

Post-Katrina Intrusions on African American Cultural Traditions in New Orleans

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Introduction

Tremé is considered America's oldest Black neighborhood. Between 1775 and 1841, Black people who had earned their freedom from slavery, mixed with recent immigrants from Saint Domingue (Haiti), owned 80 percent of Tremé. They created businesses, started the first daily Black newspaper, *L'Union* (later the *Tribune*), and centered Congo Square at the heart of the neighborhood as the spiritual public space to celebrate and preserve their African heritage in spite of enslavement (Johnson 1991).

Three centuries later, Tremé is struggling to remain a predominantly Black space in a majority Black city. The Housing Authority of New Orleans noted that several sections of Tremé had shifted from majority Black to majority white (Rose 2020; LaBorde 2016). In addition to Tremé, traditionally Black neighborhoods that spread out from Uptown, such as Broadmoor and Central City, heading east past Tremé, then to the Seventh Ward, Gentilly, and on to the Ninth Ward, also experienced rapid gentrification. The Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center noted in 2020 that since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had a total of thirteen gentrifying neighborhoods with an additional fifty-one showing early signs of gentrification. Altogether, the city now ranks as the fifth most gentrified in America (Rose 2020).¹

Gentrification is one of the more far-reaching postdisaster effects of Hurricane Katrina, a decade and a half later. When the waters receded in New Orleans, it stripped the ability of generations of Black New Orleansians to rebuild life, community, and to hold on to heritage. Along Claiborne Avenue, where second lines and jazz funerals take place, over 1,000

Black households have disappeared, and the stretch has gained 120 white households, 50 Latino households, and 5 Asian households, according to the latest census data for that neighborhood (Rose 2020).

More than fifteen years since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans remains an important case study of how post-disaster recovery can be persistently unequal in the long term. Many post-disaster case studies often mark the ten-year anniversary of a natural disaster, noting infrastructure renovations and the return of economic activity and population density as overall indicators that a disaster-vulnerable space has “returned to normal.”

This chapter dives deeper into postdisaster recovery, centering marginalized communities within disaster spaces and the ways in which their lives and communities remain forever changed by a disaster. In fact, while Hurricane Katrina was the perfect collision of mother nature (a hurricane) and a man-made crisis (failed levees, slow federal response), resulting in the flooding of a city, the uneven return of New Orleans is entirely a man-made crisis in which policies or the lack of system protections failed to allow a fair opportunity for marginalized peoples to regain what was lost from a natural disaster. The gentrification of Black communities in New Orleans is therefore the consequence of a lack of intervention to protect African American families from market forces, and of the policies of urban revitalization that drive such forces in postdisaster spaces.

A further form of marginalization is that the cultural capital of New Orleans is rooted in African American traditions that were first birthed in Black neighborhoods across the city and controlled within neighborhoods in order to pass this unique heritage down through several generations. This chapter describes first the ways in which gentrification of Black neighborhoods in New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, threatens the survival of cultural practices that are crucial to livelihoods and community cohesion in Black neighborhoods. These traditions were born out of resistance that first began in enslavement, and persisted through three hundred years of oppression, and that bring joy and upliftment to souls in addition to economic means and empowerment.

To their credit, New Orleans residents continue to act as gatekeepers of what is left of their communities and to serve as watchdogs of the erasure of their communities and the settlement into them by “transplants” (the name given to mostly white residents who have made New Orleans their home after Hurricane Katrina). While grassroots organizing is one way in which residents continue to push back against their displacement, digital spaces also allow residents to draw national attention to the ways in which the place that was the home of Louis Armstrong is under cultural assault, precipitated by the aftermath of a disaster.

Cultural Gentrification

As the demographic shifts into historically Black neighborhoods rapidly continue in the city, African Americans have decried the cooption of communal practices that were the exclusive and traditional domain of culture bearers. These physical displacements and cultural intrusions are evident in the ways in which Black residents continue to fight to preserve their sacred spaces and sacred traditions.

The movement of “transplants” into Black spaces in New Orleans takes on a slightly different nature than in other gentrified Black communities across the country. The appeal of Black culture in this city to outsiders places a premium on escape, relish, and entertainment, which makes living in Black neighborhoods in New Orleans quaint, faux-authentic, and hip. The participation of outsiders in the sacred practices of marginalized groups is an extension of the privilege that those who hold power are able to exert over disenfranchised groups (Thomas 2012).

Particularly for Black people, the consumption of their lived experiences is not new. The fetishizing and exoticizing of Black bodies and Black cultural traditions is rooted in Frantz Fanon’s theorizing of the white gaze.

Recalling Afro-Caribbean philosopher Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008), scholar Dianca London (2017) contemplates the dangers of the “white gaze.” “When race is signified via the white gaze,” London writes in a scholarly essay, “narratives involving people of color are otherized. Their stories become tangential, contingent upon their proximity to or distance from whiteness. When the white gaze is privileged, all other identities are jeopardized, confining marginalized bodies to typecast tokenism or, even worse, erasure.”

The city was predominantly Black before Hurricane Katrina, dropping to 59 percent from 67 percent prior to the storm. The white population in New Orleans has grown by over 10 percent since 2005, with 90 percent of white native residents returning to the city (Rose 2020). Therefore, the city grew in white residents who were not native to New Orleans and familiar with its unique Black culture. Nor did new residents fully understand the ways in which native white residents adhered to socially understood but unwritten rules of mutual respect while engaging in city-wide events.

Estimates of returning white residents and new transplants to the city (those who moved to New Orleans after the storm) outpaced the rate of return of native African American residents threefold (Population Reference Bureau 2010). Younger transplants, in particular, also faced the city’s rising housing costs and shortage of units and were lured to traditionally African American wards and neighborhoods that have lower costs of liv-

ing. The result has been the rapid gentrification of historic African American neighborhoods, wards, and blocks, which were traditionally located along public transit lines, or within short walking or biking routes to the French Quarter or to downtown.

As transplant residents began to purchase homes or rent in Black neighborhoods, boutique businesses from coffee shops like Starbucks to sandwich café's and even a Whole Foods emerged for the first time in predominantly Black neighborhoods. White residents also lobbied for and supported the expansion of bike lanes, more pedestrian friendly sidewalks, greenways, and the extension of the streetcar line further past the French Quarter and into Mid-City. This changed the nature of Black communities both visually and communally and became a source of both tensions and, later on, cultural clashes between residents and transplants.

The visual change was particularly painful for residents because of the significance of Tremé and its beating heart, Congo Square. Enslaved Africans and free people of color founded Congo Square as a space to preserve African traditions and create community in the face of enslavement. Many of the cultural traditions of New Orleans: music, dance, art, Vodou, and Black masking were forged and preserved first at Congo Square. Efforts by the city council to revive Congo Square in 2021 generated widespread resistance online and through organized protests from Black residents across the city who argued that this sacred public space remains a target for urban revitalization, primarily because of the gentrification taking place around it. The desire by the city to repurpose space around Congo Square in 2021 triggered fears that the site is marked as a space for redevelopment primarily because of its proximity to and appeal for transplants, rather than to protect it as a sacred Black public space.

In addition to Congo Square and its use today as a site for community gathering, Black communities created Black Mardi Gras and public performance traditions that were defined by the geographical spaces where they forged community. Black masking traditions in particular in New Orleans, which are a part of major city events such as Mardi Gras, Super Sunday, and Jazz Festival, are to this day rooted in the earliest forms of resistance by people of African descent in this city.

Their practices are contextualized in the lived experiences of African Americans in New Orleans, and their performance today through festivals are tributes to their ancestors, rallying cries for continued forms of resistance to systemic oppression, and a source of joy and escape from the hardships of life. They are not performances for external entertainment, although they are featured parts of the carnival and festival public events that attract tourists and bring economic means into the city. Rather they are community cultural practices passed down from generation to genera-

tion, and their performance annually takes place in the spaces where Black residents have lived.

Indeed, African Americans in New Orleans do not see the performance of their cultural heritage as a spectator sport. For instance, Black masking traditions like Mardi Gras Indians pay tribute to marronage and to Native Americans who allowed African Americans to survive as runaways (Smith 1994; Wehmeyer 2010). After emancipation, Black women created the Baby Dolls as a form of empowerment to reclaim their dignity as sex workers in the French Quarter (Vaz 2013). Second-lining can be found in births and deaths, is a core form of celebrating life, and its music and dance are passed down from generation to generation (Turner 2016). While tourists and white native New Orleanians are spectators to these Black practices, the unspoken rule and understanding is the need for distance and respect.

As a result of the celebration and homage these customs display, spectators who are not part of these communities or clubs or tribes must remain on the outskirts of these processions and can only engage performers if invited in. For the most part, this is how tourists have engaged these cultural practices during Mardi Gras season and across the year. With new transplants who reside in the spaces where these customs are performed yearly, the shared ownership of a historic space results in a battle between a community that sees its streets as ancestral and transplants who also see those streets as boundaries for the property they now own. Through ownership of former Black spaces that are rooted in history and the economic power ownership provides, rights accrue to transplants that privilege one form of existence over another.

These physical intrusions on Black cultural practices in New Orleans have real consequences beyond mere annoyance, objectification, or disrespect (Barrios 2010). These postdisaster physical intrusions correspond to three consequences: economic loss through appropriation, increased forms of criminalization, and the rupturing of Black safe communal spaces.

First, these intrusions result in economic loss when Black practices are appropriated and exploited by transplants. Cultural traditions created by African Americans in the city are frequently used in backdrops by Hollywood South (Louisiana's film industry) and for other parts of the entertainment industry; however, the bearers of these cultural practices continue to deplore the lack of recognition or compensation for native Black New Orleanians.

Second, these intrusions enhance criminalization of Black practices and Black bodies. Transplants have been successful in activating and proposing new ordinances to enforce "noise pollution" from African American street traditions ranging from block parties, party buses, street performers, and second-lining. The city's police have been used to shut down such

events and make arrests following complaints by transplants about what have been traditional community practices at different times of the year.

Third, these intrusions further rupture Black safe communal spaces, adding a second level of violence inflicted on Black communities in the city after Katrina and its mismanagement tore the soul of Black New Orleans and scattered it across the South. Indeed, native Black New Orleanians and their children who moved away from the city after Katrina use the following phrase or hashtag: Nola born, elsewhere raised. To be born Black in New Orleans is a distinctive cultural marker that displacement from Katrina could never erase. All native New Orleanians wish to travel home, physically or spiritually. The cultural practices born in the city are a line that connects displaced residents and even Katrina Babies (those born outside of the city to New Orleans families or New Orleans children displaced by the storm). While their physical spaces are disrupted, their distinct cultural heritage allows New Orleans to be transported as an omnipresent sense of identity and belonging.

Cultural Intrusions

Cultural Appropriation for Economic Gain

Pop star Miley Cyrus's hip-hop phase can be traced back to post-Katrina New Orleans. The country singer and actress made a dramatic image and musical style transition that started in 2013 and ended around 2017, followed by several apologies for comments Cyrus made in response to her being labeled a "culture vulture." However, in Cyrus's short hip-hop phase, she produced the album *Bangerz*, which went triple platinum and number one on the Billboard chart when it debuted in 2013.

So what did Cyrus's success have to do with the mainstreaming and appropriation of Black New Orleans culture? She first encountered bounce music while shooting a film in the city, which emerged as the hub of Hollywood South through a Louisiana effort to lure West Coast film and TV projects to the state with the goal of revitalizing the city and southeast, Louisiana (Morgan Parmett 2014). The key to selling Black New Orleans culture was partly Hollywood South's arrival in a postapocalyptic New Orleans that made for good television and films (Roberts 2017: 23). In other words, New Orleans's physical disaster was an economic boom for Hollywood production and for storytelling. The movement of creatives into New Orleans brought a first group of transplants to the city who stayed and became part of the city's new residents.

While shooting the comedy film *So Undercover* in 2012, Cyrus spent time with other transplants, and while experiencing the city's culture, learned

how to twerk. On her Facebook account she posted a short viral video of her twerking to bounce music. She then nationally debuted twerking as part of her new performing hip-hop persona at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, mainstreaming it and popularizing it among white pop culture consumers. Entertainment media at the time described Cyrus as having “invented” twerking (“Miley Cyrus” 2015). The dance became so popular after Cyrus’s performance on national TV that both the Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries added it as a new word in 2013, the same year as her performance.

Prior to Cyrus’s demonstration of twerking, this form of dancing had been derided as part of Black culture that society deemed hypersexualized, provocative, and dirty (Baskerville 2014; Halliday 2020). In New Orleans, in particular, where Cyrus first learned her moves, twerking had its roots among low-income residents in the city’s housing projects and was a key feature of bounce music, which was pioneered by rappers like Magnolia Shorty and Big Freedia. Hurricane Katrina destroyed public housing projects in the city and scattered those residents into other neighborhoods or cities. This cultural form that was often described as being “ghetto” was a feature of block parties, street parties, and spontaneous dance-offs by DJs in the projects. Big Freedia became a postdisaster icon for former residents of public housing because her music restored memory of the life and community that was lost when Katrina destroyed many of the city’s projects, which were later demolished by city decree.

While Miley Cyrus sold one million copies of her *Bangerz* album in 2013, New Orleans native Big Freedia and other bounce-music artists continue to sue and speak out against the use of the artform they innovated and popularized without credit and compensation by both well-known artists and other creatives who have become transplants in the city, and who routinely mine New Orleans culture for ways to freshen up popular culture. In response to Cyrus’ performance of twerking and the interest generated in bounce, Freedia, who is called “The Queen of Bounce,” said in an interview in 2013, “It’s become offensive to a lot of people who’ve been twerking and shaking their ass for years, especially in black culture” (Superselected 2020). In her 2015 biography, Freedia wrote of Cyrus: “I want our culture to be credited” (Big Freedia & Balin, 2015, p. 237).

Joining more popular names like Big Freedia, local groups also spoke out at the time about Cyrus’s appropriation of Black culture, specifically Black New Orleans culture. In 2013, the Millisia White New Orleans Baby Doll group began an effort to educate others on the origins of twerking culture, particularly as it originated in the city in the community and spaces where block parties were held (“News with a Twist” 2013).

Since Cyrus's appropriation of twerking culture in support of her successful musical transition into hip-hop, many other artists, both Black and white, have moved to New Orleans to co-opt parts of Black culture into mainstream art forms. While New Orleans's artists have recognized how their culture has become more mainstream, they critique the lack of credit and financial remuneration when their art and culture is co-opted.

Policing Gentrified Neighborhoods

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was the most incarcerated city in the US (Vargas 2020). In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, inmates at the city jail were left without basic food, water and shelter. Also dubbed the murder capital of the world, New Orleans pursued aggressive policing by its police department, which heightened tensions between law enforcement and Black communities. As the difficult days after the storm rolled on, hysteria over unfounded claims of mass looting ended in fatal police shootings of Black men, which only years later were determined to have been the source of a large-scale cover-up (Miller, Roberts, and LaPoe 2014).

In one of the more notable police shootings after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) officers killed two unarmed men, one who was seventeen years old, James Brissette, and another, aged forty, Ronald Madison, who was determined to be mentally disabled. Four other unarmed Black men were also shot. The shootings took place six days after the storm on the Danziger Bridge. It took five years for a federal jury to convict five NOPD officers. The cover-up led the Department of Justice to launch an investigation into the NOPD's practices, placing the department under consent decree monitoring to implement many reforms after the disaster.

Criminal justice reform in New Orleans is one of the main reasons that the state of Louisiana is the only one in the South with a Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, whose victory was primarily determined by the city's residents. Edwards became a national model, cited even by President Donald Trump, for his comprehensive criminal justice reform plan. The model adopted longtime work by local activists to release first-time, nonviolent, and nonsex offenders, to reduce prison terms for petty offenders, particularly for marijuana charges, and to invest in programs that reduce recidivism and assist the formerly incarcerated in reentering society. The plan also aims to create alternatives to incarceration for petty offenses. The plan resulted in the largest release in the state's history of inmates on "good standing" while serving their sentence. It also took the state off the top of the list of most incarcerated states in the US and is pro-

jected to drop the prison population by 12 percent over the next decade (Office of the Governor 2020).

The first key to effective reentry is the community that many of the formerly incarcerated are returning to, and who supports them in ways that allow for successful return to society and the prevention of recidivism. With the arrival of new white residents and businesses into Black neighborhoods, longtime residents have spoken out about the increased surveillance by law enforcement in those communities, not for the overall safety of the neighborhood but primarily because of an increase in calls from white residents (Sinders 2021; Blumberg 2020). These calls range from reports of carjacking to alerts, reports of break-ins, or expressions by white residents of their need to walk, jog, or bike safely in neighborhoods that were, or still are, predominantly Black but still hold many abandoned homes.

The increased hypervigilance of law enforcement in gentrified neighborhoods often results in false arrests, profiling of Black residents, and general distrust between communities and police. The community that would have worked to reintegrate formerly incarcerated persons in the past is slowly becoming a shell of its former self, without the resources and support the state needs for sustained community-wide reentry efforts. As former inmates return to live with relatives or the elderly as a result of this state-wide effort, gentrified Black neighborhoods become riskier because white “transplant” residents activate law enforcement within these formerly predominantly Black neighborhoods, heightening the surveillance of the formerly incarcerated and resulting in probation violations for minor infractions. Ultimately the use of law enforcement to patrol gentrified Black neighborhoods, at the requests of newer white residents, weakens the ways in which the community worked in the past to support successful re-entry into society for the formerly incarcerated.

Physical and Spiritual Displacement

In 2017, actress Carrie Fisher died. Members of the Krewe of Chewbacchus announced they would hold a second-line to celebrate Fisher’s life. It set off an outcry on Facebook among Mardi Gras krewes about the sacredness of second-lines. One Facebook user, Martha Alguera, posted: “Really Carrie Fisher needs a second-line?” (Brasted 2017) The question set off a series of public outcries that prompted the krewe to remove the word second-line from the event. The krewe’s cofounder Ryan Ballard told the *Times-Picayune* that “this debate was waiting to happen. It’s all about all the changes in New Orleans that have taken place over the last few years. Some good, some bad. It’s the new New Orleans, post-Katrina world where the city is evolving” (Brasted 2017)

The public outcry over the Carrie Fisher second-line wasn't the first. Previously a second-line planned for David Bowie created a public outcry among the Black community. Second-lines, which are street musical processions, originated in West Africa and were retained by enslaved Africans in New Orleans (Berry 1988). Jazz funerals are a component of second-lines aimed at celebrating the lives of loved ones who are no longer with the community (Turner 2016). They are practices specifically tied to the desire by people of African descent to hold onto their heritage and to celebrate life. Tulane University researcher Matt Sakakeeny noted in the *Times-Picayune* article that "white people like me do a lot of hand-wringing over these traditions. . . . I'm a guest when I join these traditions nurtured by black New Orleanians" (Brasted 2017).

The public outcry over second-lines for white celebrities is more than just an annoyance about a "new New Orleans." Indeed, in the pre-Katrina context, white performers were members of Black Mardi Gras krewes, Black jazz bands, Baby Dolls, Skulls and Bones, and many other practices, with the exception of Mardi Gras Indians. In fact the presence of white members in the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club became the subject of debate among the Black community as the krewe's members often paint their faces black, meaning that white members inadvertently participated with "blackface" during Mardi Gras.

The displacement of native Black New Orleanians after Hurricane Katrina is an experience that is mourned. As mentioned already, children who were forced to relocate and grow up in other cities often describe themselves as "Nola-born, elsewhere raised." These "Katrina babies," as they call themselves, saw their childhood interrupted by postdisaster relocation, alienation from community and culture, and a desire for belonging.²

Lower-income New Orleans families, particularly those displaced from public housing, experienced discrimination in the cities they relocated to, heightening the desire to return to a place of community they are being priced out of (Chamlee-Wright and Storr 2009). Yet these cultural practices are kept alive across the city's diaspora of Black residents. That these practices are becoming whitewashed since Katrina intensifies the stripping away of central markers of Black New Orleans cultural life that many of those who wish to return home, but cannot afford to do so, see as the eroding of a place they continue to call home.

Resistance to Intrusions on Cultural Practices

New Orleans residents have always pushed back and acted as gatekeepers to their communities as they worked to rebuild after Katrina. As gentrifi-

Will New Orleans still be cool after we displace everyone that makes it cool?



Figure 4.1. Flyer by Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance’s march of 2 November 2019. Posted on Facebook on 23 October 2019.

cation has accelerated, they have taken to protests offline and online to call attention to the ways in which their communities are eroding.

Veteran New Orleans musician and native Kermit Ruffins convened a meeting of musicians and friends at his Tremé lounge within the first few years after Katrina to respond to what African American newspapers described as an “attack on live music [that] has been achingly long, pervasive and ongoing” (Wyckoff 2014).

The meeting led to the creation in 2014 of the Music & Culture Coalition of New Orleans, a mix of musicians and their allies that began to formally advocate on behalf of the city’s culture bearers as newer residents increasingly called on the city council to enact some of the most stringent noise ordinances the city has put in place in its post-Katrina residential codes.

The coalition joined forces with other grassroots organizations with goals running from housing equity to the removal of Confederate monuments to linking the enforcement of cultural practices through city codes with other forms of systemic displacement of the city’s Black residents.

The coalition aimed, as well, to acknowledge all of the impacts of unaffordable housing, urban renewal, short term rentals like Airbnb, and gentrification.

On 2 November 2019, a collective of several New Orleans grassroots organizations scheduled the #PutHousingFirstMarch, highlighting that housing was an issue of social justice in post-Katrina New Orleans and impacted Black communities and their way of life. As the slogan for its march, the Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance carried the tag line: “Will New Orleans still be cool after we displace everyone that makes it cool?”³

What precipitated the November march was a string of viral events during festival season in 2019—spanning dozens of live musical events from Mardi Gras through the Jazz Festival and the French Quarter Festival—in which white residents, transplants, and even tourists had called the police on street musicians, brass bands, artists, and Black residents. Echoing similar national social media documenting the policing of Black bodies, the New Orleans context specifically had involved the public expression of Black communal cultural practices in public spaces. As is the case nationally, when white residents call the cops on Black neighbors, it often leads to the use of excessive force by law enforcement, and can potentially be deadly.

In New Orleans, these calls heightened tensions between local residents and transplants. As gentrification has accelerated after the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Black residents have taken to Black-owned media and social media spaces to call out the effects of policing cultural practices.

During summer festival season in 2019, Twitter user @KyleDeCoste504 caught the attention of The Roots band frontman and drummer Ahmir Khalib Thompson, better known as QuestLove. The Roots is the house band for NBC’s Late Night with Jimmy Fallon.

Invoking the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, DeCoste deplored the arrest of brass musician Eugene Grant due to a call “from a colonizing business owner.” DeCoste wrote, “He was just making a couple honest bucks playing music on Frenchmen Street and they tackled him to the ground and locked him up.”⁴

The owners of Frenchman Art & Books had called the police to complain about “noise.” When the police arrived, a confrontation ensued between the officers and Grant. The police stated that Grant struck an officer in his chest with his trumpet. Grant’s attorney and mother argued that the twenty-seven-year-old is on the autism spectrum, and that the officers attempting to arrest and taser him confused and frightened him. Grant was thrown to the ground by officers, pinned there, and arrested. The arrest was recorded by bystanders and shared on social media. Dozens of resi-



Figure 4.2. Screenshot of viral social media video of brass musician Eugene Grant’s arrest on Frenchman Street posted on Facebook by the Music & Culture Coalition of New Orleans and included in an editorial published on 18 July 2019.

dents flooded to the bookstore’s Yelp account to post negative reviews for the business’s actions.

One negative Yelp review stated: “They may be angry at us for playing our music too loud, but we are even more angry at them for trying to disrupt our tradition” (“Don’t Mute” 2019). A Twitter user named @YesICandice posted on 9 July 2019 in response to the viral video: “If you’re in New Orleans, please avoid Frenchmen Art & Books. They are new owners who called the police on a brass band playing outside which turned into 10–15 officers showing up and one musician being detained. MAKE NEW ORLEANS BLACK AGAIN.”⁵

As the video gained national attention, QuestLove reposted it to draw attention to the calling of law enforcement on New Orleans street musicians and artists. He wrote to his millions of followers: “Reason 399 why gentrification sucks: live music is the bloodflow of Nawlins culture ESPECIALLY ON FRENCHMEN ST. This is like me calling the cops on South St cause of the cheesesteak aroma in the air. Y’all put lives in danger doing this passive aggressive ish. TALK TO FOLKS!”⁶

What QuestLove was pointing to was that when communities erode due to gentrification, widely acceptable forms of public performance and cultural practices are interpreted as law-breaking.

Grant’s arrest sparked a series of community forms of surveillance of so-called “transplants,” “gentrifiers,” and “colonizers” who had been

weaponizing noise ordinances as ways to police cultural traditions in the city.

In 2018, New Orleans City Council member Cyndi Nguyen introduced a proposal to regulate party buses, a well-known public spectacle of converted school buses and limousine buses popular with younger Black teens that provide a moving party experience across the city, with strobe lights and bounce music blasting from its speakers. While Nguyen stated in introducing the proposal that party buses are protected under the city's charter if they have party carrier permits, she told *Gambit* magazine that her office had been receiving “numerous calls about buses rolling through neighborhoods late at night with loud music” (Woodward 2018).

The ordinance would restrict party buses to major thoroughfares only and not residential streets, where they typically would have circulated in Black wards, now experiencing gentrification. Similar proposals were brought to the city council to regulate block parties and second-lines, placing higher thresholds for receiving permits, and regulating the time, format, and nature of these community events. These series of ordinances, city council members argued in public meetings, were a result of complaints and pressure leveled at the city to regulate these primarily Black cultural practices.

The Music & Culture Coalition also cited a series of events since Katrina that led to the public outburst in 2019. Referring to the decade since the storm, the coalition pointed to the “harassment of Mardi Gras/Black Masking Indians,” specifically on St. Joseph’s Night, the “arrest of several musicians in the Tremé in 2007 during a traditional second line,” “the shutting down of To Be Continued Brass Band” in the French Quarter and downtown, and the “Hundreds Brass Band outside of Jazz Fest,” in which the musicians were forced to stop performing “while an officer looked up what ordinance they were violating, and were allowed to continue, when there, in fact, wasn’t one” (Ellstad 2019).

Later that summer, in August 2019, the NOPD arrested Kay Joe, a local rapper who goes by the name “Unscripted,” as he performed on Frenchman Street. In addition to arresting Joe, police confiscated his equipment, his primary means of earning money, until his court case could be handled. Joe posted in an Instagram Live video that “I was locked up, handcuffed and everything. They towed my ride for street performing, something I’ve been doing for three and a half years, and all of a sudden it’s illegal. I guess I’m being made the example.”

The rapper also said he fully knew the social contract with the neighborhood. He would only perform after the brass bands had completed, out of respect for them. He would keep his sound levels under eighty decibels, and not block door entrances. He had been fully educated about

the changing levels of acceptance for street performances in and around the city. He stated in an interview with *Offbeat* magazine: “The biggest issue surrounding my arrest is there should have been a decibel reading to determine if I was in violation. NOPD can’t determine that, only the Health Department, who is trained and equipped with a decibel reader, can” (Frank 2019).

Decibel readers had become a new tool of measuring community levels of tolerance for Black culture, and as the *Offbeat* article noted, “While Joe’s late night performances may have been tolerated, and even celebrated in the past, recent changes to the local community have affected street performance culture” (Frank 2019).

Using Social Media to Resist

In 2019, social media lit up with New Orleans residents posting images of primarily white residents or their homes in predominantly Black neighborhoods or wards that are experiencing gentrification. They identified the ways in which cultural practices that were widely communal and shared had become criminalized against the original residents. Transplants weaponized several laws against Black residents, ranging from noise pollution to loitering, disturbing the peace, violations of newly enacted ordinances, public nuisance, reckless driving, defacing public property, trespassing, and suspicious activity—all as reasons to call law enforcement on Black cultural practices.

In response, Black folks used their cameras and social media to record police arrests, removal of street artists and musicians, shutdowns of block parties, raids, police harassment, and the enforcement of party buses during Mardi Gras and other festivals.

One Twitter user posted in 2019, “If you are a transplant living in New Orleans [and] feel the need to issue a noise complaint against musicians, you have moved to the wrong place and should leave ASAP.”⁸

Others have asked transplants to respect the sacredness of second-lines. Twitter user @ShotByLu posted in 2019: “Dear transplants, visitors, and whom it concerns: Do NOT walk in the Second Line procession with your dog, keep that on the other side of the ropes. Thanks, Mgmt.”⁹

Journalist and author Megan Braden-Perry,¹⁰ a Seventh Ward native, has used her social media presence to document the impacts of gentrification on the city’s culture. In particular, she has focused on the ways in which the large-scale purchasing of homes and lots in Black neighborhoods has created short-term rentals that attract tourists or transplants,

housing them in Black communities, selling an “authentic” New Orleans experience.

Braden-Perry wrote in 2013 about the contrasts between what native New Orleanians have desired since Katrina and what the commercialized image of post-Katrina New Orleans has sold to transplants who now gentrify Black spaces.

I feel like these newcomers and TV producers looked at our Facebook posts post-Katrina and said, “Yes, this is what New Orleanians love! Gumbo, second lines, red beans, this Schwegmann’s place and these Hubig’s pies!” That’s what New Orleanians grieving for the city wanted. . . . Why are these people grieving for what they never knew? Who gave them the right to come to the pulpit and give our eulogy?

As Twitter user named Seventh Ward Sunflower noted in response to a question about why New Orleans culture is constantly at risk: “Because they [transplants] moving not realizing the culture isn’t just when they decided to visit for x event but all the damn time.”

The resistance to transformations in Black neighborhoods is more than just nostalgia. There have been real implications for how Black residents have been impacted through the co-optation and commercialization of the cultural spaces they created. In 2019 in particular, after a boom in film and television featuring New Orleans as a backdrop, residents pointed to the shift in who benefits from this rejuvenation of the city. Twitter user Jonathan Isaac Jackson (@jonisaacjackson) posted that “New Orleans independent cinema is now about transplants who are enjoying the culture at the expense of low paid, black citizens.”¹¹

While the gentrification of Black spaces in New Orleans is another form of systemic oppression, this is not to say that Black New Orleanians have taken intrusions without a fight. The social media discourse in itself is one space, but it also works in conjunction with offline forms of resistance.

These include protest second-lines and marches, graffiti and visual artists whose physical performance of resistance visually marks every neighborhood with the imprint of Black culture (as shown in Kermit Ruffin’s Mother-in-Law Lounge in the Tremé neighborhood), and Brandom “B-mike” Odum’s artworks of Black New Orleans culture that are placed around gentrifying neighborhoods. Someone scribbled “Yuppy = Bad” in blue graffiti on the side of the St. Roch Market in 2015, in what was historically a Black neighborhood in New Orleans (Bullington 2015).

New Orleans grassroots groups like Take ‘Em Down Nola team up with artists and culture bearers to push back against the practices that perpetuate uneven recovery across the city, convening marches and protests to bring city action with regard to land use, education, access to jobs, health-

care, and basic infrastructure, which still have not returned in many parts of Black streets and blocks.

While mainstream media in the city have largely framed post-Hurricane Katrina gentrification of Black neighborhoods as a debate between “progress versus preservation,” native Black residents have used social media as a space to articulate how gentrification hurts communities even further, weakening community dynamics and eroding the sanctity of cultural practices.

On one end, native African American residents continue to see outsiders, whom they call “transplants,” as responsible for increasing their vulnerability to hostile law enforcement, who now police what were traditionally acceptable communal cultural practices. Enhanced policing of African Americans also impacted cultural traditions, including the removal of street performers and the policing of Black cultural practices as public nuisances and noise violations. Native Black residents have also called out the cultural appropriation and disrespect for traditions when new residents monetize their culture without credit or compensation. The cultural tensions brought on by gentrification provide a window into how post-disaster recovery impacts the most vulnerable groups. More importantly, cultural intrusions impact the livelihood of Black residents whose informal and formal traditions are an economic means for these communities in a city that sells its culture, primarily Black culture, as its primary revenue draw for tourism.

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Notes

1. On the broader context of post-Katrina New Orleans, see Johnson (2011) and Fox Gotham and Greenberg (2014).
2. As seen in the 2018 film by Edward Buckles, *Katrina Babies*.
3. Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance, Facebook post, 23 October 2019, https://www.facebook.com/events/511697759640332/?post_id=548875639255877&view=permalink.
4. Kyle DeCoste (@KyleDeCoste504), Twitter post, 9 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/KyleDeCoste504/status/1148665244748845056?s=20>.
5. Candice, right? (@YesICandice), Twitter post, 9 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/YesICandice/status/1148748708940587008?s=20>.
6. B.R.O.theR. ?uestion (@questlove), Twitter post, 10 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/questlove/status/1148916694812901376?s=20>.
7. Kay Joe (Unscripted), Instagram post, 16 August 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1OXRFUAtoa/>.
8. GJP (@jupiter_bunny), Twitter post, 12 September 2019, https://twitter.com/jupiter_bunny/status/1172218192007258112?s=20.
9. Pels in Six (@ShotByLu), Twitter post, 10 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/ShotByLu/status/1104818686689492996?s=20>.
10. Megan Braden-Perry (@megandoesnola) can be followed at <https://twitter.com/megandoesnola?lang=en>.
11. Jonathan Isaac Jackson (@jonisaacjackson), Twitter post, 2 October 2019, <https://twitter.com/jonisaacjackson/status/1179526352334213122?s=20>.

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