstatic black ritual has the potential to challenge social barriers but in this incarnation mostly helps to flesh out her emotional world. Without examining the mash-up of black religious practices, the scene only hints at an image of New Orleans as a platform for “otherness,” be it ethnically or sexually different than the white male mainstream.

_Belle of the Nineties_ suggests, but never exploits, a literal or metaphorical link between New Orleans’s reputation as a sexually liberal place and West the vamp, whose star power was to a large extent built on the manner in which she used her sexual wit to break gender roles. In compliance with the recent emergence of the Production Code, Paramount Pictures circumvented censorship by “domesticating” the sexual force of West’s persona, even having her character exchange her freedom for a traditional marriage and thereby entering the white mainstream. As a result, the image _Belle of the Nineties_ constructs of New Orleans is embedded in a white male worldview but remains vague. Rather than responding to or commenting on circumstances and characteristics specific to New Orleans, the film responds to nationwide pressures of censorship. In 1978, almost fifty years later, as if to compensate for _Belle of the Nineties_’s stifled portrait of the city,
Paramount Pictures produced a portrait of New Orleans with *Pretty Baby* that challenged conventional concepts of (child-)sexuality and romantic notions of the city.

*Pretty Baby*  *Pretty Baby* was French New Wave director Louis Malle’s first film in the US. Malle, who was experienced in documentary filmmaking, particularly as a cameraman for Jacques Cousteau, approached this tale about a child prostitute as an ethnographic film study. *Pretty Baby* includes only two short, yet significant, scenes of spiritual performances by a black priestess. To contextualize these scenes effectively, it is necessary to provide a fairly detailed account of the plot and the Storyville environment that Malle portrays. Storyville was encased by North Robertson Street, Iberville Street, Basin Street, and St. Louis Street, covering parts of what is known as the Faubourg Tremé, which is located above the French Quarter. Councilman Story’s ordinance, which was in effect from 1897 to 1917, established that within these sixteen blocks prostitution was *not* illegal. Even though other American cities had districts where prostitution took place, because of its connection to the entertainment industry (in particular jazz), Storyville stood out and shaped New Orleans’s reputation as an urban space and tourist destination, where (white) men were free to act out their fantasies. This greatly added to the city’s image of “other,” in this case meaning deviant or liberal.
Malle was inspired by Jelly Roll Morton’s memoirs recorded by Alan Lomax in 1938 and by Al Rose’s 1978 book *Storyville, New Orleans*, a vivid description of the District that included photos by E.J. Bellocq. Bellocq’s photos, which after years of obscurity had been exhibited by Lee Friedlander in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art, serve as major primary sources on life in Storyville and have had a lasting effect on the widespread public image of New Orleans as a sexualized female space. A standard in the industry of cultural-heritage tourism, the photos can be categorized as either ethnographic, offering insights into a specific world; as fetishizing prostitutes; or even as exploring the nature of fetishizing. Certainly, his softly lit portraits of young prostitutes posing nude or semi-nude evoke a sense of poetry and romance for the women and their lives. The reality behind the images of young women in striped stockings, as Al Rose’s book, Morton’s recollection, and the documentary *Storyville: The Naked Dance* from 1997 inform us, was one of oppression, violence, and fear of venereal diseases. Often ignored, this Storyville documentary reminds the viewer that the District and its prostitution trade were strictly segregated. While white clients could visit black prostitutes and black prostitutes worked in white-run establishments, black clients were only allowed to frequent black prostitutes in a special, ghettoized section marked by abject poverty.

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Pretty Baby takes place in a luxurious brothel in white Storyville operated by an old white madam. It tells the story of Violet (Brooke Shields), the twelve-year-old daughter of a prostitute (Susan Sarandon) who in the course of the film is initiated into the trade. In the beginning of the film, a photographer named Bellocq (Keith Carradine), based on the real-life man, visits the brothel to take photos of the prostitutes. Malle restages some of Bellocq’s photos in Pretty Baby, yet the Storyville he constructs defies cultural-heritage tourism. He does not simply replicate a look and atmosphere as accurately as possible, as Nathan C. Southern argues in The Films of Louis Malle: “Malle is obsessed with reconstructing the past, and creates not simply a nostalgic film but an investigation of nostalgia.” With Pretty Baby Malle made less a history film and more a “historicism” film. He re-creates a place and a milieu that has been instrumental in shaping the image of New Orleans as sexually deviant and immoral. He then places characters in the milieu, examining and demonstrating like a social scientist how they might behave. Through the progression of Bellocq first photographing Violet’s mother and then excessively Violet, the audience sees him objectifying yet also sympathizing with the prostitutes, taking advantage of Violet, desiring her, and possibly even feeling genuine love for her. The relationship between the child prostitute and the photographer is presented as complex and complicated. Malle, without placing moral judgment, seems to sympathize with both and steers away

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from the expected angle that would cast Bellocq as solely a perpetrator and Violet as a completely helpless victim.

Violet’s mother marries one of her customers and moves with him to St. Louis, leaving Violet behind. Shortly after, Violet moves in with Bellocq. When Storyville closes, Violet and Bellocq get married. Finally, Violet’s mother, now a regular middle-class housewife, returns with her husband and takes Violet away with her. Significantly, her mother had only been able to find a way out of prostitution by leaving New Orleans, and so Violet has to leave as well. At the train station, her new stepfather takes a photo of Violet and her mother. Her mother has lost interest in being photographed and does not pay attention, but Violet stares defiantly into the camera. *Pretty Baby* capitalizes on the spectacle that New Orleans promises by showing all—sex, nudity, etc. At the same time, the film inverts the spectacle by framing it as a documentary. Throughout the film, Malle’s camera stays closely with Violet and uses her perspective as an overall guiding view. In fact, she appears in all scenes and drives the action in most. The act of looking, the photographic gaze, Violet’s gaze, and the customers’ gazes at the women, direct the film, forcing the audience into the position of observing—as if in a social experiment—this other world that it presents. New Orleans in *Pretty Baby* is more than metaphorically, it is also quite literally—at least to Violet—a brothel. Until Storyville closes, the film takes place in the brothel and then in Bellocq’s house, where Violet continues to prostitute herself by having sex with him and posing nude for his photos. Most striking is that Violet, even
though she feels pain at her first sexual encounter and at times argues with Bellocq, is happy in her environment and even exhibits pride in her profession. This resonates with screenwriter Polly Platt’s declared goal, as quoted in Southern’s book, that she wanted to “investigate in the screenplay amorality. Because I felt that a child who was raised where prostitution was a way of making a living, that she would be completely without sexual hang-ups of any kind.”

 Appropriately, no representatives of the Catholic church enter her world who could have imparted traditional moral values to Violet. From Violet’s point of view, nuns embody the threat of being torn from her home (the brothel or Bellocq’s house) and of losing her freedom. The only restriction about sex Violet is ever taught is a spanking when she is caught playing at sex with a black boy. Violet’s anger and confusion, and the fact that it is the black maid who admonishes her harshly, underscore Malle’s point that moral values are learned. However, Violet’s world is not entirely devoid of spirituality. In two small yet pivotal scenes a black woman, presumably a Voodoo priestess, performs a ritual. The scenes are placed at opposite points of the film, in the exposition and in the resolution.

 Both scenes take place at the brothel. In the first one, the priestess prays over candles, chants in an unidentified language, throws a handful of coffee beans, and then proceeds to paint Violet’s legs, one green and one orange. As a result of this painting ritual, the priestess prophesies, to Violet’s delight, that she will have so many men in her life that she will hardly know what to do with all of them. This is Violet’s initiation ritual,

functioning for her in a similar way as a confirmation or a bat mitzvah. When Storyville closes, the priestess prays, chants, and blesses the brothel and its inhabitants, who all have to find a new place to live and way to make a living.

With these scenes, Malle shows that both sex workers and practitioners of African-derived religions were placed in the same low social class. Within this class, black characters are marginalized. The priestess, in particular, remains mysterious. The film never reveals where she lives, to which religion(s) she belongs, or how she negotiates the segregated city. However, rather than stereotyping people of color as sexually deviant and their cultures as projection fields for repressed white desires, Malle offers an observation of this very specific milieu and its place in the complex social order. He shows a black priestess initiating and encouraging white women to excel in their subservient roles as providers of sexual services to a white, male ruling class. Thus, the exotic, “the other,” can be considered influencing the everyday life of a group of women who are also “other” in this society. From behind the scenes, her ritual helps solidify the prostitution system. Actively supporting the social order or at least maneuvering within it through her rituals requires assuming influence. Hence, the black priestess, who is regarded as being on the lowest level of the social strata, indirectly challenges her position in the hierarchy—unlike the women she guides. It is speculative if and how Voodoo priestesses offered their practices to prostitutes in Storyville. However, these scenes in Pretty Baby are reminiscent of stories of Marie Laveau influencing believers—white and black—within all spheres of
society. Malle integrates these rituals into the dramatic action as any other habitual activity the characters engage in. The priestess performs them—and as they are being filmed, she performs them for the camera—yet they are neither explained nor highlighted. Instead, in keeping with the film’s actual topic, the observation of sexual conduct, the first time Violet is offered to a client, it is staged as a highly theatricalized ritual. Violet is placed on a platter and carried around the parlor for the clients to see. She is then placed on a stage and the men bid on her. Most obviously, the staging reminds the viewer of a slave auction; from a theatrical point of view, Violet (her virginity in particular) is sacrificed.

In the public imagination, the connection between black spirituality and sex is essential to the image of New Orleans as “other,” and Malle capitalizes on the sensationalization of the link while at the same time undercutting it. By connecting the religious initiation ritual and the ritualized auctioning off of Violet’s virginity, he illustrates how the constructs of New Orleans as a place of sexual freedom and of spiritual “otherness” are infused with ideas of race and class that are considered normative. His scientific view demystifies New Orleans, draining its image of its metaphors and its allure while portraying it as a place where people live and die and perform rituals—sexual, religious, and theatrical—to no particular end. However, because of the milieu—Storyville and its motley crew of characters—that Malle chose for his study of human behavior, the film adds to the city’s image as a space where things happen and conduct is/was permissible that would be and is taboo anywhere else. He thereby presents the city as
“other” from anyplace else and at the same time argues against this construction. The example of the next film, *Easy Rider*, capitalizes on exactly this construction for its story about two drifters who seek salvation in New Orleans.

*Easy Rider* In chapter 1, I discussed *Easy Rider* in relationship to Black Indians. A very short moment that features Big Chief Tootie Montana during the montage of the two main characters Billy (Dennis Hopper) and Wyatt (Peter Fonda) celebrating Mardi Gras sparked this discussion, and I argued that the image of the Black Indian was exploited to further the quest of the white, male protagonists. I am now returning to *Easy Rider* to make the larger point that this low-budget film epitomizes the construction of New Orleans as a place of “otherness” through the characters’ travels toward a spiritual awakening that they never achieve.

*Easy Rider*, a slang term for a procurer of prostitutes, managed the rare feat of attaining cult status and gaining box office success. *Easy Rider* was produced between 1967 and 1968 and released in 1969, when the optimism of the decade was beginning to wane. Lee Hill observes that during its production “1968 exploded in violence with the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, rioting in American ghettos and university campuses, the street fighting and protests that shattered the Chicago Democratic Convention, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.”

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film captures this shifting mood, exploring—even deconstructing—the failing of the American dream.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the plot is sparse, yet a few details are worth describing. At the beginning of the film, Billy and Wyatt manage a drug deal. A strictly capitalist venture thus sets them off on their journey. With the money stashed away in the tanks of their bikes, they travel from the West Coast down first to New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gras and afterwards to settle in the Florida Keys. Along the way, the two self-defined outcasts meet representatives of American life and possibilities: a farmer with countless children and a commune of hippies who are learning to live off the land. An astonishing lack of African-Americans marks the film, even when Billy and Wyatt reach the South. With the exception of a muted confrontation between Billy and a young black man at Mardi Gras, Billy and Wyatt do not have actual encounters with any black characters. The film’s support of counterculture values and of the Civil Rights Movement concentrates on the fate of white men.

In Texas, when slowly driving along with a parade, Billy and Wyatt are jailed under the false premise of parading without a permit. They meet alcoholic civil rights lawyer Hanson (Jack Nicholson), who joins them on the last stretch of their journey. In Louisiana, their long hair and large bikes arouse the anger of local rednecks, who kill Hanson in the middle of the night. Hanson’s last words before he falls asleep and is then clobbered to
death are prophetic, “This was once a helluvah country,” yet sound ignorant of the history of oppression and slavery that made the American dream possible. Was it ever a “helluvah country,” and if so, for whom? It remains unclear if the three white men are searching for an America of their imagination or one that actually existed in the past.

These plot points are framed by beautifully shot sequences of the men traveling through the immense American landscape to the accompaniment of sixties music by, among others, Jimi Hendrix and The Band. These scenes elicit a sense of poetry and freedom and are thus the most remarkable components of the film, contributing to Easy Rider’s status as one of the most celebrated road movies. David Laderman argues that “[t]he birth of the road film seems to reflect two interrelated postwar phenomena: the advent of the automobile as a fundamental expression of individuality and the emergence of a large strata of restless, often suburban, youth in the 1950s, depicted in such films as Rebel Without a Cause and Blackboard Jungle (both 1955).”

In emphasizing Easy Rider’s shift between extolling values of conservative Americana and rebellion, Laderman explains that the genre’s “cultural roots include a literary tradition focused on voyaging (the Journey), which in turn often reflect an ideology of expansionism and imperialism (in the strict literal sense of asserting one’s self elsewhere). This Euro-American ideological strain, which combines enterprise and mobility, is perhaps best summed up by the term ‘manifest destiny,’ which reverberates

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with connotations that may seem contrary to the overtly rebellious themes of the genre.”

Contrary to the actual historical expansion of “manifest destiny,” Billy and Wyatt travel from west to southeast. The geographic direction symbolizes that the film questions the hopefulness and imperialist/colonialist ruthlessness of the manifest destiny ideology. However, people of color are only bystanders on the side of the road (a few scenes show Billy and Wyatt riding their bikes through impoverished black areas; in one, people even wave to them), and women merely serve as catalysts for the two travelers’ quests and desires. Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road, a strong inspiration for the counterculture movement with its stories of the two white male drifters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, is the film’s most obvious literary model. As Laderman notes, “In Easy Rider, women are reductively marginalized as either burdens or sex objects. More generally, the ambitious drive to go outside American society that the film celebrates becomes recuperated to the traditional American culture the film seeks to critique.”

Easy Rider struggles to integrate traditional white male domination with revolutionary values.

This is particularly evident in the cemetery scene in New Orleans, in which Billy and Wyatt seek spiritual awakening. Loaded with Christian symbolism, the scene links spirituality (Catholicism) and sexuality, exploring yet never resolving the duality of sin and salvation that the tour guide of the haunted house tour had outlined as a trope for the city. The first scene in New Orleans takes place in a restaurant. Billy convinces Wyatt to go to

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166 Ibid., 41.
167 Ibid., 48.
the brothel that Hanson planned to visit, The House of Blue Lights, arguing that their dead friend “would have wanted it that way.” The music that plays during this and the next scene, “Kyrie Eleison” by the Electric Prunes, is a psychedelic version of the medieval prayer. It suggests that the time the two will spend in New Orleans is one of spiritual awakening through sex and drugs. The next scene finds the two in that establishment. The transition from the restaurant to the brothel is typical of the film’s jarring editing style: a harsh cut from a close-up of Wyatt’s pensive face to medium shots of paintings depicting Christian saints and young women in seductive poses. Wider shots reveal that the House of Blue Lights is an old mansion decorated with statues, old-style furniture, and large gold-framed paintings of Louis XIV, Jesus, various saints, and presumably prostitutes. Here, even as the music fades out, the Christian theme continues. Wyatt and Billy arrange to be with two prostitutes. Wyatt’s date (played by Toni Basil) introduces herself as Mary. With her large, innocent eyes and her long, dark hair she reminds the viewer of paintings of the Virgin Mary.

Because Wyatt does not simply want to have sex with her, the four go out to party at Mardi Gras, as described in chapter 1. The music during this party montage that leads the four to the cemetery is the gospel song “When the Saints Go Marching In,” recorded as part of the Library of Congress Collection’s *Music of New Orleans.* At the side of the road in front of the cemetery, they see a dead baby lamb. This lamb presumably symbolizes

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168 *Easy Rider.*
169 It is unclear why the recording is not listed in the film’s credits.
sacrifice, but it remains unclear who is being sacrificed. In the cemetery, the four sit down at a tombstone. Billy’s date Karen (played by Karen Black) wears a black shawl over her head typical of Catholic women at the time. Wyatt places acid pills underneath her tongue, a gesture that makes him appear like a priest administering Communion.

They lose themselves in the trip that is layered with erratic sounds and a rhythmic thump like a heartbeat, voiceovers by a young woman praying incoherently to Mary, Mother of God, and by Wyatt—or more precisely, Peter Fonda—talking equally incoherently about his mother’s suicide. The four try to get affection, or at least attention, from each other; they roll on the ground and cry about what seem to be memories of past hurt. Billy and Karen make love after she screams that she wants to be beautiful, and Billy implores her to be beautiful, holding each other like lost children. Mary and Wyatt have sex in a very slim space between two tombstones. Wyatt sits on a statue holding an umbrella. Karen screams that she is dying and that she does not want to die, then dances between tombstones. These chaotic and rather pained moments are intercut with shots of the sun, Mardi Gras parades, night sky and day sky, statues, a close-up of the young woman praying to the Virgin Mary, and a thin man in a dark suit with an umbrella skipping down a cemetery alley. Like in the Mardi Gras montage, viewpoints shift and change. However, because of Wyatt’s voiceover and frequent shots of him sitting by a statue and staring into space, his experience appears to be the guiding perspective. This would fit the characterization of the two travelers, with Billy as the materialistic thrill seeker and Wyatt
as the thinker. The final words of the young woman praying are “Holy Mother of God, pray for us,” and Wyatt’s last words are “You’re such a fool. I hate you so much.” These final utterances dramatize the emptiness of their experiences.

In *Easy Rider* New Orleans is shown to create environments in which conventional logic gives itself over to forms and practices that resist containment. Regardless of the definition, Voodoo or Christianity, prescribed rituals collapse into delirium. To Billy and Wyatt New Orleans signifies the peak of disappointing fantasies. Yet rather than constructing the city as the ultimate American illusion, the film suggests that the two travelers cannot find the “otherness” they are seeking to connect with in New Orleans, not because it is not there—some of the Mardi Gras revelers seem to have found it and rejoice in it—but because they bring nothing to it. In their self-indulgent trip, Billy and Wyatt cannot find anything; neither communal comfort nor spiritual awakening, and the specters they see are drug-induced hallucinations. *Easy Rider* alternates throughout between criticizing conservative mainstream values and endorsing rugged individualist Americana, another form of conservatism. However, in the scenes in New Orleans, the film extols alternative lifestyles. *Easy Rider* isolates the city on the American map, and Billy and Wyatt are foreigners in this foreign city. New Orleans in *Easy Rider* remains a place of its own, outside of the American dream that the film attacks and an invitation to those who are able to pour their inner “otherness” outward and allow it to manifest itself. Thus, while

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170 *Easy Rider.*
challenging Euro-American culture and value systems, *Easy Rider* simultaneously perpetuates a clichéd view of New Orleans’s “otherness.”

**Fear of the Mambo Priestess—Fear of the Self**

*Easy Rider* leaves the audience with an open ending and the question if salvation, or at least a solution, is possible. In contrast, *Angel Heart*, directed by Alan Parker, offers a very clear-cut solution to the dilemma of sin and salvation. Based on the 1978 novel *Fallen Angel* by William Hjortberg, *Angel Heart* tells of small-time New York private detective Harold Angel’s journey to his own identity. The plot loosely follows the pattern of revelation familiar from the Oedipus myth and the Sophocles tragedy based on it. *Angel Heart* is an allegory indebted to mythological and theatrical predecessors and so in its essence is theatrical. At its center is a pact with the Devil rooted in the myth of Faust, in particular the plays by Christopher Marlowe (1588/1593) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1806) that were inspired by it. Businessman Louis Cyphere (Robert De Niro) approaches Angel (Mickey Rourke) to search for a crooner named Johnny Liebling, also known as Johnny Favorite, who owes Cyphere a deed. Although not experienced with complicated cases like finding a lost man, Angel is intrigued by the generous financial offer and takes on Cyphere’s case. For the audience it is easy to see, but for Angel throughout most of the film impossible to grasp, that Louis Cyphere is Lucifer, and as his name promises, Lucifer here brings light to darkness and knowledge to ignorance.
Angel’s search for Liebling leads him from a first meeting in the backroom of a black Baptist church in Harlem down to New Orleans. Through a string of violent, blood-infused encounters, including an affair with a mambo, or Voodoo priestess, by the name of Epiphany (who turns out to be his own daughter), Angel discovers that he himself is Liebling, who a long time ago had made a pact with the Devil. Rather than being dead, as Angel had first suspected, Liebling instead took the soul of a young soldier by the name of Harold Angel in a gruesome satanic ritual years earlier. From then on, yet without remembering having performed the ritual, Liebling lived as Angel in Angel’s body and with Angel’s soul as a cloak for his own. Once Angel realizes that he is Liebling, he understands that he belongs to Louis Cyphere and descends in a dramatically lit elevator down to hell. Angel Heart consists of three points in time: the time the film was made, the time it takes place, and the time to which it refers. The fourth time line—the future—is implied. The movie takes place in 1955, yet the discovery that Angel has to make about his own sins pertains to events in the year 1943. Angel–Liebling’s harsh sentence, framed by strict biblical codes of good versus evil, is to spend eternity in hell, an abstract place, or metaphor for a place, for which the only reference is torment. Even though Angel Heart is set in specific time frames and paints a picture of historic New Orleans, the film is an allegory, similar to Faust, of human hubris and fallibility and the power of God. It engages with history only as a means to tell this tale.
Similar to *Pretty Baby*, *Angel Heart* is built around perception and voyeurism. Both films use New Orleans as a stage for discovery through the act of looking. In *Pretty Baby* the audience learns about their own ideas of sexuality by looking; in *Angel Heart* the main character learns about himself through looking. The performative quality assigned to New Orleans, the spectacle within every aspect of even mundane habits, lends itself to the act of looking and consequently to voyeurism. Through this voyeurism, the performative and the cinematic mesh. The audience sees events unfold through Angel’s eyes—it fits only too well that he is a private eye. Gradually, a second perspective is added that the viewers at first cannot localize or understand. It turns out to be the perspective of Liebling, who resurfaces in Angel’s conscience and through whom the audience is confronted with a frantic and boundless indulgence in violence, sex, and horror. Parallel to Liebling’s reemergence, Angel declines both physically and mentally. In New Orleans, three fishermen and their dog attack him (leaving him with a limp that denotes the Devil’s hoof), his one set of clothes is repeatedly drenched from rain and dirty lake water, and his overall attitude changes from overly confident to timid.

The disintegration of Angel’s appearance and mental state corresponds to the look of New Orleans. Filmed in muted colors, the city is visually past its prime, a decrepit, crumbling world. Water is leaking everywhere, mixing with the dirt that covers every surface. Even the apartment of Liebling’s former girlfriend, fortune teller Margaret Krusenack (played by Charlotte Rampling), who participated in the satanic ritual that
robbed the original Angel of his soul, is decorated with knickknacks, gold-framed mirrors, lace curtains, and tablecloths of a bygone era that do not elicit nostalgia but rather evoke a feeling of morbidity. In *Jezebel*, death and decay are deported from New Orleans to an island. The South in *Jezebel* may be at the brink of death, but there is hope that after the city is purged by fire of the disease that plagues it, healthy life may grow again. On the contrary, in *Angel Heart*, the port town has already fallen and what is left serves as a gateway to hell, at least for Harold Angel.

The inhabitants of this deadly place believe in Hoodoo (chicken and chicken feet show up wherever Angel turns), and so it is no surprise that Angel’s path to hell leads through a Hoodoo/Voodoo ritual. The film does not identify the religion but rather conflates elements of both with those of Satanism. A scene depicting a Voodoo celebration led by Epiphany (Lisa Bonet) and a subsequent sex scene between Angel and Epiphany illustrate this merging of belief systems. Just as in *The Widow Paris*, this Voodoo ceremony takes place in the woods. Yet in contrast to the shy and puzzled Marie Laveau seen in *The Widow Paris*, *Angel Heart* presents the young priestess as unrestrained and highly sexualized, and like in *Pretty Baby*’s most explicit sex scenes, the view of a voyeur directs the audience’s gaze. Angel watches from behind a bush, believing that he is hidden. Epiphany appears to be performing for him, and since the audience is seeing the ritual through Angel’s eyes, the performance is staged for them too. Epiphany, presumably possessed, dances in the center of a circle of black worshippers to the beat of drums. She
holds up a chicken and dances with it, possibly in reference to the animal sacrifices that are typically part of Voodoo rituals. The dancing grows more and more ecstatic, with Epiphany bouncing up and down on a female worshipper while slitting the chicken’s throat and then bathing in its blood. The contrast between Epiphany’s innocent and very young appearance and her orgiastic dancing alludes to pedophilia, yet again not unlike in *Pretty Baby*. This adds to the sensationalization of her performance and its effect on Angel.

Aesthetically, this scene is far removed from an actual Voodoo ritual, as can be appreciated when turning to Maya Deren’s own experience of being possessed. In *Divine Horsemen* she describes observing herself: “I must keep moving!—and pick up the dancing rhythm of the drums as something to grasp at, something to keep my feet from resting upon the dangerous earth.”¹⁷¹ Like a spectator to herself, she maintains some awareness—an awareness of her own nonexistence, of being performed.

In contrast, Epiphany’s possession encapsulates the foundational white view of black rituals as juxtaposed to their own, which by extension applies to the concept of New Orleans as feminized, Africanized, and therefore “other.” Michelle Y. Gordon has described this perspective and its complex social ramifications:

> Individually and collectively, public Voodoo narratives evinced for white publics the primitive, oppositional blackness on which constructions of their own racial identities relied; these narratives demonstrated the persistent threat of black and female rebellion, and thus they substantiated the need to regulate communities of color, women, and the color line. Since slavery, Voodoo accounts had helped “authenticate” fundamental rationalizations of white supremacy. The

fetish and demon worship, animal sacrifice, cannibalism, nudity, drumming, sexual promiscuity, and interracial “orgies” recurrently reported in public narratives of Voodoo “verified” the wildness of the postwar city, the inexorable barbarity of its inhabitants of African descent, and the perils of Louisiana’s particularly radical Reconstruction.

Angel Heart replicates this pattern of white men looking at black cultural practices and interpreting and framing what they see to construct (or reassure) their own white identity out of a sense of astonishment. Unaware that he himself is Liebling and that Epiphany is his daughter, Angel’s response to her performance is both frightened and tantalized—one very similar to those reported by white observers, such as Benjamin Latrobe, of performances in Congo Square in the nineteenth century.

The shocking violence of the ritual then sparks the unleashing of Angel’s suppressed consciousness, leading to a blood-drenched sex scene between Angel and Epiphany in Angel’s hotel room. During it, rain leaks in through the roof. As the sex gets more violent, the rainwater turns into blood, flooding the room. After the sex is over, the omniscient view reveals that there is no blood and that very little water actually leaked in through the roof. This scene illustrates that Angel Heart distinguishes between subconscious or dreamlike states and Angel’s actual experiences. The film does not offer such an “awakening” to reality or corrective at the end of the Voodoo ceremony in the woods, leaving the audience with the impression that Voodoo ceremonies, in fact, are

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violent expressions of black female sexuality. However, in the scene in Angel’s hotel room, viewpoints shift between Angel and Liebling, only to return after a literal blood bath to an omniscient observer’s point of view. In contrast, the audience sees the Voodoo ritual only from Angel’s point of view, and so it remains speculative if the film suggests that Angel’s biased perspective distorts the ceremony in this sensationalized manner.

The voyeurism and the secrecy of the ritual give the impression that here the true/actual/authentic New Orleans is revealed. This New Orleans is ancient, rooted in mysterious religious ideals and practices; it is performed, a spectacle for others, and thus theatrical. This New Orleans is Africanized, yet Africa here is stereotypically created by a white filmmaker to appeal to the desires of a white man who is unsure of his own identity but who senses and later learns that his identity is eternally tied to the Africanized ritual that is revealed to him. Even though Angel Heart perpetuates a stereotypically racialized and sexualized version of Voodoo, it is one of the only films set in New Orleans in which a white man has to pay his due.\footnote{A notable exception is Band of Angels (1957), starring Clark Gable as a remorseful slave trader and hunter.}

The duality of sin and salvation that the tour guide had promised for New Orleans, which casts the city in a benevolent and forgiving light, in Angel Heart is replaced with the Old Testament rule of sin and damnation. Angel Heart constructs New Orleans as a city governed by supernatural forces and Angel’s journey as an allegory of the struggle between good and evil.
Haunted and Horrible—Young White Men on the Prowl

Few movies have stimulated the tourism industry anywhere as much as *Interview with the Vampire* has in New Orleans, where it has inspired the production of fan items and even walking tours since its commercial release in 1994. As equally indulgent in horror, sex, and violence as *Angel Heart*, *Interview with the Vampire* was adapted by New Orleans native Anne Rice from her own novel (published in 1976) and directed by Irish filmmaker Neil Jordan. The film is rooted in European gothic tales that sprang to prominence in the nineteenth century, particularly Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and refers to ancestral vampires of film and literature, such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. *Interview...*, with its emphasis on aesthetics and its stylistic and narrative exaggerations, offers a theatricalized version of these forerunners that, at least in parts of the movie, approaches camp. As Nina Auerbach outlines in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*,¹⁷⁵ vampires are responses to the times and places from where they originate, and so both film and novel are topically, aesthetically, and historically situated in the American South. With its dramatic night journeys; decaying mansions; lush, overly ripe plants; supernatural forces; mystery; and danger, yet mostly because of its location, *Interview* can be ascribed to the genre of Southern Gothic. New Orleans and the plantation, where the first half of the film takes place, are only seen at night illuminated by candles and fire, a sensual decaying outpost of fading European grandeur that looks threatening and suggests terror and death.

Interview departs from the classic vampire tales, which tend to focus on human experience with the vampire, by moving vampires and their inner lives into the center. Interview is divided into a framing story and a main plot, which are separated by 200 years. The main protagonist, vampire Louis (played by a Dorian Gray–like Brad Pitt) tells a young reporter (Christian Slater) in San Francisco in 1990 of his experiences as a vampire, beginning in colonial New Orleans of 1791. This framing story set in the present time brings the horror closer to the audience, makes the fantastic tale more believable, and thereby breaks down the gap between now and then. The past is in the present; the horror is with us. As Louis de Pointe du Lac tells it, in 1791, the beginning of the main plot, he was a plantation and slave owner who had fallen into deep melancholia after the death of his wife and daughter. He longed to die and placed himself in all kinds of dangerous situations, for example visiting brothels populated with criminals. On one of those excursions, vampire Lestat (Tom Cruise) catches up with Louis and seduces him with a first bite in the neck. This constitutes Louis’s initiation. It is a ritual that has been covered in the countless vampire stories and films that came before Interview, a highly eroticized and at the same time gruesome moment of violation. The bite throws both Louis and Lestat into such ecstasy that they are (literally) catapulted into the air—few orgasms have been depicted on-screen as dramatically and comically. This ironic, and at times melodramatic, exaggeration and the sexual fluidity serves the camp character of the film. As Susan Sontag notes:
“Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn’t: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.”

The excess continues when Lestat and Louis find themselves a companion, a young girl named Claudia (Kirsten Dunst), whom Lestat turns into a vampire with Louis’s tacit agreement. Having formed a bloodthirsty family, the two undead men do not enjoy each other but only the relentless murdering of New Orleans’s population, which magically does not appear decimated. After Louis has overcome his initial shame, he, Lestat, and Claudia exist rather openly without any ramifications in that city. Even though some of the murders are staged with comedic timing and victims drop dead in an almost slapstick manner, the gore, ruthlessness, and violence in Interview represents a specific challenge to concepts of self and identity that are shaped by the bodily experience. According to Julia Kristeva, the abject and the disgusting confront the self with its own boundaries and thereby with its self, yet the vampires in Interview do not feel disgust. As they do not experience the boundaries of others, they can easily take over the body of the other as their own. In poignant mockery of upper-class manners, Lestat bites a rat to death and pours its blood with studied grace into a wine glass. Moments like these underscore Auerbach’s argument that “spectacle is the only credible substance” Louis and Lestat have. As their existence revolves around fulfillment of uncontrollable bodily desires, the two carnivalesque

178 Auerbach, Our Vampires, Ourselves, 155.
vampires personify the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque. Their exaggerated gestures and mannerisms call attention to themselves as theatrical devices, as they turn New Orleans into their very own Grand Guignol.

The theatrical nature of the film is evident at its beginning when, out of despair over the many murders on the plantation, Louis’s enslaved black servants perform a ceremony, presumably a Voodoo ritual. The ceremony contains all the typical components of fire, drums, dancing, and a chicken. The scene begins with a close-up of the piercing of a Hoodoo doll with needles. This is followed by wider shots of people dancing to the rhythm of drums around a large fire in front of the main house. Closer shots reveal one woman dancing ecstatically with a chicken. While the ritual takes place, Lestat and Louis are sitting at the dinner table laden with foods that they will never eat, arguing about Louis’s unwillingness to accept the terms of his vampire existence. Lestat leaves and gallops right through the servants’ fire. Yvette, a house servant, enters and implores Louis to send Lestat away. Instead of a reply, he holds her hands tenderly for a brief moment. Then he kills Yvette by sucking her blood out of her arm. This is his second initiation, and Louis is so distraught by his own actions that he sets the house on fire, carries the dead Yvette to the door where the other slaves await him, and yells at them that they are free. “Hear me now. This place is cursed. Damned. Your master is the Devil. I hereby declare you free.” Lestat enters and saves Louis from the fire. A final long shot from a distance shows the slaves jumping childishly up and down as the house succumbs to the flames.
The ceremony in Interview elicits hardly any attention, and, unlike in Angel Heart, it is completely powerless in the face of the relentless vampires. The lack of impact of this ritual may underscore the social hierarchy and constructs an image of New Orleans as shaped by white male domination at the total expense of black agency. However, more so, it suggests Simon Bacon’s and Katarzyna Bronk’s observation that

> Whether personal or collective, these transgressive or violent memories from the past, though remaining fixed and often unchanging in their individual character, act as intrusive and insistent fragments of remembrance that lacerate the present. This form of undead memory refuses to remain buried but can be seen to metaphorically feed off of the present, draining it of its forward impetus and normative continuity. Thus the vampire’s construction as a signifier and metaphor of a past that will not die, or of excessive behavior and/or traumatic events, makes it central to the ways our memories construct who we are, what groups we belong to and what we are likely to be in the future.^[179]

Channeled by two white male vampires (played by two white male stars) the re-creation of historic New Orleans as a theatricalized space in Interview functions as a reflection of the city’s and the region’s violent, exploitative past that reaches into the present.

When Louis leaves New Orleans, he expands this performance of violence to “all the world’s a stage.” In a logical consequence, Louis flees New Orleans to Paris, its historic mother town, to connect with the vampires who are believed to be the originals. These vampires perform actual bloodthirsty acts at a Grand Guignol theatre. The inclusion of the Grand Guignol suggests that the theatrical genre served as inspiration and source for horror

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movies. As André Loiselle notes: “The films that acknowledge the theatre of gore do so to reflect on the nature of horror on screen.”\(^\text{180}\) The Parisian stage functions as a tool and a locale to create a metadrama, defined by Tracy Davis as “a play, which comments on conventions of its genre.”\(^\text{181}\) Metadrama in turn provides a stage for elements of theatricality. The film then works as a “metacinedrama,” further and further distancing the audience—estranging and calling attention to itself. With the final montage of *Sunrise*, *Nosferatu*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Superman*, Louis, by narrating his own fate, actually narrates a version of the construction of American history, tropes, and even the American dream.\(^\text{182}\) Whereas *Nosferatu* holds its place in cinema history as a model for vampire films, *Sunrise* is one of the first films to use synchronized sound, and *Gone with the Wind* is one of the first technicolor films, thus signifying technological advancement and American progressiveness despite *Sunrise*’s plot of murder and despair and *Gone with the Wind*’s revisionist, nostalgic view of the South. *Superman* appears to offer the ultimate American hero, yet Clark Kent is stranded on earth after his own planet is destroyed and so his role as an alien-savior ironizes the idea of American exceptionalism. While in *Interview* the cities of Paris and New Orleans are obviously historically connected and represent the move from one continent to the other, San Francisco, where the movie begins, represents

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\(^{181}\) Davis and Postlewait, Introduction to *Theatricality*, 14.

\(^{182}\) F.W. Murnau, *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Sunrise* (1927); Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (1939); Richard Donner, *Superman* (1978).
the outpost of the final frontier. In this version, while *Interview* exploits the theatrical and carnivalesque image of New Orleans, ultimately it depicts the city as only one stop in the expansion of the United States, and the theatricalized horror that ravages it symbolizes this expansion.

**Marie Laveau Revisited**

The films that I have examined in this chapter all pre-date Hurricane Katrina. They construct distinct versions of New Orleans as a place of “otherness,” where white protagonists (and the audience vicariously through them) explore identities, desires, and quests for spirituality. As a result, in the public imagination the city is moved to a reality of its own, parallel to and different from anyplace else. This image of New Orleans as a destination for dreams and thrills blurs the line between reality and fantasy and is possibly a root cause for the phenomenal neglect shown it in times of disaster, such as during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. After all, what is not real cannot be saved, and what is so very different may not elicit empathy.

Since 2005 when Hurricane Katrina wiped out large parts of the city, social justice groups have been making extensive efforts to preserve traditional New Orleans cultures, while at the same time the cultural-heritage tourism industry booms. This phase of urban reinvention saw the production of “Coven” (2013), season 3 of the popular TV show *American Horror Story* created by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy. The season takes place
in contemporary New Orleans but uses a flexible approach to time typical of fantasy films and TV shows. It frequently includes flashbacks to different historic periods, and historic figures such as Madame Lalaurie, whose mansion was a center point of the haunted house tour, are resurrected and forced to adjust to modern life.

Similar to *Belle of the Nineties*, the show exploits the diva status of its main actors, Jessica Lange, Kathy Bates, and Angela Bassett—who act their parts with well-devised exaggeration—to create its theatricalized camp tone. The main action revolves around a competition for the role of supreme witch (who, with one exception, are all white, while one of them has Down syndrome) of one coven. At the beginning of the season, Miss Fiona Goode, played by Lange, is the Supreme; at the end, after vicious struggles and supernatural occurrences, her daughter has advanced to the position. This inner-coven rivalry is intertwined with a war between the white witches and a group of black Voodooists led by Priestess Marie Laveau, played by Bassett. *American Horror Story* uses this battle between a white and a black diva to ironically frame a story about white female supremacy. Marie Laveau is characterized as a vengeful, angry woman who uses her astonishing powers to cause great harm to her enemies. Even though Laveau avenges the victims of Madame Lalaurie (a worthy cause it seems), Papa Legba ends Laveau’s reign by trapping her eternally in Madame Lalaurie’s torture chamber, where she has to torment Lalaurie and her daughters against her will, while the white witches led by a blonde Supreme look to a bright and promising future. This ending is compounded by relentless
scenes of Madame Lalaurie torturing black male servants. The many close-ups of their frightened faces, their bound and twisting bodies, and the deep wounds Lalaurie joyfully inflicts on them make up a Grand Guignol that fetishizes torture, specifically white women torturing and thereby disempowering black men.

While Lalaurie’s cruelty is based on real occurrences, the gore and overall content displayed in Marie Laveau’s ceremonies suggest that the show purposefully departs from realism. In the first ritual that Laveau is shown performing, she slices a snake in half to telepathically call zombies from their graves. Snakes in Voodoo rituals symbolize Damballah, one of the highest deities, who in Haiti represents wisdom, gentleness, and creativity and in New Orleans, luck and love. In the next ritual, she directs zombies yet again—this time, while suspended in the air. In contrast to The Widow Paris, here the conflation of Voodoo and zombies adds to Laveau’s exaggerated portrayal as a very powerful woman. However, as in The Widow Paris she is dependent on one male figure, in this case Papa Legba, to whom she has sold her soul. Rather than derived from Voodoo, this plot twist is familiar from the Faust legend and its dramatized interpretations by Goethe and Marlowe that is also present in Angel Heart. In Haitian Vodoun and New Orleans Voodoo, Legba (also known by the name of Elegba in African contexts and as Limba or La Bas in New Orleans) is the guardian of the crossroads and the gatekeeper to the spiritual world. Imposing the European legend on Papa Legba transforms this positive African spirit
into a frightening figure not unlike Lucifer in *Angel Heart*. Further, Papa Legba’s rather
demonic power over Laveau diminishes her as a woman and as a priestess.

In an interview with the online magazine *Collider*, Angela Bassett describes her
view of Marie Laveau: “She went to the jails and took care of people who were there on
death row. She cared for the sick. She was a beautician. She was an entrepreneur. She
touched everyone. She cared. Her magic, as they say, was gris-gris. It wasn’t black magic.
It was grey. It was just what was necessary.”

This hodgepodge of clichés aptly conveys the direction *American Horror Story* takes: The show does not exploit history nor does it make any attempt to relate to actual aspects of Voodoo. Rather, it abandons facts altogether and instead references factoids drawn from infotainment sources, such as haunted house
tours or the Historic Voodoo Museum. *American Horror Story* does not even distort
Voodoo rituals for its own ends; it perverts misconstrued copies of public representations of Voodoo in order to achieve a camp version of history, the locale, and its characters. All
Laveaus and their rituals portrayed in film are ghosted by the ones created before them, in
the process outlined by Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*, but this one dismisses the
existence of the source in favor of creating a highly theatricalized spectacle.

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184 The small rooms and hallway of the museum are cluttered with display cases full of skulls, sand, and dirt; altars are placed next to open prayer books; and the walls are covered with paintings of Voodoo personas, foremost, of course, being Marie Laveau. Popular songs glorifying the priestess, like Doctor John’s “Marie Laveau,” play through the speakers.
185 Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*. 
New Orleans in *American Horror Story* serves as a stage for this spectacle. This stage is built from images of the city as ghostly, haunted, and mysterious that the films and other media artifacts that I examine in this text have also created. New Orleans in this version is not only governed by two witch houses—one white, one black—but seems to only consist of these two realms. Camp “incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over morality,’ of irony over tragedy,” Sontag notes. Yet, this weighing can serve as a tool. In *American Horror Story* the exaggerated color coding is ironic in itself, reminding the viewers that it is a construction and that consequently all images of New Orleans are also constructions only. As a result, the show undermines the validity of any portrait of the city, and along with that the social constructs, among them racialized divisions, they challenge or perpetuate.

In my final chapter, I engage once more with such social constructs, specifically with the impact commemorative performances and their mediatization have (and historically had) on this racialized division.

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4. PERFORMING REMEMBRANCE

Located an hour drive from New Orleans on River Road in Wallace, Louisiana, a jail with three holding cells sits on an elevated stone platform in the middle of an open space. It is made of metal walls on the sides, iron bars front and back, and a metal roof. Even on a mild spring day, the inside temperature can compete with that of an oven; in winter the damp Louisiana cold keeps it freezing and wet. Like a set piece borrowed from a Grand Guignol production, its performative quality radiates across the plantation, of which it is the sad center. That the jail and not the Big House, as one might expect, is the heart of the plantation is by design. In fact, the plantation is laid out in such a way that from the gallery at the back of the Big House, one can see the jail. Its side walls face the Big House, so any drama visible to the inhabitants of the Big House is reduced to prisoners entering and leaving. However, the side with the iron bars faces the slave quarters, forcing the view of those suffering in the cells on others enslaved and reminding them of what awaited them if they should choose to resist.

As the layout of the Whitney Plantation demonstrates, slavery was a highly performative system. The lives and deaths of enslaved blacks were not publically mourned, but their oppression and suffering were celebrated and performed in public. On plantations and in the urban settings of New Orleans proper, the bodies of black workers were employed as actors, puppets, or even only props to perform roles of submission and to complete scenes of white domination that were in their brutality reminiscent of Grand
Guignol productions. The spectacle of Mardi Gras and related festivities have overtly determined the public image of New Orleans as a theatricalized space. Yet through repetition, these performances of pain and oppression normalized casting one group as masters and the other as servants, and as a result they were instrumental in cementing the city’s racialized division, which until today shines through even in the most joyful portrayals of New Orleans.

New Orleans takes great pride in its awareness, study, and celebration of its own past. Not only does the city boast a large number of archives and museums dedicated to its history, it is also filled with historical markers that memorialize the city’s and its state’s rich past. Many statues and plaques celebrate the memory of a white-dominated society, including, for example, confederate General Robert E. Lee, while public markers that commemorate those who were enslaved or oppressed are still rare, as Erin Greenwald criticized on a recent WWNO radio program. New Orleans’s public image has thus not only been shaped by the city’s official efforts at commemorating select forbearers but also by leaving select groups out of the celebrations. Those who performed the roles of victims are ignored; those who performed the roles of oppressors are memorialized. However, since the era of Reconstruction, groups who had not felt represented in official commemorative celebrations responded, among other performances, with public mourning celebrations, particularly jazz funerals. Perhaps in an ironic turn, jazz funerals grew to be one of the

performance practices for which the city is most famous. Honing in on the important role public remembrance plays in constructing social structures and in shaping the image of New Orleans, I conclude my investigation with a chapter on how mediatized depictions of commemorative performances are both used and actively contribute to affirming, perpetuating, or undermining this dynamic of oppression and resistance. I examine how various forms of media, such as small-scale documentaries like Joe Budde’s “Picou Funeral” and the HBO show Treme, have integrated and/or documented jazz funerals to engage with the meaning(s) the tradition holds for its participants as well as with its metaphorical quality. Efforts such as these create images of the city in which the performative resonates as poetic and resilient. In contrast, Hollywood films that feature jazz funerals, such as the 1974 James Bond movie Live and Let Die, have either sensationalized the practice or used it as a means to drive the stories of the (typically white) characters, as in the action-melodrama Double Jeopardy from 1999. For those films, the inclusion of jazz funerals serves to construct images of New Orleans as “other.” “Otherness” here is presented as theatrical, and theatrical is associated with Africanized and/or devious.

Since films and TV shows (or any mediatized or artistic output) are reflective of the times of their productions, I contextualize media portrayals of jazz funerals with historic events that shaped New Orleans’s society and its related public image. Central here are, unsurprisingly, Hurricane Katrina and the levee breaks. 2015 saw the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and the city hosted a series of events to celebrate the occasion.
Residents met this with mixed responses. Some, in particular black New Orleanians, posted the slogan “nothing to celebrate” on their social media accounts in order to remind the larger world of the disproportionate deaths of African-Americans and their continued disadvantages in the recovery process. NewsOne provides hard figures on the issue: 1400 deaths during the flood in New Orleans proper; 705 persons still missing; 100,000 fewer black residents living in New Orleans than before the flood (from 67 percent of the population down to 60 percent); and a pre-Katrina population of 484,674 down to 384,320, but with only 354 fewer whites.\footnote{Christina Coleman, “Where Is New Orleans Ten Years Later? An Infographic of Hurricane Katrina by the Numbers,” NewsOne, August 29, 2015, http://newsone.com/3172033/where-is-new-orleans-10-years-later-hurricane-katrina-infographic/.} Significantly, while black residents received quantifiably less support during and after the storm, it is precisely their suffering and dying that preoccupied the nation as a grand media spectacle. Black people were alternately cast as victims of a national disaster or as criminals taking advantage of it, and images of New Orleans constructed in the wake of the storm differ greatly from those I identified in the previous chapters. Metaphors of the city as a stage or as a seductress were replaced with visions of graveyards.

For example, Spike Lee’s fact-filled 2006 documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* paints a picture of destruction, violence, and chaos. He integrates jazz funerals as cultural expressions that helped cope with the disaster and as an allegory for the African-American experience in the US. While widely watched documentaries like *When the Levees Broke* or fictional renderings, such as the TV show *Treme*, have drawn
attention to New Orleans, the plight of its residents, and the need for improvement, they have not been able to prevent the commercialization of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, Katrina, like Voodoo and vampires, has been firmly implemented in the mythologizing and commodification that makes New Orleans attractive to many visitors. Tours of the Lower Ninth Ward capitalize on loss as a product that is revived, performed, and consumed again and again. Thereby they create images of New Orleans as outside the natural flow of time (which would allow for real growth and renewal) and thus as “other,” not unlike tableaux vivants, whose peculiar charm is derived from living people imitating something dead. One of the web pages advertising Viator tours illustrates this:

“Board your comfortable coach in the French Quarter, and soak up the vibrance of New Orleans’s best-known area as your guide shares facts and anecdotes about New Orleans’s history and culture. Travel to the Ninth Ward, one of the neighborhoods hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina. Here you will see the house of music legend Fats Domino and learn about his harrowing experiences during the hurricane, when levees broke and caused massive flooding.”

Gray Line New Orleans employs a similar method to lure visitors on a tour of “America’s worst catastrophe.” To footage of the destroyed Lower Ninth Ward, the chipper voice of a narrator advises that, except for at refreshment stops, guests are not allowed to leave the bus. It remains unclear if this is to protect the residents or the tour guests, but it suggests

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that African-Americans—the main residents of the Lower Ninth Ward—are there to be looked at. Whether rebuilding their homes or conducting everyday activities, they are seen as performing for others. Hence, tours like these continue a performative pattern and an image of the city that was established during the age of slavery. In an unprecedented effort, those who suffered through these performances have now been memorialized at the Whitney Plantation Museum, the first plantation museum designed to make the experience of the enslaved population tangible. It is the first stop on this final portion of my expedition.

**Slavery: A Place to Remember**

In his essay “Between Memory and History,” Pierre Nora argues that:

> Although it is true that the fundamental purpose of a *lieux de mémoire* is to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial (just as gold, as they say, is the memory of money)—all in order to capture the maximum possible meaning with fewest possible signs—it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* thrive only because of their capacity for change, their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections.\(^{191}\)

The Whitney Plantation Museum constitutes a *lieu de mémoire* that illustrates a determination to effect such change and engender new meanings. Originally called the Haydel (or Heidel) Plantation, the Whitney Plantation was founded in 1752 by German

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immigrant Ambroise Heidel (1702–70) as an indigo farm. In the early nineteenth century his son Jean Jacques Haydel Sr. transformed the farm into a lucrative sugar plantation, enslaving up to sixty-five people of African descent during this period.\footnote{The Whitney Plantation Museum does not list the numbers of enslaved at later dates.} The name change to Whitney Plantation occurred after the Civil War when the plantation was sold to Bradish Johnson of New York, who renamed the property after his grandson, Harry Whitney. Over the next one hundred years, the plantation went through a series of ownership changes. In 1990, it was sold to the Formosa Chemicals and Fiber Corporation, which had the intention of building the world’s largest rayon plant on the site. To appease local activists, the Formosa Company agreed to build a museum of Louisiana Creole culture on part of the plantation. Before the museum was built, the rayon business slumped, and the company sold the plantation to the Cummings family. The current owner, John Cummings, a white American, used his personal funds to transform the site, together with Senegalese scholar Ibrahim Seck, into the first plantation museum focused on the experience of those who were enslaved.\footnote{Modern-day Senegal is the region from which the majority of Louisiana slaves originated.} To date, in the US it is the only museum devoted to the memory of the lives, struggles, rebellions, and deaths of the enslaved population. By memorializing those who lived at the bottom of the social strata, yet on whose labor the plantation economy
depended, the museum demonstrates, as Henri Lefebvre states, that space “is not only supported by social relations, but it is also producing and produced by social relations.” ¹⁹⁴

The entire plantation has been transformed into a museum. Historic buildings such as the Big House, the kitchen, the jail, and an ironsmith workshop have been preserved, and slave cabins and the church, which had been erased over time, have been replaced with structures similar to the originals. Between the buildings that made up life and work on the plantation there are now statues and large granite slabs (inspired by the Vietnam War memorial in Washington) engraved with names of slaves. Among these memorial walls a place called Field of Angels is devoted to the lives and deaths of enslaved children. It is encased by a wall inscribed with the names of 2,200 children and quotes from the oral history collection of the Federal Writers Project that describe their lives on the plantation. Encapsulating one focal point of the museum, the suffering of children, in the field’s center a bronze statue of an African female angel holds a dead baby in her arms.

Visitors can only encounter these sites through a guided tour. Like in the haunted house tour that I discuss in Chapter 3, as the tour guide leads visitors across the vast plantation, he theatricalizes occurrences that took place on the site through his lively presentation. However, in contrast to the haunted house tour, which is tailored according to a narrow interpretation of New Orleans—namely that the city is haunted by lost souls—the Whitney Plantation tour theatricalizes carefully researched information in order to make

experiences palpable that were veiled by the passage of time. Here, too, through their interaction with the guide, participants engage as active players. More so, visitor-performers can momentarily step out of their personal comfort zone and actually try to put themselves into the unimaginable role of slave, for example, by sitting in a slave cabin or entering the jail. Nora argues that it is the alienation from history that elicits the desire for “re-creations of the past.” As a site of re-creation of past lives and of remembrance of those who were deliberately dismissed or carelessly forgotten, the museum serves as a reminder that our individual and our group identities depend on whom we collectively and publicly remember and forget.

The first stop on this tour is the church, a white wooden structure furnished inside with brown wood. After a short introduction, the tour guide shows a ten-minute documentary that describes the plantation museum’s history and goals and provides a brief overview of the system of slavery that made New Orleans’s economic success and the flourishing of its ruling class of planters possible. As a testimony to the museum’s efforts at telling the stories of the enslaved, the film includes quotes from former slaves, also taken from the Federal Writers Project, that offer glimpses of the conditions under which they lived. One woman, for example, recounts how the children ate from a hollow tree trunk like pigs at a trough. The film accompanies these narratives with rare photos of slaves. One image depicts parents with four small children in rags sitting on the steps of their cabin.

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195 Nora, Realms of Memory, 3.
196 Untitled Film. Ibrahim Seck sent me the film. It is not available outside of the museum tour.
The father looks at the three children sitting between him and their mother. Turned in profile away from the camera, the expression on his face is difficult to read. It appears to this viewer as either concerned for the children or embarrassed at being photographed. The smallest of the three looks afraid, while the other two stare defiantly at the camera. Their mother holds the youngest one, a baby, in her arm. She is breastfeeding him and a part of her breast is showing. Looking blankly at the camera, she seems oblivious to it. Other photos show children of different ages in groups without adults. A particularly disturbing one depicts three teenagers, male and female, barely dressed and with shaved heads, wearing heavy iron collars around their necks. Pictures like these and the oral accounts by former slaves contradict plantation nostalgia created in films such as *Jezebel*, which I discuss in Chapter 2, and on tours through plantations neighboring the Whitney Plantation Museum, such as the Oak Alley Plantation, which emphasize the planters’ genteel lifestyle. In themselves the photos included in the film are utterly absorbing, yet the experience of being absorbed is purposefully troubled by the manner in which the screening is arranged.

Lifelike statues, modeled on children between the ages of four and ten who had been born on the plantation and lived there until the end of the Civil War, are placed throughout the aisles and in the front near the altar. Some are turned towards the screen and seem to be watching the film together with the visitors; some are turned toward the visitors as if studying their reactions to the film. To the side, the tour guide watches the interaction between visitor-performers and statues. This interplay of gazes between visitors, statues,
tour guide, and photographed people on the screen expands the film-viewing experience to a complex performance of lived and mediatized. Here, film, audience-actors, tour guide, and child statues together form a multimedia experience, thereby bringing the plantation’s past to life and into the present. Mediatized and live performances here are, in the words of Philip Auslander, “parallel forms,” interacting with each other to recall those whose voices had been lost.\textsuperscript{197} Since both the tour and the documentary primarily re-create life on Louisiana plantations rather than in New Orleans, they do not construct a specific image solely of the city. Instead, they create the haunting image of Louisiana as a brutally run prison colony with New Orleans’s slave market as its operational center. Both demonstrate that splendor and spectacle—so often defining aspects of depictions of New Orleans—were intrinsically linked to performances of pain and oppression between masters and servants. As the plantation museum, the film, and its setting bring to life performances of oppression and those who acted the necessary parts, they point to the roots of New Orleans’s commemorative performances, jazz funerals—the need and desire to publicly commemorate the lives and deaths of people of African descent.

\textbf{Funerals with Music}

“New Orleans is like a living history book. And a jazz funeral is a very important chapter.

\textsuperscript{197} Philip Auslander, \textit{Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture} (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.
So we will just keep turning each page from the beginning to the end,”\textsuperscript{198} declares Milton Batiste, lead trumpet player of DeJan’s Olympia Brass Band, at the end of the documentary \textit{Jazz Funerals from the Inside} (1995). With this statement Batiste, who—not unlike a tour guide—leads the audience through the film, evinces the intrinsic relationship between the understanding of New Orleans as a place embedded in and expressive of its past and its preeminent burial practices. Using footage from various funeral processions and expert interviews with, for example, jazz archivist Bruce Raeburn, the film highlights that the process of moving from mourning the dead—thus death per se—to celebrating the life of the deceased and, therefore, life itself is essential to a jazz funeral. To achieve this, the mourning ritual follows a prescribed order: Led by a grand marshal and accompanied by a marching band playing a sorrowful dirge, such as “St. James’ Infirmary,” pallbearers carry the coffin with the deceased through the neighborhoods where he lived and worked. The procession of family members and friends is followed by people from the neighborhood who want to pay their respects. This group tends to grow along the way to the cemetery and, because of its placement behind the mourners, is called the second line. After the body has been buried—cut loose—the band plays an upbeat tune, and the mourners and the second liners walk and dance in a joyful manner, celebrating the deceased’s life.

William A. Schafer emphasizes the performative approach of this practice of coping with death: “New Orleans funerals were leisurely public acts, theatrical displays designed not to hide burial as a fearful obscenity, but to exhibit it as a community act, the social

obligation of friends and family.”

Death is acknowledged and accepted as part of the human journey. Matt Sakakeeny also stresses the significance music and musicians hold in this major civic ritual, arguing that it is musicians who “mediate the relationship between the living and the dead.” He notes that “in the context of the jazz funeral, musicians speak through their instruments, creating a sound that New Orleanians and others interpret as a message to the dead. They conceive of the instrument as a voice, equivalent to yet distinct from the speaking voice. As a wordless voice, the instrument is perhaps less capable of expressing literal meaning, but it gains capacity to speak more ambiguously and inclusively.”

Sakakeeny points out that “on average, there is about one per day, led by one of the twenty or so organized brass bands in the city, hired by the family of the deceased. But when a fellow brass band musician dies, any and all musicians are welcome and even expected to be present, instrument in hand, the only form of reciprocity being the assurance that one day musicians will honor them in turn.”

Music in New Orleans is a field open to African-American men and dominated by them, with women typically relegated to the role of singers. Any family may order a jazz funeral, so women have received them as well. Yet, because so few women have elevated roles in jazz, few women have been celebrated with a jazz funeral that was not purchased by their families.

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201 Ibid, 57.
The tie to music, and in particular to brass bands, is significant for the development of jazz funerals. Henry A. Kmen proposes that jazz funerals were popularized by military marching bands in the nineteenth century. However, members of marching bands were frequently black or Creole and often came directly from plantations, as William A. Schafer explains in *Brass Bands of New Orleans*. Most of the musicians playing in plantation bands were self-taught and predominantly drew their repertoire from church songs. As so often in the history of jazz, actions taken by individuals had a great impact on the growth of the genre, as the specific case of Henry Clay Warmoth illustrates. As Schafer describes it:

Warmoth, a white politician who worked with Pinchback, O.J. Dunn, and other black leaders, retired from politics to his sugar industry; and on the plantation he maintained a number of black brass bands, possibly as nostalgic mementoes of the glorious years of Reconstruction and the fight for black freedom. Warmoth hired James Humphrey to tutor his bandsmen, and many of the most famous New Orleans street musicians learned under Humphrey at Magnolia plantation. It was a seedbed for the generation of brass bandsmen who would mark the genesis of jazz.”

Some of the musicians who played in plantation brass bands before the war had been enslaved; yet this is not the only connection between the origin of jazz funerals and slavery. The performance style itself may have grown out of practices developed during the years of bondage. As previously mentioned, funeral processions are led by a grand marshal, whose walk, a slow and exaggerated version of a stroll, is a crucial performative component of the practice. The exact origin of this walk and the role of the grand marshal

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is speculative; however, Joseph Roach’s description of the particulars of slave auctions is illuminating.\footnote{Roach, Cities of the Dead, 214.} He draws from two sources, The Historical Sketch Book and Guide to New Orleans and the Louisiana WPA Oral History Project, to give details of the manner in which slave auctions in New Orleans were staged in the courtyard of the St. Louis Hotel. Those persons who were to be sold were led toward the auction in a procession by an enslaved man whose walk, moves, and gestures were intended to draw attention; essentially his performance served as an advertisement. It is conceivable that, over time, African-Americans transformed this role into the high art form of the grand marshal, who not only is important in funeral processions but also in the countless parades by African-American social-aid organizations that take place throughout the year.

In Rejoice When You Die Ellis Marsalis Jr. traces the origins of jazz funerals to Africa. He notes that after the Civil War a practice resurfaced that had laid “dormant” during the years of slavery. The newly won freedom may have encouraged people of African descent to live their traditions more outwardly, but according to Marsalis, practical developments were the ultimate cause for the emergence of this now popular custom:

Following the war, social-aid clubs and benevolent societies were established to assist the former slaves with medical bills, life insurance, and other forms of social support that would otherwise have been difficult or impossible for them to obtain. Twenty-five cents a week would ensure a member a proper burial. Many of the clubs supported brass bands, which played for parties and weddings as for funerals. The brass bands flourished from the 1880s through the 1920s. In the 1930s the Great Depression severely hampered their activity, but neither their music nor the playing of it for funerals
The Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club illustrates this. Formed in 1909, Zulu is famous for its spectacular Mardi Gras parades, with participants (including white ones) wearing blackface and throwing coconuts (see chapter 2). Yet one of the club’s lesser-known functions has been to provide jazz funerals for its members paid by membership fees. The club’s public relations representative at the time, Douglas Menacon, stated in an interview with me in March 2011 that the approximately eight hundred members (African-American men only) are carefully selected in order to grow and maintain a black social elite. Dignified burial practices are regarded as important for this upper class.

Richard Brent Turner argues that jazz funerals grew out of Yoruba burial practices: “New Orleans’s African-American jazz funerals are the culmination of second-line culture. These funeral processions have roots in at least four rich sources: the West African Yoruba concept of rituals as transformative journeys; the music and burial traditions of New Orleans black brass bands, social aid and pleasure clubs, and the Black Church; Catholic street processions and religious celebrations; and Haitian Vodou’s ancestral spirits.” Furthermore, Turner establishes the link to West African music traditions that were practiced at Congo Square, as well as to Catholicism through the specific church of St. Augustine in the Tremé. St. Augustine Church was built in 1850 and “home to the second

206 Douglas Menacon, interview with author, March 10, 2011.
207 Richard Brent Turner, Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 90.
oldest religious order of African-American Catholic women in the nation, the Sisters of the Holy Family." Its political and communal significance for people of color is evident in the membership of Homer Plessy, who in 1996, one hundred years after his landmark Supreme Court case, received a jazz funeral that began in his home district of the Tremé and ended in Congo Square. Turner concludes: “A significant Black Christian tradition is seen, therefore, in the interaction between fragments of sacred space, African-derived music, and burial traditions, and also between the performances of jazz funerals and Congo Square music and religion.” Born out of African belief systems, practical needs, and music culture, jazz funerals encapsulate relationships between movement and place and between history and remembrance.

A short 16mm black-and-white film by Joe Budde (1924–2004) from February 1961, titled “Picou Funeral,” illustrates these aspects. “Picou Funeral,” archived at The Historic New Orleans Collection, documents the main parts of the funeral of clarinetist Alphonse Picou. It functions both as an ethnographic documentary and a poetic comment on the human condition. Picou played jazz and classical European music and his life (October 19, 1878–February 4, 1961) spanned the emergence and popularization of jazz. As a light-skinned Creole of color who was able to pass as white in order to play in white bands, Picou embodies the racialized complexity of New Orleans culture. This is illustrated

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208 Turner, 99.
210 Turner, 104.
in a 1949 recording by Alan Lomax of Picou playing a song called “The Coon Blues,” which Picou, as he explains in an accompanying interview, picked up from a traveling musician. Picou claimed to have written this song down, which would make it the first blues to have been written in New Orleans. The title of the song evokes the coon song genre, even though the music does not fit the coon song style. Coon songs—whose name was drawn from the minstrel show character Zip Coon—were sung to ragtime music, which was the dominant music genre in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century. As Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff detail, coon songs, like minstrel shows, were at first solely performed by white performers in blackface. Soon black performers in blackface followed suit and gained great popularity. Minstrel actors and coon shouters were characterized by their highly physical performance styles, with coon shouters bellying out tunes and minstrel show actors stumbling, falling, and leaping all over the stage. These forms of caricatured emulation of black traditions denote a gradual Africanization of American culture, while at the same time underscoring racial difference and muting black rebellion. Significantly, in the interview Picou does not comment on the song’s title nor on the coon song genre, thus leaving room for speculation that Picou satirized the highly racialized genre.

Picou’s contributions to the genre of jazz are recognized mostly through the work of more famous musicians, in particular Charlie Parker, who gained acclaim for a solo he

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211 Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2007).
212 Ma Rainey, for example, began her career as a coon shouter with Allen’s New Orleans Traveling Tent Show.
played as part of his interpretation of the song “High Society,” which he based on Picou’s solo of the same tune. Although Picou did not gain great fame beyond the confines of the city, he was a staple in the New Orleans music scene; played with every musician of rank, from Papa Celestin to Freddie Keppard and Manuel Perez; and owned his own music club, Picou’s Spot, on Ursuline Street. He was a member of The Eureka Brass Band and performed at jazz funerals. As a result of his immense local popularity among black, white, and Creole audiences, his funeral was the largest the city had ever experienced to that point. It was widely covered by the local press, but even the New York Times sent reporters. In these reports the binary segregation of New Orleans is still intact: The articles all refer to Picou as a “Negro” rather than as a Creole of color, thereby erasing the European, in particular French, influences in Picou’s life and work and the difficult negotiations he had to make for his music career along and across the color line.

Budde’s film takes a different direction. The short film is divided into three reels, shot in black-and-white, 16mm silent film and totaling nine minutes. The first six minutes (the first two reels) show congested streets with crowds (both black and white) walking down them and people climbing walls and roofs to get a better glimpse of the coffin. The mood is solemn, and the masses of second-line participants conduct themselves quietly. Individual mourners are difficult to identify, as the film captures the overwhelming masses that have come out to honor Picou. The Eureka Brass Band led by Grand Marshal Matthew Houston marches ahead of family members and pallbearers carrying the coffin. The grand
marshal wears a dark suit with a sash draped across it that announces the name of the band. He does not look at the bystanders but at an invisible spot in the distance. While he holds his arms still, his steps are wide, starting with a slow roll of the hips that places all of his weight into each step, like a dance, thereby stressing the connection between body and earth.

Reel 3 (at approximately six minutes) of Budde’s film continues with the grand marshal, except now he is guiding the procession through the Mount Olivet Cemetery. Next to him walks Picou’s long-term musician friend, Willie Nelson, who carries Picou’s clarinet. The procession stops in front of the tomb. In front of a white wall, Nelson holds up the clarinet to the camera. The act of Nelson presenting the clarinet manifests Roach’s notion of performing effigies that he outlines in *Cities of the Dead*. Roach contends that

...beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth, there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh. They consist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people step according to circumstances and occasions. I argue that performed effigies—those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke—provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates: among them, actors, dancers, priests, street maskers, statesmen, celebrities, freaks, children, and especially, by virtue of an intense but unsurprising paradox, corpses. No doubt that is why effigies figure so frequently in the performance of death through mortuary rituals—and why the ambivalence associated with the dead must enter into any discussion of the relationship between memory, performance, and substitution.\(^{213}\)

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Clearly, Nelson showing Picou’s clarinet functions as what Roach describes as the “inanimate effigy,” substituting for the man Picou and symbolizing what was essential to him. As part of the funeral ritual, the clarinet also served as a prop (in the sense of an object used in theatre) for Nelson to perform one part of the effigy fabricated of human bodies. Walking with the clarinet is part of the performance of a funeral with music. Yet holding the clarinet up against the white wall is a staged gesture performed for the camera in order to immortalize even the effigy. Here, more than merely documenting the ritual, performance and film merge.

After this performative presentation, the film switches focus from the clarinet to Nelson. Since the film provides no explication, it appears to be working from the assumption that either viewers know of Nelson’s and Picou’s long friendship or that the film is effective even if their relationship is unclear. Nelson is shown standing in front of the tomb into which Picou’s coffin has been pushed. The shot reveals the rear of the coffin in the tomb. Wide shots of Nelson alternate with medium shots in this position. Placing Nelson next to the tomb gives him the role of guardian and mourner most affected by the loss, emphasizing his connection to Picou. His central position is even more underlined in the following series of wide shot, medium shot, and close-up that show Nelson sitting by the tomb. In the wide shot two men in the background of the frame are laying bricks to seal the tomb, while further away, to Nelson’s right, mourners stand waiting.
Yet again, Budde changes direction and now dramatizes the final steps of the burial process. Medium close-ups of hands laying bricks and swiping mortar are followed by a close-up of a cameraman filming a picture on the tomb that depicts the face of a woman—possibly Picou’s late wife. Integrating the cinematographer and the woman’s picture alerts the audience to the process of image-making; a classic estrangement effect. Moreover, this adds to the narrative of Picou being let go into another world, as the woman’s portrait suggests that he will join a loved one. Wide shots, close-ups, and finally medium shots of bricklaying follow. They are filmed against the sun, creating a silhouette of the two bricklayers. The film ends dramatically with the final brick pushed in, sealing the tomb.

Budde begins his film as a documentation of a public event, moves on to staging a performance of an effigy, then dramatizes the act of mourning the deceased, and ends on a final image symbolizing the man’s end. These short chapters inform about a ritual, mythologize the act of mourning, celebrate Picou, and ultimately comment on the finality of death. Through its artful expression and dramatization of the funeral, in particular the final moments in the cemetery, “Picou Funeral” reminds viewers that jazz funerals are highly composed performance rituals that allow for individual self-expression (through conduct, outfit, movements), function as collective cultural expressions, and ultimately are a complex form of art. By commemorating Picou, the film manifests the significance musicians have as carriers of African-American culture in New Orleans. In this way Budde—similar to Jules Kahn and Sylvester Francis, whose films of black performance
practices I discuss in Chapter 1—aligns himself with those who are typically not commemorated. The image the film constructs of New Orleans is one of a unified culture without any indication of a racialized hierarchy. In fact, through its poetic dramatization of the event, the film overcomes the racialized realities that still dominated the city at the time. As a result, the film, indirectly, serves as a challenge to the racialized hierarchy. By illustrating how a jazz funeral transforms the city into a stage, it emphasizes the role African American traditions play in the city and its image as a theatrical space.

**Time on My Hands**

Since the time of Alphonse Picou’s funeral, New Orleans society has undergone profound changes, among them most prominently desegregation and Hurricane Katrina. The burial rituals for African-American drummer and dancer Lionel Batiste in July 2012 and their mediatized representation reflect some of those changes and the city’s relationship to its image as a place of history and tradition. Born in 1931, Batiste was an integral part of New Orleans’s performance culture, and similarly to Picou, one of the city’s best-known personalities. According to Jason Berry in *New Orleans Magazine*, Batiste …grew up in Tremé across the street from Craig School. His father played many instruments; the sisters sang, the six brothers played piano or banjo. The neighborhood in the 1930s and ’40s was a hotbed of musicians—trumpeters Kid Howard and George Lewis, vocalists Smiley Lewis and Cousin Joe, trombonist Jim Robinson, the sterling Alphonse Picou who played the famous piccolo passage in “High
Society,” all lived within a few blocks of Batiste’s home where his daddy earned keep as a blacksmith.\textsuperscript{214}

In an interview with me Batiste provides insights into day-to-day activities that were instrumental in developing and maintaining traditional music culture. He describes, for example, that in his upbringing the game “Spin the Bottle” required the person in front of whom the bottle stopped to sing or dance and as a result functioned as an enjoyable way to practice music skills. Racialized discrimination shaped Batiste’s early life. Although officially segregated into black and white, the three-tier system, which afforded Creoles of color an elevated social status, stayed intact in the minds of many New Orleanians until and even beyond the Civil Rights Movement. Batiste, who was dark-skinned with European features, talked about the so-called “brown paper bag test” that in his youth determined if a person’s skin color was light enough to permit him/her entrance to social events hosted by Creoles of color.\textsuperscript{215}

Arguing that “The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance,” Susan Sontag describes camp as “a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.”\textsuperscript{216} Simply known as “Uncle Lionel,” Batiste embodied fanciful artifice with a mix of seriousness and self-irony that places his persona within the realm of camp, not unlike the persona Mae West created for herself. Batiste was usually dressed in his signature flamboyant style,


\textsuperscript{215} Lionel Batiste, interview with author, May 29, 2011.

\textsuperscript{216} Sontag “Notes on Camp,” 1.
wearing colorful silk shirts, white pants, two-toned shoes, a hat decorated with a small spider, and a gold watch on his palm instead of his wrist to symbolize the catchphrase “time on my hands.” This outfit was a vital component of his everyday performance or perhaps even more accurately performance of his every day. Batiste’s unique style may have had its roots in fashion choices (intense colors and a creative mix of patterns) developed during slavery that Shane White regards as both the enslaved Africans’ desire to set themselves apart from whites as well as an expression of African retention, “an act of cultural bricolage, the imaginative mediation of an African-born slave in a new, European-dominated environment.” White argues that the way enslaved Africans arranged patterns achieved a sense of movement, which corresponds to the significant role music plays in African (American) culture. While it is challenging to prove this argument, it should be noted that social aid and pleasure clubs and second-line organizations, such as The Avenue Steppers Social Club, Sudan, or The Distinguished Gentlemen, make great effort at distinguishing themselves through outfits of intense colors and often unique patterns. At jazz funerals, members of the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club, for example, wear black pants and bright sunflower yellow jackets. At their 2012 parade, members of the social aid organization Black Men of Labor sported shiny orange shirts, yellow pants, orange shoes, and orange hats decorated with a small yellow bow tie.

218 One particularly important item or prop is the feathered fan that typically carries the name of the organization and serves as its identifying aesthetic signifier, much like a flag.
Onstage or when giving impromptu performances on the street, Batiste made his outfit an integral part of his performances, highlighting his clothing items casually with elegant dance movements and gestures. As a member of the Treme Brass Band, Batiste participated in many jazz funerals, and for those occasions he exchanged his exuberant clothing for the band’s uniform: black suit, black shoes, white shirt, and an optional black hat. As Batiste explained in the interview with me, in his view jazz funerals are for and about the mourners rather than about the theatrical effect that has gained the tradition so much attention: “The most important part of a jazz funeral is to give respect to the family.”

Batiste felt such love for the tradition that when he fell ill, he requested to have a funeral staged for him while he was still alive. His family was not able to arrange that but found an alternative way to fulfill Batiste’s wish: A mortician embalmed his dead body, dressed him in his finest outfit, and in the chapel propped him up against a replica streetlamp so that he, or better put his dead body, stood one full day in the memorial home watching visitors pay their last respects to him. Keith Spera, writing for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, describes the scene with the nonchalant amusement typical of the attitude New Orleanians take towards their own eccentricities: “As more mourners packed into the chapel, a pedestrian traffic jam ensued. The crowd pressed against the velvet rope, behind which Mr. Batiste’s body stoically observed the scene. In response to Henry’s razzing trombone, the dancers shouted ‘Hey!’ and thrust their hands skyward. By the time a second

<sup>219</sup> Lionel Batiste, interview with author, May 29, 2011.
brass band made a pass, everyone in the chapel was standing up. Including Mr. Batiste."

Significantly, to use Joseph Roach’s term, Batiste’s own body was used as an effigy fashioned “from flesh” of his former self. He was performing his own “liveness” while being dead. On the one hand, mourners paid their respect and so acknowledged Batiste’s passing. On the other, Batiste’s “tableau mort” appears, even if only temporarily, as a rejection of death.

Unsurprisingly, Batiste’s spectacular wake made national news. The local ABC news affiliate produced a short video entitled “Jazz Musician Stands at His Own Wake.” As two visitors explain that “Uncle Lionel’s Batiste’s Last Stand” was a first even in New Orleans, the camera tracks up and down Batiste’s body, revealing as many details as possible. The camera creates additional distance, making his body seem more lifelike, while its positioning behind red ropes contributes to exoticizing him and the event, reminiscent of displays at the Museum of Natural History or even Madame Tussaud’s. The camera’s curious eye leaves it to the TV audience to decide who is looking at whom: Batiste at his visitors or the visitors at him. Whichever way the gaze is directed, Batiste’s wake was grand theatre, encapsulating the ephemeral quality essential to live performances and their analogy to life. The WGNO segment underscores the impression of New Orleans as a place of otherness. “Otherness” in this context should be understood as startling but

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also as impossible to imagine anywhere else. Locals might agree—“only in New Orleans” is a popular phrase expressing their amused pride. Since this was the first time in New Orleans that a dead body participated at its own wake, it cannot be considered normative even there. Much rather, playing along with Batiste’s exceptional personality, the wake capitalized on the image of New Orleans as an exotic location, and the news video responded in a predictable fashion.

The spectacle of Batiste’s wake paled in comparison to his funeral and the accompanying media frenzy. His burial was preceded by a week of spontaneous and organized parades that built anticipation for the final send-off. Social media was brimming with excitement about the event, with posts announcing the procession route and a deluge of photos of Batiste. A clever merchant created paper wristbands in the fashion of Batiste’s signature “time on my hand.” Before the actual funeral even took place, it had been transformed into a commercial media spectacle that turned Batiste from a recently deceased musician into an icon or poster boy for New Orleans merchandise.

At the funeral, a privately produced video captured the event. Filmed with a cell phone or a small camcorder, it appears unedited. At times, the footage is shaky, but overall it provides clear, albeit limited, views of parts of the funeral. The camera stays close to the main protagonists, such as the grand marshal, the brass band, and the mourners, apparently attempting to tape key participants and aspects of this ritual. Videotaping events and

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posting (mostly unedited) clips online is a contemporary convention. The lack of deliberate artfulness aligns this example of the trend formally with Jules Cahn and Sylvester Francis, whose footage of African-American street performances I discuss in Chapter 1. The video shares with Joe Budde’s film of Picou’s funeral the sense of honoring a cultural tradition as well as a local music celebrity of African descent. The video shows that the organizers try to follow the traditional steps prescribed for the occasion. However, they are overwhelmed by the unprecedented high attendance. The Treme Brass Band accompanies the procession through streets so congested that the grand marshal has hardly any space to move forward. Aside from tourists, many white mourners and several white musicians participate in Uncle Lionel’s funeral. Without making this a deliberate point, but simply by showing participants and observers, the video creates an impression of New Orleans as a creole city where black and white come together effortlessly. It also illustrates that, since the time of Picou’s funeral, a heightened commercialization of a communal tradition had taken place. With every step and at every corner, the second line of residents and tourists grew until the procession culminated in a party so large it was only matched by Mardi Gras parades. The video illustrates that Batiste’s funeral—similar to Picou’s—blurs theatre and ritual and thereby transforms New Orleans (or at least large parts of it) into a stage. Rather than metaphorically, jazz funerals, like Mardi Gras, literally manifest the concept of *theatrum mundi*, and even this artless, spontaneously created video underscores this.
The heightened frenzy and commercialization evident in Batiste’s funeral has its roots in the popularization of the tradition through the movie industry, most famously the 1974 James Bond movie *Live and Let Die*. *Live and Let Die* opens with a jazz funeral in New Orleans’s French Quarter. A middle-aged white man leans on a post in a street in the French Quarter and watches a funeral procession approach. Led by the Olympia Brass Band playing “No Closer Walk with Thee” and Grand Marshal Matthew Houston, who had also led the way at Alphonse Picou’s funeral, pallbearers carry a coffin, followed by the grieving family and a fairly small second line of African-Americans wearing everyday clothes. The pace is slow and the mood is solemn. The white man at the post turns to a bespectacled man of color and inquires whose funeral it is. The bespectacled man pulls a knife, responds “Yours,” and stabs the man, who falls on the street. Now, the pace picks up swiftly. Within seconds, the pallbearers stop, place the coffin over the dead body, lower it, and lift it back up. The body disappears into the coffin. Immediately, the mourners dry their tears, and everybody begins to dance.

The scene stresses the performative aspect of the tradition, and as a result exoticizes it into theatrical entertainment for an outsider audience. Leo Touchet, the photographer who contributed the impressive selection of jazz funeral photos published in *Rejoice When You Die*, notes in his introduction to the book: “The movie *Live and Let Die*, which included a jazz funeral scene, popularized the jazz funerals and turned them into

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223 These photos were taken between 1968 and 1970.
Both happenings and jazz funerals are threshold forms. Happenings grew out of a blend of theatre and fine arts. Performed for and by participants (and thus performative), jazz funerals encapsulate the blurring of theatre and ritual. Other aspects that define each form, however, differ greatly: Happenings were (and arguably still are) a popular genre with the avant-garde in urban centers. In her essay “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition” from 1962 Susan Sontag highlights that “lacking a plot and continuous rational discourse, they have no past. As the name itself suggests, Happenings are always in the present tense.” Although only partly improvised, happenings present events without a (clearly understandable) order or structure and often even without a delineated ending. In contrast, jazz funerals form a journey through time that reflects the human condition, with the present time understood as constantly in motion. Touchet’s comment suggests that here the predominantly African-American tradition is moved out of its intended and familiar context in order to excite a movie audience and is thereby devalued. This touches on the sensitive issue of appropriation of African-American artistic work by white artists that haunts, in particular, the field of music.

Furthermore, the scene plays with the dynamic of a racialized social hierarchy. It begins with the white male gaze on black performance culture. The viewpoint of the white onlooker as subject and the black performer as object is familiar to theatre and movie

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audiences. Although the black body is always troubling to the white perception of the world around him/her, as Nicole Fleetwood points out, this constellation assures a white-dominated hierarchy. Here, only moments into the scene, the white observer-subject becomes victim-object of a plot devised by African-Americans, turning the power constellation on its head. This is the only scene in the movie that depicts a black ritual in New Orleans. While not portrayed favorably, black protagonists in this scene have agency and use their cultural practices as tools to outsmart a white protagonist. Yet, the film builds a link between the participants of this funeral and an island modeled on Haiti, where James Bond’s antagonist, a black drug kingpin who masterminded the jazz funeral, operates his criminal organization. Dramatic scenes (and the final showdown), including preparations of a cannibal feast of white hostages held by a cartoonish Voodoo priest, take place on that island. Both rituals are fantastic interpretations of African-derived traditions and both show blacks brutally killing whites. As a result, the murderous jazz funeral scene, while on the surface entertaining, associates black culture with violence, suggesting white fear of black assertion and, possibly, of retribution for white oppression. It depicts an image of New Orleans as Africanized and therefore “other,” which as presented here, at best denotes theatricality, and therefore dubiousness, and at worst, danger.

In comparison, The Cincinnati Kid from 1965 uses a jazz funeral to paint a harmonious portrait of New Orleans. Steve McQueen in the role of high-stakes gambler

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226 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision.
Eric Stoner, known as Kid, is caught between a blonde, wholesome country girl and a red-haired gambling seductress. *The Cincinnati Kid* opens with a jazz funeral, immediately establishing New Orleans as its location, as McQueen’s character walks by leisurely. A young (black) boy challenges him to a quick game of dice. From their friendly interaction it is clear that they know each other and that they have a relationship as equals. Together, the jazz funeral and the boy introduce Kid as being one with the people—they give him “street cred.” Further, the jazz funeral functions as a foreboding of Kid’s final loss in gambling and, as the opening credits play over the funeral’s cheerful second-line parade, the happy ending Kid finds in the love of his country girl. For the time it was produced, *The Cincinnati Kid* demonstrates an unusual openness to integrating black characters into the narrative (including Cab Calloway as a well-respected gambler), and thereby constructs an image of New Orleans based on the city’s social realities. Yet, the funeral only serves a symbolic function for the white character’s actions.

*Double Jeopardy*, from 1999, continues this pattern of using a jazz funeral as a vehicle for the main storyline. The film is a coming-of-age-melodrama dressed as an action movie. It tells the rather incredible story of millionaire wife Elizabeth Carson (Ashley Judd), known as Libby, who fights to exonerate herself and reunite with her child after her husband Nick (Bruce Greenwood) fakes his own death, frames her for it, and hides her son. Typical of melodramas, the roles of hero and villain are clear-cut. At first, the moral

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27 Kid’s lack of maturity is indicated by the fact that he engages in play-time with the boy. Throughout the film he has several encounters with the boy and always wins—until the very end when he loses: The Kid loses to a kid.
integrity of Libby’s character is established with her devotion to her husband, and, once she realizes his betrayal, by her determination to win back her son. Motherhood here trumps being a wife, but both characterize her as wholesome and morally unchallengeable. Whether she lies, drives a car into the ocean, or threatens to kill her ex, her overarching motive to reinstate herself as a mother justifies all her actions. The film presents Libby’s struggle, which includes a series of harrowing physical and emotional tests to her strength that she passes with the resolve of a superhero, as she grows from a naïve wife to an independent hero-mother. Along the way Libby, like so many heroes in coming-of-age-movies, finds an ally–mentor, parole officer Travis Lehman played by Tommy Lee Jones—a grumpy loner with a heart of gold. Libby follows the trail of her husband all over the US and finally down to New Orleans, where Nick has taken on a false identity as a luxury hotel owner. In the confrontation between Libby and Nick, the French–African city symbolically clashes with the American way of life. Nick the con man thrives amongst the glittery social elite of New Orleans, while Libby, focused on her goal, frowns upon the glitz and only connects with regular folks who can help her. She eventually overtakes Nick, exonerates herself, and wins her freedom, only to immediately leave New Orleans for the clean and wide-open spaces of Georgia where her son attends a boarding school. This ending, staged as a reunion with her son at a soccer game played by two almost exclusively white teams, suggests support for a modern version of the nuclear family: matriarchal and devoid of a father.

228 One black student can be seen.
For this investigation the face-off between Libby and Nick in New Orleans is illuminating. They meet at a fundraiser, where bachelors are auctioned off for the night, eerily reminiscent of actual slave auctions, and incidentally staged at a hotel that was formerly a site for these auctions. As a first indication that Libby will prevail over Nick, she “buys” him at the auction and arranges a meeting with him and her son. For no other apparent reason than that it is supposed to be a “big tourist place,” Libby suggests Lafayette Cemetery No. 3. The scene begins with a horse-drawn hearse, mourners, and a brass band approaching. The band plays “St. James Infirmary,” a dirge that is customary at jazz funerals. Nick and Libby meet at the entrance of the graveyard. Even though the funeral procession functions as a signifier of New Orleans, the camera neither presents it as exotic nor do the characters respond in any particular way to it. Libby keeps a respectful distance from the mourners, and Nick is so focused on Libby that he doesn’t pay them any attention. The film treats the funeral as an integral and, in fact, normative part of New Orleans culture. More important, it uses it as a metaphor for Libby’s (temporary) demise and Nick’s triumph.

Because Nick alleges that their son Matty is playing inside the cemetery, they follow the procession in. As is to be expected, aside from the procession, this unlikely location for a meeting turns out to be rather deserted. Nick points out a boy in the distance. As Libby approaches, the boy runs away, and Libby follows him through the empty alleys lined with tombs. At first, the camera stays with Libby, cutting medium shots back and
forth between her and her point of view of the cemetery. Then, the camera cranes up to reveal the funeral procession walking down an alley parallel to Libby. This parallel movement while the music is playing symbolizes that Libby is on a path to her death. Only moments later, Nick knocks her over the head with a stone, and exactly as the music comes to an end, throws her in a tomb. The scene ends with Nick—in the foreground of the frame—giving the boy a few dollar bills for acting the role of their son while the procession exits the cemetery in the background, with the band playing a jubilant tune and the mourners dancing cheerfully. As the music suggests, both in the cemetery when he locks Libby inside the tomb and outside, Nick wins this part of the battle.

That this New Orleans performance tradition works on Nick’s behalf is indicative of the dynamic between the hero and the villain and between New Orleans and the rest of the US. Here, again through the use of the jazz funeral, New Orleans represents the theatrical and therefore morally dubious, only this time exploited by a male villain rather than a sexually active woman like Brooke Shields’s character Violet in Pretty Baby or Mae West’s character Ruby Carter in Belle of the Nineties. Theatrical, as Tracy Davis observes, is often defined as artificial and feminine.229 Significantly, while Libby grows to be an independent woman who fights with the tools of any male action hero—her own body and guns—Nick is increasingly associated with the theatrical. In the opening scene, he is already displayed as a narcissist who enjoys presenting himself on the terrace of his

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229 Davis and Postlewait, eds. Theatricality.
luxurious mansion to admiring guests. In the course of the film, he takes on disguises and performs various false identities, the starkest one as a desirable hotel owner/bachelor onstage being auctioned off. Finally, he is connected with the jazz funeral. Consequently, even though the hero is a woman, *Double Jeopardy* repeats a vision of New Orleans as a stage for the white protagonist to grow and to outgrow tainted relationships familiar from movies like *King Creole*. Hence, the metaphor of New Orleans as a (fallen) woman is the result of a process of gendering: Characteristics associated with stereotypical and negative views of femininity (artificial, false) are assigned to characters independently of their actual sex.

In contrast to those three movies, the show *Treme* makes an effort to depict a jazz funeral as a meaningful ritual for the participants in one of the main storylines.\(^2\) As I summarized in Chapter 1, *Treme* captured the time immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Fictional characters and real-life New Orleanians crossed paths on the small screen, and frequently storylines were based on actual events. One storyline focuses on bar owner LaDonna Batiste-Williams’s many struggles. One of her battles, which was inspired by actual cases, is centered around finding her younger brother who went missing during the storm. Through a painstaking investigation LaDonna (played by Khandi Alexander)

\(^2\) Independent film director Jesse Rosen also takes a metaphorical approach to jazz funerals in his father-son drama titled *Jazz Funeral* (2014). The film has not yet been distributed. The trailer suggests that *Jazz Funeral* borrows directly the aspect of journeying essential to jazz funerals to tell a story of personal growth of a young white man and his relationship to his father and to women. This fits again with the familiar trope of white men exploring their sexual direction in New Orleans.
learns that he had been arrested the day of the storm and died during his incarceration. In
the final episode of season 1, directed by Agnezia Holland, LaDonna and her family are
finally able to hold a funeral for him. The scene begins with a prayer at the grave. After the
burial, the majority of the mourners join the second line led by the Treme Brass Band—
among them Uncle Lionel Batiste—and parade through the streets. The camera stays close
on LaDonna as she joins the dancing, first quietly, but then gradually more joyfully,
accepting the inevitable and celebrating her brother’s life. From LaDonna, the camera
moves to other participants and ends on a high-angle wide shot of a street corner where the
mourners and celebrants embrace each other and then disburse. This ending encapsulates
the deep cathartic experience that the component of journeying inherent to jazz funerals can
hold for participants. It reveals this tradition as a relevant communal ritual and points to the
enormous efforts of New Orleans residents to overcome through their rich performance
rituals the suffering caused by the storm and subsequent levee break. Performativity here
(as in many scenes in *Treme*) is used to create an image of New Orleans as a survivor.

The Media and the Storm

The image of New Orleans struggling to survive has preoccupied its portrayals since
August 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina swept across the Gulf Coast. The resulting levee
break flooded an astonishing 80 percent of New Orleans and literally drowned the Lower
Ninth Ward (located below sea level), which was at the time predominantly populated by
African-Americans. Within one night and day of storm flooding, New Orleans became unrecognizable. In the actuality of Hurricane Katrina, the terror of trying to survive bordered on the fantastic. Streets turned to rivers with floating dead bodies, and desperate people waved for help on shattered roofs that barely peaked out of the muddy waters. Uncle Lionel Batiste, for example, like many had to evacuate during the flooding. He did so by using his bass drum as a floating device.

The manner in which journalists on the scene reported the events changed drastically from the onset of the storm to the first day after the flood. In the beginning of the storm, correspondents performed as tough on-the-ground reporters. A brief segment with Brian Andrews from the CBS affiliate in Miami, WFOR, (but reporting for CNN) illustrates this. Andrews is positioned at the entrance to a New Orleans hotel. Wind and rain are blowing heavily through the street. He runs over to a mailbox farther in the middle of the street to provide a “better view” of the storm. To protect himself, Andrews crouches down behind the mailbox, is unable to withstand the wind so close to the ground, and runs back. At the hotel entrance, a gust throws him to the pavement. He laughs sheepishly at himself yet seems proud about his bravery. Depicting the beginning of the catastrophe as a great adventure for journalists to experience and TV audiences to watch maintains the image of New Orleans as a playground.

As the city drowned in water and chaos, journalists quickly adjusted their conduct. In
an often-accessed segment CNN’s Anderson Cooper interviews Louisiana State Senator Mary Landrieu on day 4 of the levee break. When Landrieu lists a number of politicians who deserve thanks for improving this dire situation, Cooper responds with thinly veiled aggravation: “For the last four days, I have been seeing dead bodies here in the streets of Mississippi. And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other… I gotta tell you there are a lot of people here who are very upset and very frustrated. And when they hear politicians slap… [he interrupts himself] you know, thanking one another, it kind of cuts them the wrong way right now.” As Landrieu states her belief that the country will recover to its former greatness, Cooper responds: “There are a lot of people here who are kind of ashamed of what is happening in this country right now, ashamed of what is happening in your state certainly.” Cooper exchanges his position of neutrality and, by scolding a leading politician on camera, makes himself an agent of change.

One of the most dramatic examples of this transformation played out on Fox News on day 6 of the levee break. This segment begins with an exchange between anchorman Sean Hannity in the studio and reporter Shepard Smith on the dark streets of New Orleans. Hannity ask Smith if help is on the way, to which Smith answers, “I don’t know.” Hannity repeats the question, suggesting that the answer could be found, until Smith loses his temper and shouts that he has never been in a situation where he was not able to answer a

231 YouTube alone counts 282,595 views as of October 6, 2016.
232 Cooper was reporting from Waveland, MS, which is 50 miles north of New Orleans.
234 Ibid.
question that simple. The perplexed Hannity cuts to Geraldo Rivera at the dark Convention Center. With great aggravation Rivera describes the dehumanizing and undignified circumstances people have been enduring for six full days until that point. He repeatedly asks into the camera why the people trapped there are not allowed to walk over the interstate to the nearest town, Gretna, where there is water and food. Visibly exhausted after, as he notes, only one day in New Orleans, Rivera holds two babies up to the camera, one after the other. The first baby is fifteen months old; the second one is ten months of age. Geraldo asks the mothers briefly about their situations. The mother of the first baby has pictures of two other children who are missing. Geraldo tries to show the photos in the darkness to the camera. It is impossible to make out the children’s faces. Geraldo states, “I’m so glad they are not here in this hell.” The show cuts to Smith, who explains that the government won’t allow people trapped in the Convention Center to go to Gretna. He ends by yelling at Hannity “This is all the perspective you need!”235 The show now cuts back to Rivera, who holds up the second baby shouting into the camera to “let the people go.” His phrasing is very close to the refrain of the Negro spiritual “Go Down Moses,” and for one spectacular moment, the Grand Guignol of post-Katrina New Orleans is replaced by a performance of compassion. At the peak of his excitement, Rivera reflects on his role as a journalist: “It’s not a question of objectivity. It’s a question of reality.”236 This suggests that there is a difference between reality and objectivity, and that in order to fulfill his

236 Ibid.
traditional obligation as a journalist to present facts objectively, Rivera would have had to neutralize his experiences of the reality he witnessed. Instead he chose to present New Orleans as dramatically as he saw it—a living hell.

Steve Classen argues that reporters like Rivera broke with the seemingly objective stance typically required of journalists that suggests to their audience that there is a unity between the victims of this disaster and the center of society. Classen contends that sensible journalists are expected to embody this unity. Their reporting is supposed to be understood and to function as rituals that “work to legitimate and reinforce the mythology of a societal ‘center’ at which media institutions reside. Through ritual practices such as the live, on the spot reporter in the midst of crisis or disaster, audiences and publics are persuaded to think of media as standing in for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organizational level.”237 By aligning themselves with the people whose suffering they reported on during Hurricane Katrina, journalists inadvertently challenged the mythology of a societal center and its moral legitimacy.

Not only did the performance roles of journalists change but also those of the protagonists in the stories they were reporting. The majority of people at the Convention Center were black and portrayed as victims, while absent and invisible government officials were implied to be perpetrators. Carol A. Stabile observes in “No Shelter from the Storm” that anchormen were not criticized for expanding journalistic codes of conduct

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when they repeatedly attempted to shift the reporting from black suffering to alleged black crimes, such as looting and raping. Stabile traces those accusations, in particular the ones of rape, to the history of lynching in which alleged rapes of white women by black men were used to justify their hangings: “News coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina thus was caught between a narrative framework that criminalized displaced people, thereby blaming them for the horrific situations in the Superdome and the convention center, and a frame that understood the government’s inability to act—and the racism that underlay that inability—as criminal.”\textsuperscript{238} Tragically, the familiar framing of black citizens as criminal was effective, Stabile notes, as fear spread and bus drivers were unwilling to drive into the city and rescue people from the Convention Center. The media representation of New Orleans during and after the storm thus reflects a struggle between center and off-center, between depicting the city as a deathtrap for its black residents or as a haven for black criminals.

While the country was still struggling with the crisis of Katrina and its depiction and experience, filmmaker Spike Lee began production on When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, which he completed only months later in 2006.\textsuperscript{239} When the Levees Broke is made up of four acts and an epilogue. It is an in-depth investigation into the reasons for the levee break, the destruction it caused, and the complex aftermath for the city and its residents. More so, as the title promises, When the Levees Broke is a cinematic commemoration of the people of New Orleans, their city, and their culture. The four acts

\textsuperscript{239} Lee followed up four years later with If God Is Willing and da Creek Don’t Rise.
and the epilogue each document a specific phase of the storm, and each is framed by a montage of footage—accompanied by trumpeter Terence Blanchard’s score—of destroyed neighborhoods, dead bodies, and residents trying to save their lives. Throughout each episode Lee stresses the significance of black culture, in particular music-derived or related cultural practices.

Act 1 covers the phase leading up to the storm. A focal point here is the anxiety residents experienced when Mayor Ray Nagin ordered mandatory evacuation without a clear plan of how to transport people out. Act 2 documents the immediate phase after the storm and the flood. This episode is particularly haunting as it weaves together footage (still photography and moving images) of dead bodies floating in the water or decaying on the side of (what is left of) the road with personal accounts, such as the one by Herbert Freeman Jr., a middle-aged black man, whose mother died outside of the Convention Center as they were desperately waiting for a bus. Act 3 shows people finally being moved out of the Convention Center; however, at the airport families were ripped apart and sent to different states. Act 4 documents the maddeningly slow path to a new “normal,” with residents waiting for FEMA trailers while real estate companies begin a land grab of the flooded Lower Ninth Ward. In the epilogue, Lee expands on details of the experiences of the main protagonists, in particular their escape from New Orleans, the violence they faced immediately after the storm with white men shooting black citizens, insurance companies refusing to pay them, and the overall impact on them as survivors of this catastrophe:
trauma, health, and mental health issues. A detailed analysis of each act would exceed the scope of this dissertation, but I find it necessary to take a closer look at several themes and filmmaking patterns that Lee incorporates as a way to understand his vision of the catastrophe and of his portrait of New Orleans.

Lee alternates expert interviews (scientists, engineers, politicians, and journalists) with citizens like Phyllis Montana LeBlanc and famous New Orleans personalities, such as Blanchard, actor Wendell Pierce, and Mayor Nagin. All interviewees at some point in the series are filmed holding up a picture frame and introducing themselves. This estrangement device literally frames the individuals and effectively freezes them in time, suggesting that they are memorable. Lee himself does not appear in front of the camera but at times responds off-camera to a statement by an interviewee with a follow-up question or a laugh, thereby guiding his audience’s responses.

One of the expert witnesses is CNN reporter Soledad O’Brien. In the segment that Lee weaves into Act Two, O’Brien takes her viewers to the street by the Convention Center and calls attention to a dead body covered with a blanket. This scene is followed by an interview with O’Brien in which she expresses her indignation at finding the body still at the exact same spot when she returned two days later. Like Cooper, Smith, and Rivera, O’Brien here conveys her personal feelings and as a result compromises her role as a

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240 Blanchard is a well-known New Orleans jazz musician and, in addition to appearing in and scoring When the Levees Broke, frequently writes the music for Lee’s films.
241 New Orleans actor Pierce gained national attention for his role in The Wire (2002–08) and later for playing trombonist Antoine Batiste in Treme.
neutral or objective reporter. However, O’Brian expresses herself in a measured way, which makes her a very effective, credible source. Lee does not comment on the manner in which O’Brian reported from New Orleans and so only indirectly engages with the question of professional journalistic conduct. Rather, Lee uses her reporting as additional testimony to the image of complete mayhem and neglect that he paints of post-Katrina New Orleans.

In Act 3, Lee gives scholar Michael Eric Dyson space to comment on the way families were separated at the airport and flown out to different states, often without any contact information: “Well, the fact is, they were treating them like slaves in the ship, families were being separated, children were being taken from their mothers and fathers. Those who were more weary and those who were more likely to be vulnerable were separated from those who were stronger. Babies literally ripped out of the arms of their mothers and fathers. The separation of the evacuation where people lost sight and lost sound and lost sense of their loved ones.” By including a comparison to the way families were torn apart during slavery and sold off to different plantations, Lee historicizes the plight of African-Americans, with the mistreatment or casual neglect during Hurricane Katrina as its logical conclusion. Past and present merge, as Lee’s current New Orleans is not very different from historic New Orleans.

Beyond the main protagonists, Lee gives a vast number of New Orleanians the opportunity to voice their opinions. This kaleidoscope of views contradicts the official

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narrative represented by news clips featuring President George W. Bush or FEMA director Michael Brown, who insist that rescue efforts were handled well, and as a result, undermines the myth of a just and legitimate societal center. Anne M. Valk notes in her review of *When the Levees Broke* that Lee makes as much a contribution to oral history as to cinema: “By relying on first-person accounts, too, *When the Levees Broke* effectively points out discrepancies between official accounts and those of individuals, thereby capitalizing on one of oral history’s most powerful tools: its ability to present new perspectives on history ‘from the bottom up.’”\(^{243}\)

The New Orleans that Lee shows is one of *the people*, and while Lee includes interviews with white residents, the majority of the people are of African descent. Anne M. Valk’s term “from the bottom up,” may suggest that these interviewees are members of the working class and, therefore, perhaps not deeply involved in the city’s political process. Contrary to this, Lee highlights that many are professionals (for example, lawyers or engineers) and homeowners. Because they have been disempowered in this instance of crisis, even the successful black residents belong to *the people*, or to use the classic term, *folk*.

The connection to *folk* is significant, because with sections on New Orleans music, Congo Square, and Black Indians, Lee traces the roots of New Orleans culture to Africa and to slavery and shows that the richness of New Orleans culture grew out of black folk culture. From among these artistic accomplishments—and as an expression of the mourning that guides the series—Lee devotes most of the screen time to jazz funerals.

Act 3, to images of Joe Budde’s film of Alphonse Picou’s funeral (see chapter 3), Gralen B. Banks, the director of security at the New Orleans Hyatt Regency and a member of the social aid organization Black Men of Labor, and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis explain the role jazz funerals play in the cultural life of New Orleans. Marsalis states: “How it ties in with Christian tradition and with the African tradition is that the afterlife is rich and full and the life on earth is one of travail. This person is dead, but he’s going on to riches, and that’s why we are going to celebrate. It has also given us a way to not hush over death.” Marsalis’s statement encapsulates the essence of When the Levees Broke: to acknowledge death and dying and, similar to a jazz funeral, to celebrate those who have passed.

Fittingly, a jazz funeral for Hurricane Katrina frames Act 4. A small brass band led by clarinetist Michael White and singer and trombonist Glenn Andrew Davis accompany a horse-drawn hearse transporting a coffin labeled “Katrina.” This procession is intercut with Dinerral “Dick” Shavers, member of the Hot 8 Brass Band, guiding Lee through the Lower Ninth Ward and describing the sadness he feels at the decimation and loss around him. Moreover, Shavers suggests that many of the houses that are marked as having been checked for dead bodies, in fact, have never been examined. Hence, the dead have not been acknowledged—their lives and dying have been ignored. As the camera cuts back to the funeral participants dancing around the coffin in the middle of the street in the Lower Ninth

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244 Lee, When the Levees Broke.
245 Ibid.
246 Members of the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club told me that the funeral was staged for Lee’s cameras, but I have not been able to verify these statements.
Ward, an image of New Orleans as a graveyard emerges, with mourners and survivors dancing out of resilience and desperation. Performance and its mediatized coverage may not be able to shield against the destruction of life, but it can function as a witness and as liberation.

Another expression of black resilience takes place at the end of the Epilogue, when Black Men of Labor—wearing bright orange shirts with green patterns—parade through the French Quarter. Hyatt security director Banks recalls joyfully that it was unprecedented for a black organization to parade through this part of town: “The other side of Rampart? Jackson Square?! Andrew Jackson?! It took Katrina for this.” His statement reveals the extent of racialized segregation in New Orleans and shows that black cultural expressions both have emerged and continue as responses to a long, unbroken chain of oppression and violence. His New Orleans (with its infrastructure and administration in shambles) serves for Lee as a case study of the destructive forces inherent to the system of white supremacy. Through the ages, black people have been its targets, victims, and collateral damage but also its moral winners. Black artists in *When the Levees Broke* are voices of reason, and New Orleans is the cradle and hub of black American performance culture. Since Lee devises *When the Levees Broke* as a requiem, he conceptually aligns it with jazz funerals to reveal New Orleans as a black city, with its “blackness” setting a positive example for the rest of the US.

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247 Lee, *When the Levees Broke.*
A Note on Resistance

On January 8, 1811, enslaved sugar workers from St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, and St. James parishes armed themselves with machetes, sabers, tools, and some rifles and marched toward New Orleans with the goal to free all slaves. Along the way, they killed two white men and destroyed property on the plantations that they passed. Near the city they engaged in battle with the local militia, which was supported by federal troops. Many of the freedom fighters were killed in the battle, and large numbers were put on trial and executed until planters asked for a stop to the executions, but only because their workforce had been severely diminished. Like in ancient Rome, the heads of those who died in battle or who had been executed were propped up on poles along River Road\textsuperscript{248} to deter others from future attempts at revolution. Since the beginning of 2015, replications of these heads, sculpted by Woodrow Nash, are placed on poles at the exit of the Whitney Plantation Museum. This deeply moving display commemorating the bravery and suffering of those enslaved fighters is the last image visitors see as they leave. It reminds visitors of the performances of pain and oppression that governed the region’s social structure and created a need for commemorative performances. It exemplifies resistance against the erosion of memory and so, perhaps, a new chapter in historicizing Louisiana and New Orleans—and with this the creation of new images of the city.

\textsuperscript{248} River Road connects the plantations with New Orleans.
FINAL WORDS—IMAGE AND EXPERIENCE

In 2005, New Orleans photographer Ted Jackson created a photo series of sites that were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina for the online edition of The New Orleans Times-Picayune. He selected photos that he and other photographers had taken of the devastation during the first days of the flood. Nine years later, Jackson visited the sites and photographed the exact spot from the exact same angle using the same lens. In the series, the photos are now laid on top of each other so that the viewer can swipe the new image into the one from the past. In an accompanying essay, Jackson explains the philosophy behind his project: “Photography serves as visual history, and precious, unearthed artifacts emerge from the archives like unflinching guardians of our past. Treasured or tragic, they remind us of who we are and from where we came.”

His photo project specifically reminds viewers that despite earnest efforts to rebuild New Orleans, its society’s racialized divide favors those who have historically been privileged: The second picture of the series shows four black women and three children up to their necks in dirty floodwater in front of their Lower Ninth Ward house. A swipe to the current picture reveals that the house is still abandoned and in disrepair. These two images manifest the extent to which African-Americans had been and still are neglected in this catastrophe. In contrast, the final set of photos illustrates monumental change. The frame of the early photo is almost entirely filled with a wall of debris and trash. In what Jackson calls the “after photo,” the area is now a green park.

While the photo pair depicting the women and children leaves the viewer with the troubling impression that time has stood still, watching garbage dissolve into nature in the last pair elicits a feeling of relief and even a sense of magic.

By performing the act definitive of the series—dissolving time lines—here the viewer participates as actor or agent rather than as passive audience. As a result, the series blurs the demarcation between photo and theatre, between mediatized and live. Moreover, the simplicity of the swipe technique takes us back in time to the beginnings of moving images, the magic lantern or the diorama that required hands-on operators and that were one of the many performance offerings at amusement parks bridging the gap between film and theatre.

Jackson’s series, along with the films and media programs that I examine in this dissertation, highlights how deeply interwoven theatre/live performances are with cinema, its offspring, and its cousins (such as photography), underscoring Susan Sontag’s statement that:

> For some time, all useful ideas in art have been extremely sophisticated. Like the idea that everything is what it is, and not another thing. A painting is a painting. Sculpture is sculpture. A poem is a poem, not prose. Etcetera. And the complementary idea: a painting can be “literary” or sculptural, a poem can be prose, theatre can emulate and incorporate cinema, cinema can be theatrical.\(^{250}\)

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Films and videos of performances or, as in Jackson’s project, a photo series, do not substitute liveness. Instead, even if not intended to, films function as archives and because of their capability to freeze time, they liberate audience and performers from the constraint of the ephemeral and the present. Thus, Jackson’s visual reflection on the elusiveness of time encapsulates my investigation of how the interplay of the theatrical and the cinematic, the live and the mediatized produces images of a city that is famous for its performative expressions and that has almost literally been “photographed to death,”²⁵¹ to use the words of the aging diva Marlene Dietrich (who incidentally played an adventuress in the 1941 movie *The Flame of New Orleans*).

The image of Dietrich (who famously broke gender stereotypes with her smoky voice and masculinized outfits) embodying the metaphor of New Orleans as a seductress brings me back to the questions that sparked this investigation: How does the interplay between the performance cultures of New Orleans and their mediatized depictions construct prevalent images of New Orleans, and, in turn, how do these images influence the city’s social structure? New Orleans has been mythologized and imagined more so than concretely studied. Due to its lively performance cultures and its unique (colonial) history, within the United States (and possibly beyond) the city has been a favorite of the media at least since the late nineteenth century when Lafcadio Hearn and George Washington Cable wrote about it. During a ten-year-stay Hearn published both fictional and factual accounts

of life in New Orleans, and as Frederick S. Starr argues, put the city on the cultural landscape. Yet, according to Violet Harrington Bryan, it was George Washington Cable who established a romantic image of the city’s creolized culture, which, until today is an essential aspect of New Orleans’s (self-) definition: “In *Old Creole Days, The Grandissimes*, and *Doctor Sevier*, however, Cable established the patterns of dialectic that would define the fictional representation of New Orleans in much of the literature that would follow: the city’s fusion of cultures—African, Creole, and Anglo-Saxon; the beauty and violence of both that culture and the landscape; the cosmopolitan and provincialism of its population and mores; and the influence of Catholicism and Voodoo.”

On my own expedition, New Orleans revealed itself to me as a compressed version of the American idea(l), both melting pot and urban space for disparate cultures. From my investigation I gathered that it is the interaction between African, Native American, and European cultures under complex and tense political circumstances in one specific location that allowed for and even forced cultural groups to develop and/or perpetuate their traditions. In addition to the ever-present racial ideologies that still mark New Orleans (and Louisiana), family ties, social and economic alliances, force of habit, and actual joy in the performances drive the continuation of the practices and as a result perpetuate the respective group identities.

As I have examined, various forms of media challenge, support, and perpetuate the

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gendered and racialized ideals and ideas of these groups, pointing to ways of using media/art directly or indirectly as a political tool. For example, with his documentary *Black Indians of New Orleans* filmmaker Maurice Martinez alerted an audience wider than the Black Indians’ community to their place in the city’s historical narrative. Filmmaker Jules Cahn through his films aligned himself with marginalized groups, such as the African-American *flambeaux* carriers who perform alongside exclusively white carnival parades. While an unknown home moviemaker peeked behind the scenes of these carnival entertainments to reveal a self-ironic carnival king, with her documentary *By Invitation Only* Rebecca Snedeker challenges the system of whites-only, male-dominated carnival krewes. Blockbuster movie *Interview with a Vampire* transforms the entire city into a Grand Guignol performance to comment on American expansionism, whereas cult film *Easy Rider* offers a drug-induced version of New Orleans as a stage for (failed) salvation and the Bond movie *Live and Let Die* presents the city as “Africanized” and therefore devious, dangerous, and at times ridiculous.

The films and media programs that I viewed for this dissertation, regardless of their artistic genre, political outlook, or even of the image they construct of New Orleans, all in some way take note that the city is steeped in traditions. Whether fictitious or factual, the images of New Orleans that these films, TV programs, and other media productions create either refer to the past or allude to it by assuming a common view of the world that is grounded in a historical narrative. Archives, such as The Historic New Orleans Collection
or the Backstreet Cultural Museum, but also TV programs and film festivals disseminate these diverse interpretations of New Orleans, creating opportunities for members of the distinct cultural groups to see each other and thus reflect on the social structures in which they operate. These efforts—some reaching small, some reaching large audiences—actively contribute to the plurality of images of the city. However, since this plurality of images is only growing slowly, their influence on social structures is only gradual.

While the performance traditions and their cinematic portrayals function as comments on contemporary society and as windows to the past, they are also rooted in cultural predecessors, such as English court masques or the Grand Guignol, or influenced by theatrical genres, such as melodrama. Incidentally, Louis Armstrong, the face of New Orleans who actually spent a large part of his life in a quiet neighborhood in Corona, Queens, embodies such connection to cultural roots, as his trip to Ghana in 1956 illustrates. Footage of the tour shows Armstrong being carried through the streets on a palanquin, not unlike during Mardi Gras 1949 when he was crowned King Zulu. At an open-air concert, Armstrong and his band perform in the center of an arena stage. Enthusiastic spectators leave their seats to dance in the playing area together with the musicians. Armstrong laughs and dances, overcome with joy that his African audience connects so easily with his music, suggesting a shared heritage between New Orleans and African cultures. Yet his natural display of joy in this video also contrasts starkly with the frozen grin that is familiar from

so many of his photos and films that govern the public image(s) of New Orleans. Indicative of the racialized pressure on Armstrong to perform happiness, his eternal smile implies that the city’s fun reputation was and is hard-earned.

One scene in the film *New Orleans*, with which I began this dissertation, offered Armstrong one of the few opportunities to *not* smile for the camera. It stages a defining moment in New Orleans history, the official shutdown of Storyville. In a solemn walk reminiscent of a jazz funeral, Armstrong and Billie Holiday lead a motley crew of prostitutes and other residents of the District toward the train station. Accompanied by their band, the two perform the song “Farewell to Storyville,” with Holiday singing the lead. With great lyricism, the scene elicits nostalgia for a world about to be lost and sadness for those who have to leave it. Utterly removed from historical facts, this enchanting version of Storyville’s abrupt ending is ingrained in the city’s historical narrative and as such has shaped its image. Its theme leads me back to the Richard C. Thomas’s airport triptych “Louis Armstrong’s Heavenly All-Star Band.” In its center, below Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton is seated at the piano, decidedly *not* smiling. Widely unpopular among many musicians at the time because of his arrogance and to this day controversial because he denied his African ancestry, Morton began his career in Storyville. In *Pretty Baby*, Louis Malle depicts Morton as an aloof and stylish piano professor. This character was not Malle’s idea but is based on the persona Morton had created for himself, making him one of the first, if not the first, African-American artist to take control of his public image—as
well as the inventor of his own racial identity. His stage name “Jelly Roll” celebrated his feats and adventures as a brothel pianist. The pose Morton holds in the triptych, his head pointing downward with a pensive expression on his face, suggests the other part of his persona, that of a sensitive artist. The painting is a very close rendition of a photo of Morton in which he performed this pose. As image evolves out of image, the painting that welcomes the traveler to New Orleans is a reminder that all images are inventions and that, like in a cabinet of mirrors at an amusement park, it is elusive to try to locate one “real New Orleans” in the constantly evolving dynamic of representation and experience.

__255__ Morton begins his memoirs (recorded by Alan Lomax) with these words: “As I can understand, my folks were in the city of New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase, and all my folks came directly from the shores of France.” Morton, _Mister Jelly-Roll_, 3.
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