Memoryscapes of Race

Black Radical Parading Cultures of New Orleans

Ana Paulina Lee

Sheriff Harry Lee, infamous for his outspoken and provocative stance on race and criminality, served the New Orleans suburb of Jefferson Parish for seven consecutive terms, from 1980 to 2007. Statements such as “if there are young blacks driving a car late at night in a predominately white area, they will be stopped” fueled his reelections, and for nearly three decades secured his tongue-in-cheek position as “king” (Nossiter 2007). During my first meeting with Ronald W. Lewis, the director of the New Orleans Museum of the House of Dance and Feathers, it came as a surprise when he asked if I was the sheriff’s kin. Despite the coincidence of our last name, and the commonality of a diasporic childhood spent in the backroom of a

working-class Chinese immigrant parents' store, I share nothing of Harry Lee's racial views or moral compass. Nevertheless, "Harry Lee" soon became Lewis's affectionate nickname for me.

In a separate yet related scene from the Crescent City, young people sometimes "play poverty" and invert societal orders of class in public spaces such as traffic lights, sidewalks, or plazas. In some cases, these youths are not poverty stricken, but rather are performing "beggar." In early spring 2015, while I was waiting for the light to change at the corner of North Claiborne and Elysian Fields Ave., a young white woman, dressed stylishly and surprisingly upscale for "playing beggar" approached my car with a sign that read: "These crackers need cheese." Whether successful or not, this performance makes strange the normalized sight of the homeless person and actual poverty of those who have stood at the same corner, the majority of whom are people of color and/or veterans, holding their own makeshift signs, who have become invisibilized.

These anecdotes are not isolated cases in the Big Easy, where racial impersonation such as "masking Indian" and performing blackface or whiteface are strategically deployed in public locations at specific times of year other than Carnival. These performances are not merely a carnivalesque inversion of social order and disorder, but they enact the cultural memory of the city. The archival practices associated with them underscore the way that New Orleans's memoryscape—its geographical dimensions of cultural memory—plays a critical role in confrontations with regimes of racial formation and representation.

Race is fixed to the geography and economy of the city, particularly its history of the slave trade and the Jim Crow laws that segregated public spaces, private real estate, and schools. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina made this economic and racial divide apparent to the whole world, and exposed a concerted effort at ethnic cleansing in the government's failure to respond to the emergency. Moreover, when I entered into New Orleans's memoryscape, I was called in to join its racial history and regimes of racial formation.

My line of inquiry is threefold: first, rather than being interested in examining race as an indicator based on the skin, I am concerned with its place in a city's cultural memory. Second, I am specifically addressing how black radical parading cultures transform people's relationships to New Orleans's segregated landscape through the embodied act of moving through neighborhoods with those one would not otherwise normally encounter. Third, I examine how these performances, and the archival practices of two of New Orleans's parading cultural museums—the House of Dance and Feathers and the Backstreet Museum—make apparent the infrastructure of race. They may not dissolve the city's architectonics, but they make visible their imprint on the city's cultural memory in the public creation and destruction of racial formation.

Macarena Gómez-Barris offers a valuable way to conceive of memoryscapes, the spatial and material dimensions of cultural memory: A region's physical features, including the architectural and material remnants of authoritarian pasts, are not only "expressions of the past in the pres-

Figure 1. (previous page) Charlie Brown, president of the Tremé Sidewalk Steppers, shredding his suit, 1 February 2015. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

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ent, they are also productive sites of social meaning where societies deal with, contest, struggle over, represent, and continue their journey through rupture” (2008:7–8). New Orleans’s memoryscape cannot be fully understood without first discussing the city’s financial investment in the color line, particularly in terms of the housing market. As a major port city that was once the largest and most prosperous slave trade center in the Deep South, the memoryscape of race is best traced in New Orleans’s housing.

One decade after Hurricane Katrina, it is clear that it was not simply a natural disaster that displaced 80 percent of New Orleanians. Since the beginning of urban development in the 19th century, flood concerns and racial segregation have constituted the same discourse. Jim Crow laws relegated African Americans to areas most susceptible to flooding (O’Neill 2010:15). Because New Orleans’s housing market is proportional to sea level, the most desirable homes are built high in areas with flood risk. Geographer Richard Campanella refers to these areas as the “white teapot,” descriptively marking the racial and economic implications:

[The] relatively wealthy and well-educated majority-white area [is] shaped like a kettle in uptown New Orleans, around Audubon Park and Tulane and Loyola universities, with a curving spout along the St. Charles Avenue/Magazine Street corridor through the French Quarter and into the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater. (Campanella 2013)

Hurricane Katrina, an apocalyptic scenario, exposed the environmentally vulnerable, racially demarcated structure of New Orleans’s urban development (Forgette et al. 2008:671). Two breached levees at the Industrial Canal in the Lower Ninth Ward opened the city to the Mississippi River, whose waters surged through the predominately black working-class neighborhood. For days, the floodwaters trapped thousands of people in attics, rooftops, and other precarious shelters, often without food or water. Many perished. Dead bodies were such a common sight in Katrina’s aftermath that rescue workers complained about corpses preventing them from helping survivors (Fabian 2010:61).

The segregated housing market was responsible for the distribution of environmental as well as public and private transportation vulnerabilities. During Katrina, unequal access to privately owned vehicles and public transportation prohibited working-class black residents from evacuating the city. Mia Bay, writing about the racial politics of the evacuation, posed a critical question regarding race and immobility: “What explains that race, rather than age and physical fragility, was the common factor that united the vast majority of those who remained in the city after Katrina struck? Of the 270,000 Katrina survivors trapped in New Orleans, ninety-three percent were black” (2010:24). Bay argues, “the inability of black people to protect their own bodies because of social barriers reveals that *Plessy v. Ferguson* is not just a historical artifact, but an enduring legacy in the United States” (30).

Figure 2. New Orleans’s “White Teapot.” (From Campanella 2013; graphic by Richard Campanella)

On 18 May 1896, the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld the legality of “separate but equal” and continued to uphold segregation laws, including against persons of Chinese descent, such as in the case of *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927), which permitted Chinese exclusion from a “white” school. Desegregation began in 1954, when the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation in schools to be “inherently unequal” and thereby in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment “equal protection clause” (US Courts n.d.). Katrina exposed that the state of Louisiana violated this clause of the Fourteenth Amendment; the segregated housing market left African Americans disproportionately unprotected.

Evacuation procedures precariously dispersed New Orleans’s residents to shelters throughout the United States; people were randomly placed on buses or airplanes, and families were separated—unable to communicate with or locate each other. Lewis recalls his time at Camp Stopher, a shelter set up in Thibodaux, Louisiana, at Nicholls State University: “There were people in that shelter from the Ninth Ward—the Desire Projects, the Lower Nine, even someone from Tupelo Street. They just ended up on the same bus during the evacuation of New Orleans” (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:45). One decade later, many of the homes destroyed during the floods remain uninhabited, boarded shut, and rotting with mold. The Lower Ninth Ward, according to Lewis, has only 35 to 40 percent of its former population.

Hurricane Katrina exposed US racism as an infrastructural part of urbanization, demonstrating that a cataclysmic natural disaster was not the root of the destruction and the overwhelming numbers of dead black residents. Katrina revealed geography as the site of struggle and contestation over forms of exclusion that came into play after slavery’s abolition. As such, the events during and after Katrina demonstrate the cultural and spatial dimensions of *forgetting slavery*.

The United States has never confronted its memory of the catastrophic epoch of slavery. Suffering from national amnesia, the country forgets that slavery was an economic institution that produced social death. Barnor Hesse observes that the “degrading social process” of enslavement was diluted by “the memory of its heroic and inevitable abolition” (2002:149–50). Quotidian examples of slavery’s misrepresentations include the word “slave,” which engraves the condition of racial enslavement onto a biological body; “enslaved,” by contrast, more accurately implicates a perpetrator. Misrepresentations of enslavement’s memory include the controversial pancake brand, Aunt Jemima. The nostalgic black mammy figure is ambiguously both the slave woman and the postemancipation subjugated laborer. The figure of Aunt Jemima replaces not only the memory of enslaved women, but it is representative of the continuous forms of racial domination that have persisted regardless of slavery’s abolition. In addition, it hides this history’s sexual, racial, and economic oppression with a romanticized and nostalgic visual depiction of plantation life, rendered as a warm and welcoming smile. Given this context of forgetting and amnesia, how might we reckon with the complex genealogies that produce racial regimes, and confront remembering in an ethical way?

Although the Thirteenth Amendment constitutionally abolished slavery in 1865, little was done at the social infrastructural level to help people emerge from mass systemic violence and discrimination. Denied civil liberties and treated as second-class citizens, people of color in New Orleans created civic organizations such as the Mardi Gras Indian Tribes and the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs—“benevolent societies”—that paid medical bills and funeral costs as well as manumission fees.¹ The Creole Wild West, the oldest Mardi Gras Indian tribe on record, can be traced to the 19th century. The longest standing Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the Young Men Olympian Jr. Benevolent Association, celebrated its 131st anniversary on 13 September 2015. The Mardi Gras Indians and the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are distinct traditions, but they are not mutually exclusive. Members of Mardi Gras Indian tribes may

1. The presence of benevolent societies organized by free people of color can be found in other parts of the Americas, including Brazil (see Lee 2012).

also belong to Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, and vice versa. The clubs and Indians are predominantly black working-class associations of New Orleans whose members represent, and care for, specific neighborhoods where they reside or feel connected.

The black radical street parading cultures organized by the Mardi Gras Indians and the many Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs throughout the year make New Orleans unique in the US for the community's collective effort to examine the history of slavery as a means of moving forward. The parades resist memorializing abolition, which too often takes the place of remembering enslavement. Social Aid and Pleasure Club members with brass bands in tow lead thousands of people through the public streets of the city, each club annually celebrating its anniversary. The parades transform participants' relationship to the city's memoryscape by creating new movements and vibrations through the space. Parading through historical sites of segregation transmits and brings dignity to histories of enduring practices of exclusion and debasement. The transmission is embodied in performances of "stepping out": Second Line parades begin when Social Aid and Pleasure Club members step, or more likely, dance out from a physically symbolic location, including private residences, local businesses, and African American cultural centers, such as the Tremé Center.² Cultural anthropologist Helen Regis contends, "parading in public almost always has a political meaning—even when the clubs organizing the parades are mostly 'social'" (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:130).

The parades of the Mardi Gras Indians' masking tradition originated in the early to mid-19th century during alliances forged between Native and African Americans, who united in their joint struggle against white supremacy. Some Mardi Gras Indians self-identify as Black Indians, acknowledging indigenous and black mixed-race ancestry. George Lipsitz observes:

In slavery times, Indian communities offered blacks a potential alternative to a society in which to be black was to be a slave and to be white was to be free. [...] The Indian image calls attention to the initial genocide upon which American "civilization" rests. It challenges the core dualism of American racism that defines people as either white or black. To perpetuate collective consciousness about Indians in this context is to perpetuate memories about runaway slaves seeking shelter. (1988:103–04)

The memory of this alliance is represented in the Mardi Gras Indian suit (the Big Chiefs do not like the word "costume," which they feel diminishes the spiritual significance of the suits). These magnificent beadwork and feather designs, craftsmanship, and artistry are the culmination of a creative and meditative process that involves dedicated daily sewing and beading for nine to twelve months prior to Mardi Gras. The sewing table ties together the communal, creative, meditative, and healing acts involved in transmitting the oral history and knowledge of the Mardi Gras Indian masking tradition. As Lewis attests in *The House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum* by Ronald W. Lewis:

Coming out of slavery, being African American wasn't socially acceptable. By masking like Native Americans, it created an identity of strength. The Native Americans, under all the pressure and duress, would not concede. These people were almost drove into extinction to maintain their way of life. And the same kind of feeling, coming out of slavery, "You're not going giving us a place here in society, we'll create our own." (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:65)

To honor this alliance and the strength it took to emerge from oppression and exclusion, the Mardi Gras Indians begin and end gatherings with the sacred song "Indian Red." The sacred

2. The parades are called Second Lines because of their line-up formation: club members comprise the first line of action, followed by a brass band, and the Second Line, composed of anyone who wants to join in, follows behind the band.

prayer is ritualistically sung as a call-and-response. The first two lines of the song “Madi cu defio” may be an adaptation of the creole slave song that begins “M’alle couri dans deser” (I am going into the wilderness) (Cable 1886:820). The song begins with a call to go into the wilderness, into the wild. This reference connects to the sense of wild in the word “maroon,” originally meaning feral or wild, which was used to refer to escaped slaves who had gone into the wild. The wilderness is a symbol of freedom in the fugitive sense, and exceeds the master/slave or civilization/barbarian dialectic.

The response to enter into the wild is also a refusal of the laws that converted freedom into criminality through labels such as “fugitive” and “runaway.” The response line, “Indian Red, Indian Red,” recalls and remembers the escape from captivity and the found freedom in the wild and with indigenous groups.

Madi cu defio [call]
 Indian Red, Indian Red [response]
 Madi cu defio [call]
 Indian Red, Indian Red [response]
 We are [call]
 Indians, Indians, Indians of the Nation [response]
 The whole, wild creation [response]
 We won’t bow down [call]
 No we won’t bow down [response]
 Down on that ground [call]
 On that dirty ground [response]
 Because I love to hear you call my Indian Red. (Tremé Brass & Indian Band 2012)³

Yet, the term “Indian Red” recalls racial representations that justify racialized violence and settler colonialist appropriation of indigenous lands. The Mardi Gras Indians deploy oral history performances and racial representations to confront the genocidal histories constructed by racial regimes. The song, like the yearlong embodied acts of sewing and beadwork that constitute the Mardi Gras Indian masking tradition, functions as an oral history performance that utilizes creativity to produce an ethical space for remembering racial regimes.

Della Pollock argues that oral history performance proclaims *living* history, that is, “the process of materializing historical reflection in live representation as both a form (container) and a means (a catalyst) of social action” (2005:1). Oral history performance intertwines healing with justice-seeking acts of remembering. In this way, it *works through* collective amnesia by bringing erased histories to light, and also by helping work through mass violence, as in trauma induced by ethnic cleansing and exclusion (Difarnecio 2014). Oral history performances also serve as powerful vehicles for demonstrating how the postmemory of mass violence, or the transmission of trauma through kinship relations and society at-large, often manifests at the convergence of creativity and mourning. An important insight of Marianne Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory—the transmission of “personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (2008:5)—is that intergenerational transmissions of trauma are so powerful that they “constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus mediated not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (5). The creative process plays a critical role in making sense of the incomprehensible event of catastrophic violence, as well as its intergenerational reverberations. The creative process does not explain, replace, or represent the traumatic event; it is not bound to rational logic. Rather, it is an act of witnessing that absorbs the body into the vibrations of history that exceed language but resound through us nonetheless. The black radical parading cultures of New Orleans create visual and aural experi-

3. I transcribed this excerpt of “Indian Red” from the recording by the Tremé Brass & Indian Band (2012).

ences of remembering whereby suits, various regalia, and brass bands form essential parts of the parades of cultural memory.

Race, and the effects of racial segregation, are by no means “post”; yet, there is a distinct difference between postmemory’s relation to enslavement and the contiguous histories of racial segregation, inherited poverty, and the denial of the pursuit of happiness. Black parading cultures are celebratory spaces that create the promise of happiness in a realm where the constitutional right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has been systematically denied. Parades constitute a healing mechanism that produces happiness through music, dance, and unity. If, as scholars have observed, the African slave trade inserted a racial code into class and religious distinctions, it also configured race into the politics of happiness, which intertwines with citizenship.⁴ While citizenship and its attendant access to the full rights of a political community indicate the ties between the individual and the nation-state, the determinants of who has access to those full rights continue to be bound to the cultural memory of slavery and its hierarchical determination of racialized labor.

In New Orleans, paraders take the politics of happiness and citizenship to the streets. While Sara Ahmed utilizes metaphors of the road or street to contend that the activity of happiness galvanizes at points of convergence where one may assert agency over one’s fate, I suggest a literal meaning is also available. The activity of happiness “depends on certain grounds being available for action” (Ahmed 2010:212). In the tireless question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” the road does not passively receive the chicken’s action and decision; rather, the road is the provider: “the road is an effect of past actions, of decisions taken to allow crossing points” (209).

Performances of racial representation at symbolic physical locations such as bridges, roads, and underpasses within the happy, festive space of the city’s various parading traditions reinforce and serve as a counterpoint to the city’s memoryscape of race. With a long historical and political tradition that can be traced to the carnivals of Catholic Europe, Mardi Gras utilizes strategies of satire, inversion, and revelry to express political critique. In southern Louisiana, the convergence of French and Spanish carnival practices that began in the early 18th century acculturated to racial segregation’s violent conditions, which are still present today, even if obscured by the fetish of plastic beads and lagniappe.

Krewes, Mardi Gras club organizations, sustained racial segregation from their founding years that date to the mid-19th century until 1991, when the City of New Orleans passed an ordinance requiring all Mardi Gras float-sponsoring clubs to desegregate or stay home (Vennman 1993). The following year, in protest against the desegregation ordinance, the Mystick Krewe of Comus and Knights of Momus canceled their parades. In 1993, the Krewe of Proteus followed suit (Wade [2011] 2013). In 2001, one decade after the ordinance passed, the Krewe of Comus, “the oldest, whitest, most exclusive parading organization” began accepting minorities and thus could parade again (Gettleman 2001). The ordinance protests highlight the long history of Mardi Gras krewes as exclusively white establishments, whose mask-wearing and horseback-riding traditions too easily evoke the Ku Klux Klan, and moreover demonstrate the persistence of segregated spaces in the postslavery South. Indeed, this reference to the KKK is clearly present in the political sphere. For example, in 1989, the New Orleans suburb of Jefferson Parish elected David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan president, to the Louisiana House of Representatives.⁵

4. María Elena Martínez charts the categories of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), which originated in medieval Castile on the Iberian Peninsula, and its migration to the Americas, specifically New Spain (Mexico). Martínez argues that by the 17th century, religious identity had produced a hierarchical system of classification that was ostensibly reconstituted in terms of race (see Martínez 2008).

5. Tyler Bridges, journalist for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, published an account of his coverage on Duke’s rise in popularity in the New Orleans’s suburbs of Jefferson Parish (see Bridges 1995).

Figure 3. *Mardi Gras, Krewe of Zulu, 17 February 2015. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)*

One of the oldest carnival krewe organizations and benevolent societies, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, started to parade during Mardi Gras as early as 1901. As a benevolent society, club members paid dues and in turn received forms of insurance including health and financial aid for funeral costs. As the origin story goes, in 1909, a group of the club's members attended the musical theatre show *There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me* at the Pythian Theater. After that performance, they decided to parade during Mardi Gras as Zulus. They wore "raggedy pants," a "lard can crown" and carried "banana stalk scepter[s]" (Zulu S.A.P. 2013). They also wore grass skirts and came out in blackface.

This tradition of masking as Zulus continues to the present when, on Mardi Gras day, the Krewe of Zulu mem-

bers still come out in blackface, with white circles around their mouths and eyes and toss decorated—and highly coveted—coconuts at the crowd. Their grotesquely exaggerated costumes and makeup make a mockery of blackface minstrelsy and its one-dimensional stereotypes. Costumes and float designs imitate African warriors. The Zulu's annual blackface performance, to recall Saidiya Hartman's analysis of minstrelsy, mobilizes the double function of effacing and fortifying "the line between dominant and insurgent orchestrations of blackness" (1997:8).

Joseph Roach recalls Mardi Gras morning in 1991, when he witnessed the near collision of Rex, King of Carnival, and King Zulu, monarch of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club. The latter began much later than its scheduled parade time, causing a traffic jam of the Zulu parade and the Krewe of Rex, whose members are often the attendees of the debutante parties of New Orleans society. Roach recollects: "As a few of the floats ran parallel to each other along either side of St. Charles Avenue, in defiance of the carefully planned and well-policed route schedule, the maskers I watched ignored each other, creating a gulf of silence between two everlasting clubs" (1996:19–20). The parade route collision demonstrates the cityscape's significance in these contests for memory taken to the streets, and makes apparent the land's relation to memory and history. St. Charles Avenue conforms to the crescent of the Crescent City, which extends from the Mississippi River near Tulane University uptown to Lee Circle downtown, not far from the French Quarter. St. Charles Avenue is literally New Orleans's main "artery": whoever controls St. Charles Avenue controls New Orleans, at least symbolically.

Also occurring on Mardi Gras day, away from the floats and beads of St. Charles Avenue, Mardi Gras Indian tribes partake of spiritual rituals, encounters, and battles over recognition for that year's prettiest suit. On Mardi Gras day the mastery of one's beadwork is appreciated and judged in street encounters and "prettiest" contests, when Mardi Gras Indian tribe members

take over the streets as a magnificent visual presence. In 2015, Victor Harris commemorated 50 consecutive years of masking as a Mardi Gras Indian, a record-breaking achievement. Big Chief Harris has made a suit every year since he first joined the Yellow Pocahontas in 1965, with whom he learned to sew under the tutelage of Yellow Pocahontas Chief of Chiefs Tootie Montana and designer Melvin “Left” Reed. In 1984, Victor Harris formed the Spirit of Fi Yi Yi Tribe and created a black inaugural suit. Every 10 years, he makes a black suit to honor the “spiritual journey of walking in the spirit of Fi Yi Yi” (Harris 2015).

The suits are considered sacred because they embody ancestral spirits and are the physical result of a year’s worth of blood, sweat, and tears. Big Chiefs teach their personal sewing and beadwork style and technique to tribe members, and a Mardi Gras Indian suit showcases these skills and serves as a visual marker of tribe membership. Styles also distinguish between urban regions. For example, downtown suits often use sewing techniques that produce three-dimensional sculptural figures on the suit’s surface. Cynthia Becker observes that the three-dimensional qualities reflect the flux of migration that occurred in downtown New Orleans, where skilled craftsman of predominately Spanish, French, and Creole people settled. The sculptural styles of downtown suits are distinct from

uptown suits. Anglo-Americans settled in the uptown section, where the suits are noted for their flat pictorial beadwork (Becker 2013:39). In an interview with Becker, Big Chief Darryl Montana describes how his father’s skills as a latherer took form in his suits: “My Daddy would walk through the French Quarter every weekend. If he saw some gingerbread work that he liked on a building, he would take and sketch it and try to include that in his work” (in Becker 2013:39). The suit designer envisions the images for the suit, which vary according to a spectrum of imagination and skill. Beadwork may convey a visual narrative, related to that year’s events, or may be allegorical. The intended meaning and symbolism belongs to the maker.

While the parading traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians and Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are performances of oral history, they have also become marketing tools for the city. The City of New Orleans markets itself to tourists as a destination for festivals.⁶ Yet this reputation is

Figure 4. Mardi Gras, Krewe of Zulu, 17 February 2015. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

6. In addition, the city organizes and sponsors some of the festivals, including the Jazz and Heritage Festival; Crescent City Blues and BBQ Fest; Tremé Fest; Oak Street Po-Boy Fest; N.O. Burlesque Festival; Algiers Fall Fest; Red Dress Run; New Orleans Sushi Festival; Louisiana Seafood Fest; Words and Music Festival, among many others (New Orleans Official Guide 1996–2017).

more invested in servicing a tourist industry than upholding cultural heritage (Regis 1999). The people responsible for New Orleans's black parading heritage often do not share in the city's tourism profits. The city uses the parades as a marketing tool to profit from the intellectual and artistic labor of black craftspeople, who bear all of the cost and get none of the profit, except if they engage in the commercialization of cultural production such as performing at local venues or during events as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. The City of New Orleans requires Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs to purchase street permits and pay for police escort services. These fees run a few thousand dollars, depending on the size of the parade and number of police officers needed for parade escort, in addition to other costs, such as hiring brass bands and purchasing materials to make banners, umbrellas, streamers, baskets, fans, and other regalia donned by club members who lead the parades. Efforts to promote festivity-driven tourism, including Mardi Gras Indian concerts, often subsume New Orleans's parading cultures within market logic, obscuring their significance as oral history performances.

On nearly 40 Sundays per year, a different Social Aid and Pleasure Club celebrates its anniversary by leading the Second Line through the streets of New Orleans.⁷ The larger clubs have Second Lines with upwards of five divisions, plus five different brass bands with Second Liners following behind each one. The parades bring together thousands of people and promote local entrepreneurship. Families or individuals sell foodstuffs and beverages, including barbeque, baked goods, fruit, beer, cocktails, and water.

In the days leading up to a club's anniversary Sunday, the club's leaders post a route sheet on wwoz.org, New Orleans's local radio station's website, or sent via email to the mailing list of the Backstreet Museum. The route sheet serves a practical purpose: it indicates where the Second Line will begin, its direction, and the planned rest stops. Symbolically, the route sheet provides the path of a specific memoryscape. It maps the geographical contours of cultural memory specific to that club, as Lewis explains:

All clubs are representatives of their communities, and your parade represents that. When you form a route, you are bringing people through the cracks and crevices of your neighborhood to give everybody an opportunity to be part of it. The parade has its political impact, as well as its social impact. We truly belong to the city. (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:134)

To kick off the celebration of their 21st year anniversary on 1 February 2015, the Tremé Sidewalk Steppers Social Aid and Pleasure Club members stepped out from the Tremé Center at 900 N. Villere Street, symbolically and physically located at the center of significant civil rights events in New Orleans. The Tremé Sidewalk Steppers led Second Liners along the backstreets to Louis Armstrong Park and Congo Square—a gathering space where enslaved, free people of color, and Indigenous communities met on Sundays to sell or trade goods, beginning in the mid-18th century. In 1817, the City Council of New Orleans passed legislation that permitted African slave dancing at the square (Ventura 1985:123–24). A plaque at the square names the location as the birthplace of jazz. The Congo Square Preservation Society organizes festivals and a weekly drum circle on Sundays at 3:00 p.m. to commemorate the history of Congo Square. From there, the Tremé Sidewalk Steppers led the multitude on a four-hour-long route until the final stop at Kermit's Mother-in-Law Lounge, located adjacent to Interstate 10. Built in the mid-20th century, the interstate cut right through the central road of the Mardi Gras Indian parades, and forced 500 households to relocate (Baumbach and Borah 1980). Today, the underpass provides shelter to many of the city's homeless. Unexpectedly, the acoustics under the bridge add a powerful element to brass band performances, drumming, and singing and is an important convergence point for many Social Aid and Pleasure Club Second Line routes and Mardi Gras Indian encounters.

7. There are approximately 80 Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans.

To resist the persistent pull of market forces, each year, Charlie Brown, president of the Tremé Sidewalk Steppers, destroys his suit. On 1 February 2015, I watched him climb onto the roof of Kermit's Mother-in-Law Lounge, the final stop on that year's Second Line route. As thousands of people stood below, Charlie Brown began to cut up his suit, throwing pieces of it into the crowd. In a final display of the garment's pure memory value (Avelar 1999:206), he tore to tatters each article of clothing until he transformed his entire suit into rags. Once he removed all use value, he threw his torn clothes into the crowd. The pieces of fabric might be held onto as souvenirs, but they were literally stripped of monetary value. His annual gesture not only locks the object into a historical moment, but also performs the stance that cultural memory must not become a commodity.

The tense struggle over control of the visual and material cultures of black parading cultures poses questions concerning the push and pull between cultural commodity and cultural heritage. The dearth of government and institutional support and the constant struggle of members against commodity culture returns to the issue of national amnesia.

In terms of archiving and transmitting the performances of black radical parading cultures, what archival practices fail to fix cultural production to an official narrative or the market logic of commodity culture? How can these parading practices remain faithful to the complexity of oral history performances? If, as Diana Taylor states, “we might conclude that the archival, from the beginning, sustains power” (2003:19), then how might the archive offer ways for the practitioner of archival memory to maintain control over what s/he is enacting? One answer to these questions can be found in the operations of two community museums located in New Orleans: the Backstreet Cultural Museum and the Museum of the House of Dance and Feathers. These grassroots museums, born out of the garages and backyards of self-trained historians and curators Sylvester Francis and Ronald W. Lewis, offer methodologies for archiving the black radical parading histories of New Orleans, including new ways of conceptualizing oral history performance within the physical space of the museums.

While city and state museums, universities, biennials, and art galleries have displayed the black parading traditions of New Orleans, the House of Dance and Feathers and the Backstreet Museum are unique for having been created and maintained by people who, as Lewis states, have “lived the culture” (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:7).

Located in Faubourg Tremé, historically the oldest community of free people of color in the Deep South, the Backstreet Museum is at the symbolic and physical center of numerous significant civil rights movement events. One block from the museum is St. Augustine Church. Founded in 1842, it is the oldest African American Catholic parish church built by free people of color in the United States. There, enslaved people sat in pews purchased for them by free people of color. The church prides itself on its history of integration (St. Augustine 2016). Outside the church lies the tomb of the unnamed slave, dedicated to the memory of enslaved

Figure 5. Backstreet Museum. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

Figure 6. Backstreet Museum, Social Aid and Pleasure Club Suits exhibit. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

people whose names and origins were taken with the theft of their bodies. One block from the museum is Congo Square.

The Backstreet Museum houses one of the largest collections of materials pertaining to the oral history performances of African American carnival parades, including the Mardi Gras Indians, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, Baby Dolls, the Skull and Bone Gang, and jazz funerals, each traditions in their own right. In the 1970s, Sylvester Francis began filming, photographing, collecting, and archiving regalia from different parading cultures. Subsequently, Francis transformed his two-car garage in the “backstreets” of the historic Tremé neighborhood into a cultural center. According to Francis, as word began to spread about the museum, many of the people he had photographed, and to whom he had given a photograph, began to bring him memorabilia, including streamers, umbrellas, fans, T-shirts, and photographs of their own.

As the collection in Francis’s garage began to grow, so did the need for a larger space. Big Chief Victor Harris, “Spirit of Fi Yi Yi,” donated suits to the collection, and soon after, Joan Brown Rhodes, owner of the Rhodes Funeral Home where

Francis worked, donated property to Francis to found the Backstreet Cultural Museum. The museum officially became a nonprofit organization in 1999. Today the museum’s collection holds more than 30 years of parading history, including documentation of over 500 jazz funerals, among displays that serve as memorial altars for deceased friends and family (Backstreet Cultural Museum n.d.).

Memorial T-shirts emblazoned with the image of a deceased loved one hang from the ceiling among numerous other visual and material signifiers that line the floors and walls of the room. Each object holds a memory. Robert Francis, Sylvester’s younger brother, guides and teaches visitors about the function of the objects and their significance for a given event or parade. The visual and cultural materials not only relate the object’s significance within the parading culture from which it originates, but they also transmit and mobilize the “usable past,” or the modes in

which one movement will cite another “to get the symbolic and affective strength” of the performance (Taylor 2015).

Inspired by visits to the Backstreet Cultural Museum, and under the mentorship of Sylvester Francis, Ronald Lewis created the House of Dance and Feathers, a nonprofit cultural organization located in Lewis’s backyard on Tupelo Street in the Lower Ninth Ward. Before it became a museum, the House of Dance and Feathers was a barbershop and a playhouse for Ronald’s grandchildren. A showcase of creativity and cultural history, the museum in turn mobilizes the memoryscape and serves as a guardian of its archive. For example, it stimulated a string of creative productions, including Shamarr Allen’s song “The House of Dance and Feathers” (2012) and sections of the novel *Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans* (2009) by Dan Baum.

The museums’ curatorial practices operate within the logic of oral history, which prioritizes embodied transmission and can often utilize objects to both recall and transmit memory. Narrative provides a context for understanding how the objects relate to each other. For example, Lewis’s narrative gives order to the Pan-Africanism exhibit at the House of Dance and Feathers:

The masks represent West African culture and the boats represent those slave ships that brought us to and fro—mostly to. And in the middle, I put an Aunt Jemima doll with its image of racism. It’s easy to just push history to the side, but I don’t want to do that because it’s there. To be fair, I want to identify with it all. When I talk about my mama coming off that sugarcane plantation, I’m not ashamed of that because that’s where my roots are. As I was growing up, my mama always had her hair tied up in a scarf. When I see this doll, I remember that, too, and think about how my family survived those cane fields. (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:13)

Lewis’s account provides insight into the way that race is a performative declaration that erases and produces the subject as representation. For Lewis, the image of Aunt Jemima produces the postmemory of surviving enslaved plantation labor and continuing forms of racialized subjugated labor that survived regardless of abolition in new economic forms like sharecropping. The figure of Aunt Jemima imposes a layered mode of racialization and exclusion onto the trauma and postmemory of slavery.

Figure 7. Backstreet Museum, Mardi Gras Indian Mandingo Warriors “Spirit of Fi Yi Yi” Big Chief’s Suits exhibit. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

Figure 8. House of Dance and Feathers. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

The exhibit and Lewis's narrative shift attention from the object of racialization to the relationship that the racialized object has to recollection. In this way, the collections of both museums recall people and events, but also demonstrate memory's relationship to specific genealogies of racial formation. As much as memory and performance may work through and expose the fictions that underlie slavery's production of a hierarchy of skin color, they may also interpolate new bodies into existing codes.

Performances in the memoryscape of race, and the archival practices associated with them at the Backstreet Museum and the House of Dance and Feathers, mobilize memory toward collaboration, civic involvement, and fortification of personal and community relationships. Lewis is the president of the Big Nine Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the gatekeeper of the Skull and Bone Gang, and has held other leadership roles, including union organizer. In addition to having been a Mardi Gras Indian, he collaborates on large-scale Second Line parades and year-round fundraisers and activities. He is also a master at incorporating cultural memory, play, and performance into politically or socially impactful activities.

Lewis's museum, located just blocks from the levee system that failed to contain the Mississippi River during Katrina, was destroyed along with his entire neighborhood. When he returned to find his museum in ruins, he conceived of the museum's revival as a way to lead, "to show how, through all this misery and despair, it could be

Figure 9. House of Dance and Feathers, Pan-Africanism exhibit. (Photo by Ana Paulina Lee)

done” (in Breunlin, Lewis, and Regis 2009:47). Teams of architects and volunteers from Kansas State and other universities joined Lewis to rebuild the museum and his house on Tupelo Street. In coming together, as occurs in the organizational structure of the Second Line, the museum of oral history performance mobilized the past to conceive of a new future.

Beyond serving as an archive of parading cultures, the Backstreet Museum and House of Dance and Feathers are each, to quote the Backstreet’s slogan, a “powerhouse of knowledge” (Backstreet Cultural Museum n.d.). Like the Social Aid and Pleasure Club and Mardi Gras Indian regalia that comprise their collections, the museums are sites of living history. They transmit the complexity and depth of the artistry, healing, organization, spirituality, and joy of New Orleans cultural memory. The oral history performance museums display histories that are irreducible to any one object or memory. The cultural museums are not (only) about coming out of slavery and surviving; they do not portray victimized accounts of resistance against racial violence, nor do they exist to promote a politically driven agenda. Rather, they establish the notion that, in order to create an ethical place for the memory of slavery, we must also remember the technologies of racialization that have sustained a community’s strength and that continue to dwell in the geography of a place.

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