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Contested Heritage. African-American Culture in a Southern City

Our Heritage – Your Playground
(R.F. Langford)[1]

The destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 was experienced as an existential catastrophe that raised the question of the city's identity once again with renewed urgency. As well as causing untold material damage – on August 31, some 80 percent of the city was under metres of water[2] – this was above all a humanitarian catastrophe that probably took some 1,200 lives and left countless numbers of people injured and traumatized.[3] Most New Orleans residents were evacuated, under conditions that were sometimes chaotic, and the consequences continue to be felt to this day: "The population […] fell from 484,674 before Katrina (April 2000) to an estimated 230,172 after Katrina (July 2006) – […] a loss of over half of the city's population. By July of 2014, the population was back up to 384,320 – 79% of what it was in 2000."[4] One of the oldest and most culturally vibrant cities in the South appeared to be facing a watery doom; a city, furthermore, whose urban character and density appears to Europeans to be astonishingly un-American; one whose centre had also attracted the attention of conservationists early on and whose central French Quarter was one of the first Historic Districts to receive official protection in the United States.[5] An initial review of the city's recovery efforts by a team of conservationists concluded that institutionalized heritage preservation has in this case proven to be of limited value for cataloguing, safeguarding and saving the city's heritage, because, in brief, there is a major discrepancy between what is locally considered significant and what is labelled

1 Langford, Our Heritage – Your Playground, 1983.
2 Plyer, Facts for Features, 2016.
3 Bialik, We Still Don't Know, 2015. New Orleans alone accounted for almost 1,000 of these fatalities (see previous footnote).
4 Plyer, Facts for Features, 2016.
5 For an overview of the early history of New Orleans, see: Ellis, Madame Vieux Carré, 2010, especially the first three chapters, 3–140.

or listed as cultural heritage on the various registers of monuments.[6] "Whose heritage" we may again ask, is being protected and maintained using public funds? And who gets to decide? What, in the desperation of catastrophe, is abandoned? And how could this situation perhaps be improved? The fundamental question that the catastrophe involuntarily and radically throws up is as follows: Can the heritage of a city, beyond its built heritage and its monuments, ever be effectively addressed by means of institutional protection measures and, if so, by whom and how?

Today, 15 years after Katrina, we can still say without hesitation that New Orleans remains a monumental city, a city of monuments. More than perhaps any other city in the USA, it has been able to maintain its distinct appearance.[7] These days, it is again possible to experience a dense, vibrant city with a European feel in whose centre, the *Vieux Carré* or French Quarter, the regular layout, the street grid of the colonial city (from 1718) remains, and where townhouses with richly decorated iron balconies on all sides evoke the antebellum golden age (1820 to 1861) (fig. 1).[8]

Figure 1: Antebellum nostalgia in the French Quarter (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

Other districts in the city also have atmospheric streets and attract not only lovers of architecture: the grand mansions of the English-speaking landed bourgeoisie in the Garden District, popular neighbourhoods such as the Faubourg Marigny – a centre of the city's musical life – or neighbouring Bywater, with its picturesque single-storey

6 Morgen/Morgen/Barrett, Finding a Place, 2006.

7 Documented comprehensively in: Campanella, An Architectural Geography, 2016.

8 Some 60 percent of the city's housing stock was built in this period. On the architectural structure of the French Quarter cf. Campanella, An Architectural Geography, 2016, especially 135.

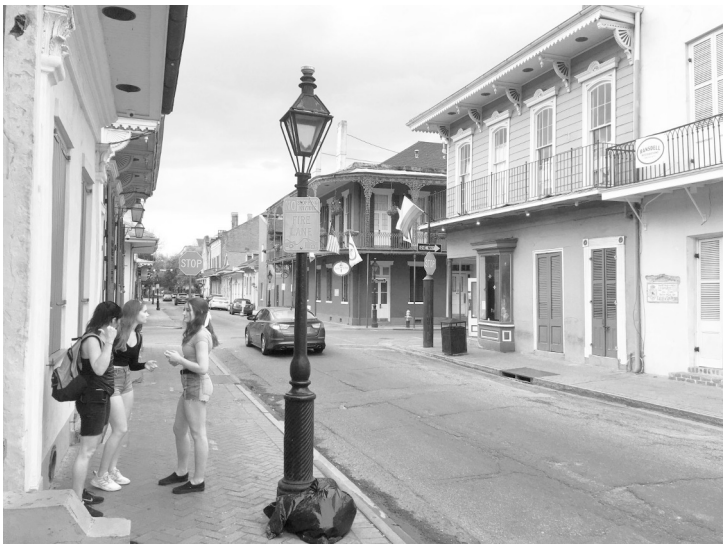

Figure 2: Well-maintained neighbourhoods, colourful houses, Marigny (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

Shotgun Houses, now a valued aspect of the city's branding[9] – all are well-appointed and mostly well-kept neighbourhoods that reveal few signs of damage at first glance (fig. 2). Moreover, they are almost entirely listed as Historic Districts.[10] This is certainly a comfort for visitors who arrive with their heads full of the images that flashed around the world in 2005. Nevertheless, the case of New Orleans in particular raises with great urgency a question that has been formulated throughout this book with respect to many case studies and from various perspectives: What is the relationship between heritage as defined by legal protection instruments and the heritage that determines the identity of the city? This text argues from various angles that the treatment of New Orleans' Black heritage perpetuates historical and social injustice to this day and that, moreover, this legacy affects not only the legacy of a particular heritage community but, via marginalization, neglect and corruption, means that a key voice in the American heritage narrative remains largely unheard.

Gentrification, Displacement, Destruction

The necessity of treating *all* discourse concerning cultural heritage as political was made particularly clear by the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans. Much has

9 For a typology and on the origins: Campanella, An Architectural Geography, 2016, 149–154.

10 Indeed, large portions of central New Orleans have been classified as Historic Districts since the late 70s. For basic information, see the map at Website HDLC, Historic District Maps, and for details, see Hawkins, City of New Orleans, 2011.

been written about the race and class bias evident in the city's destruction, the rescue effort and the reconstruction.[11] Fifteen years after that devastation, it is easy to see that the outlook for African-American heritage formations in particular has worsened since Katrina, that structures, sites and communities which were often forged with great difficulty under conditions of historical adversity and inequality have been thinned out and eroded, for an overall situation we can best describe as mixed and where occasional aspects are truly catastrophic. There can be no doubt that the process chosen for compensating flood victims enormously accelerated the process of gentrification in many neighbourhoods.[12] The class bias, which in this case is always also a racial bias, is conspicuous, and has led to immeasurable and probably irreversible destruction.[13] The problem is that financial compensation was based on the estimated current value of houses and land. As a consequence, the wealthy in their comparatively middle-class districts, whose property was evaluated correspondingly highly, received a considerable sum. In such areas, therefore, nearly all the houses have been repaired and are now habitable. It is probably also easy to demonstrate that listing as a Historic District (HD) intensified this trend. I have indicated elsewhere that the designation of HDs as zones with a special legal status intensifies social and ethnic homogenization.[14] Furthermore, it has been shown that every single HD in the United States, without exception, demonstrates above average growth in property values.[15] The situation is very different in the poor – often Black – districts, where the 'dangerous' location, poor infrastructure and lack of domestic amenities led to the market value of properties being given such a low estimation that the restitution payment was often not sufficient to pay for the renovations necessary to make the property liveable again.[16] Many Black families, whose property, often their only noteworthy possession, had protected them from sinking into misery and homelessness, are now completely impoverished. They have only been able to find a roof over their heads far from the centre of the city and the neighbourhoods they have always called home. This leads to the irrevocable destruction of social and cultural bonds and hence the possibility of articulating and developing autonomous heritage formats – particularly, as we shall see, because these tend to be weakly institutionalized and public funding is the exception. This is made clear by contrasting two neighbouring districts, both located on the river just south of the city centre.

Bywater, which, like the French Quarter, the Faubourg Marigny and parts of the Lower Garden District, was largely spared the ravages of the flood, was long a mixed lower-middle-class district until artists and urban trendsetters began to flock to the area in the late 1990s.[17] Today it is full of trendy B&Bs and cafes where lactose-free coffee, gluten-free snacks and vegan sandwiches, the latest achievements of Western

11 Above all Robert Campanella in the chapter "Gentrification and Its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans" in Campanella, Cityscapes of New Orleans, 2017, 65–71.

12 Ehrenfeucht, Restructuring Public Landscapes, 2016.

13 Moskowitz, How to Kill a City, 2017, on New Orleans 13–68.

14 Cf. the essay on New York (Chapter 7) in this volume.

15 Murtagh, Keeping Time, 2006, 94; Vinken, Vorbild Amerika, 2017, 261–262.

16 Peter Moskowitz details the ways in which the Black population was systematically driven out or prevented from returning, cf. Moskowitz, How to Kill a City, 2017, 45–68.

17 Campanella, Cityscapes of New Orleans, 2017, 3–14.

civilization, are delivered to a mostly young, white clientele. The wave of gentrification that the flood brought in the form of a mass influx of "urban creatives" has almost completely pushed out the poor population, and particularly African-Americans. The number of African-American residents fell from 61 percent in 2005 to 31 percent in 2015, while the number of children declined by two-thirds. Household incomes in the neighbourhood also rose sharply but very unequally: for white residents, the median income increased by more than $10,000, but for African-American residents it rose by only $1,000.[18] Today, Bywater, alongside the neighbouring district of Faubourg Marigny, is one of the most popular destinations for tourists visiting the city. With its almost perfectly preserved historical housing stock, colourful buildings in a synthetic Franco-Spanish colonial style with Caribbean elements as well as many locally typical shotgun houses, it appeals to both urban dwellers and travellers. When, while we were unloading our car, a young African-American woman in a party mood passed, holding a loud debate across the street with her boyfriend, our landlady felt she had to apologise for the situation and emphasize that this was a reputable street: "It is not normally like that around here." Since 1993, much of Bywater (some 120 blocks) has been listed as a HD.[19]

On the other side of the industrial canal that was dredged in the early 20th century, one enters a different world: the legendary Lower Ninth Ward, or what remains of it. Lying somewhat lower than neighbouring Bywater, much of this large neighbourhood, formerly home to many prominent African-Americans, including jazz legends and other prominent musicians, writers and artists, was flooded by Katrina. Sites of pilgrimage, such as the house of rock and roll legend Fats Domino, who himself was for a while thought to have perished during Katrina, were destroyed in the flood. Fifteen years after Katrina, the remains of his grand piano, which was hauled from the rubble, is displayed in the entrance hall of the Louisiana State Museum as the first exhibit in the permanent exhibition on "Living with Hurricanes: Katrina & Beyond". Much of the neighbourhood, however, remains a depopulated and deserted wasteland, criss-crossed by a grid of decaying streets (fig. 3).

Lacking the means to rebuild, residents are slow to return; the lots are overgrown and have begun to appear in environmentally conscious travel guides such as Lonely Planet as "a walk on the wild side": "The popular narrative of the Lower 9th [Ward] is that it was devastated after Katrina, and this is true – but what is left is less urban wasteland, and more reclaimed nature. Those who wanted to move back to the neighborhood are already here […]. In between the homes that are now occupied, one can find miles of empty lots and jungle-esque overgrowth. In many ways, the neighborhood is doing better than similarly hit areas – celebrity and media attention has at least brought money and volunteers. For all the talk of 'bringing the Lower 9th back,' what's here now is likely to be what will be here for the foreseeable future."[20] Given the sense of despair that is

18 Ehrenfeucht, Restructuring Public Landscapes, 2016, 380.

19 Website City of New Orleans, HDLC: Bywater Historic District.

20 Website LonelyPlanet, New Orleans.

Figure 3: Reclaimed nature? The Lower Ninth Ward (Photo: Irina Vinnitskaya 2013)

everywhere palpable and the irreversible displacement of nearly all the neighbourhood's original residents, such statements can only appear totally cynical.[21]

What has been lost in terms of sites of identity formation and cultural heritage can today only be understood by referring to written records. Only very few cultural institutions are still fighting to survive. One example, standing on its own at the side of the street, is the privately owned "House of Dancing Feathers" (1317 Tupelo St, currently closed),[22] whose initiator, Curator and Director Ronald Lewis, has turned his home into a museum. The exhibition is dedicated to the *Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs*, which "can be traced back to 19th century benevolent societies that provided health care and burial services for their members."[23] These African-American clubs were central institutions of Black identity in the city for centuries, and were interwoven in numerous ways not only with the history of Black music and celebratory practices, but also with protest and resistance and the struggle for self-determination. They remain significant today above all thanks to the Second Line parades and Mardi Gras street carnivals.[24] The exhibits include many of the colourful and fantastic costumes of the Mardi Gras Indians, an African-American tradition of dressing up as Native Americans that has become quite well known outside the city in recent decades (fig. 4).

21 For a more detailed overview of the situation, see, for instance: Landphair, The Forgotten People of New Orleans, 2007; Lindahl, Legends of Hurricane Katrina, 2012; Rich, Jungleland, 2012.

22 Website House of Dance and Feathers; Breunlin/Lewis, The House of Dance and Feathers, 2010.

23 Website House of Dance and Feathers, Marching Cultures.

24 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 293–311.

Figure 4: Black heritage. Mardi Gras Indians (Photo: Lombana 2012)

A good insight into how "the Indians" see themselves is given by Michael Pietrzyk's 2019 documentary film "All on a Mardi Gras Day", which was successfully shown at a number of film festivals (including the 2019 Berlinale).[25] One important act of identity formation is the creation of these celebrated costumes, with their countless beads and feathers, by hand and at great material cost. They hark back to spiritual practices and should not be dismissed as 'mere folklore'. Following the crisis that threatened the city's very identity, forms of intangible heritage such as the Second Line parades and the Indians experienced an unmistakable resurgence, though some commentators suggested that the parades became not only more popular but also whiter.[26] It is bitterly ironic that the protagonists in these parades, as the film *All on a Mardi Gras Day* also makes clear, have been driven from the districts where they traditionally lived by economic factors and now find themselves forced to survive on the periphery of the city, far from their cultural roots. It is not only social and cultural connections built up over many years that have been lost. What is being suppressed, marginalized and abandoned to destruction are cultural expressions of a unique aspect of America's living heritage. New Orleans, as most researchers agree, is incomparable in terms of the heterogeneity and breadth of its heritage landscape. Yet again it is revealed just what a one-sided vision of this variety is generally propagated; destruction or, at best, ignorance of New Orleans' African-American heritage – perhaps the city's most precious treasure – is a thread woven through the city's history. Rescue efforts after Katrina did not change this pattern but rather intensified it.

25 Website ShortsblogBerlinale, An Interview with Michal Pietrzyk.

26 Ehrenfeucht, Restructuring Public Landscapes, 2016, 382. Cf. Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 181–187.

Contested Heritage

As Katrina made clear, the uniqueness, the specificity, the 'legacy' of New Orleans cannot be reduced to the city's buildings and physiognomy. New Orleans is a monument to the colonial age and the early Republic, and a vital depository of urban and architectural history, but it is also and above all the unique centre of African-American culture and identity.[27] Indeed, the mainstream narratives on the history of the city were long deaf or even hostile towards the specificity and historical vitality of its Black communities, whose history goes back to the 18th century. New Orleans is the place where, as a result of specific circumstances, earlier and more strongly than almost anywhere else in the USA, a genuinely Black syncretic culture developed. This is most evident in the African-influenced percussion-based form of music-making that found mainstream expression in the form of jazz and went on to create one of the foundations of all rock and pop music. In the city's lively and diverse music scene, as well as in its funeral practices, parades and Mardi Gras street carnival – more details of which are included below – Black heritage is reclaimed and continues to exist as lived experience.[28] This rich heritage is extremely significant for several reasons, a significance that reaches beyond those who maintain this culture and the relevant heritage communities. Related to the hybrid post-colonial cultures of Central and South America, and particularly the Caribbean world, it is a special and unique culture in the 'White Anglo-Saxon Protestant'-dominated USA.[29] New Orleans has always had a special position in the heritage landscape of the United States.[30] It is a palimpsest of three colonial empires: founded by France in 1712, ceded to the Spanish in 1766 and purchased, together with the rest of Louisiana, by the United States in 1803. Established on the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi, populated by French exiles, such as prisoners and prostitutes but also by exiled French Canadians (Cajuns), for a long time the city was French-speaking (and Roman Catholic); the most 'southern' city in the United States, the most 'northern' outpost of the Caribbean.[31] For historically and in terms of economic geography, New Orleans was, until well into the 19th century, part of the Caribbean world that had been colonized, shaped and exploited by Spain, first in the form of silver mines, and then by means of tobacco and sugar plantations. The centre of gravity in the Gulf region was Havana; and the Spanish influence in New Orleans became even more manifest when Louis XV ceded the colony to the Spanish, who integrated it tightly into their economic zone and legal system, while the rest of North America became increasingly English. Well into the 20th century, the city on the Gulf was, alongside New York, the most important port of entry for immigrants to North America, a city of exchange, of hybridization. And finally, though no less significantly, for more than a century, it was

27 Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 1992, 157, 275–315.

28 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 293–311.

29 Ette/Müller, New Orleans and the Global South, 2017, considers the city in the context of the Global South.

30 Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016.

31 Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016, 108–109.

a centre of the inhuman and criminal practice of slavery, to which the city owed its material wealth.

Black Creoles, Free People of Colour: Africa-American Communities in New Orleans

Historically and structurally, New Orleans' Black communities are thus distinct from those of other American cities.[32] This rests in part on the legal status of the enslaved population. In the area of the Caribbean that was dominated by Spain, in contrast to slaves' status under English law (and also in distinction to the French *Code Noir*), they had the right to purchase their freedom, to own property and to establish their own households and families; weekends were partially free of work, which relieved the plantation owners of the burden of providing for their slaves, as the enslaved peoples were able to provide for themselves by means of their own gardens and markets. Since many of the enslaved Blacks possessed specialized skills, for instance in the trades, that were lacking in the hybrid 'white' population, a Black economy was able to develop early on.[33] Only with the introduction of a plantation economy (sugar cane, cotton), with the corresponding need for more intense work, and the sharp growth of the slave economy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries did these rights come under increasing pressure. An important and lasting effect of this situation, unique in the USA, was the existence of large numbers of Free People of Colour. It was their unique economic and social situation that made possible a degree of economic independence and the development and transmission of autonomous cultural and social practices, as recent research has shown. This enabled the unique historical flowering of an African-American culture within the USA.[34] If we discount the Spanish military, at the end of the 18th century, there were more Black than white people in New Orleans, and for every two enslaved people, there was one free Black person; among women, the ratio of slaves to free folk was even lower at 718:538.[35] One peculiarity that is often noted in this respect is the *plaçage*, a French colonial tradition whereby a white man would take a second, African-American wife with whom he would establish a second family. These were set up in their own houses around the city; as a rule, they were emancipated and could keep their own slaves.[36] In line with the racist social codes of the time, the second wives were often light-skinned mixed-race "quadroons". This practice was one of the important drivers of creolization; the "Black Creoles" of New Orleans (as they were known in contradistinction to the white

32 For background: Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 1992.

33 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 113.

34 The unusually homogenous ethnic make-up of New Orleans' Black population should also be noted here. Virtually all the enslaved Africans brought to New Orleans between 1720 and 1732 originated in the sub-Saharan "Senegambia". Later, ethnic groups from Congo were in the majority. Cf. Hall, Africans in Colonial Louisiana, 1992, 159–161; Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 106–108.

35 Figures for 1791: Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 111.

36 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 111. There is a private museum dedicated to the Free People of Color in New Orleans: the Musée de f.p.c. (Website Le Musée de f.p.c.).

colonists, who referred to themselves as "Creoles") were, until the abolition of slavery, the largest group of free Black people on the American continent.[37]

In other American cities, the situation was quite different: enslaved people were kept in barracks on plantations and generally did not share a common language, origin or culture. Via an aggressive practice of 'breeding' and selling enslaved people, a systematic effort was undertaken to suppress the establishment of family groups and cultural or social infrastructures. With increasing Americanization, however, the comparatively better situation in New Orleans came under intense pressure. The prohibition on the import of slaves enacted by President Jefferson in 1808 led to the growth and heterogenization of Black communities in New Orleans. Alongside the 'privateers', who hijacked cargoes of enslaved Africans headed for Cuba and smuggled them into the city in large numbers,[38] there was also growth in the numbers of English-speaking slaves traded domestically within the USA, above all from the breeding farms of Virginia, whose 'excess' slaves were now sold in the Deep South – a business model that ultimately owes its existence to the 1808 import ban.[39] The population growth that went alongside Americanization (in 1840 the city had 10,000 inhabitants; by 1840 there were 102,000), and which consisted mostly of so-called 'Anglo-Americans' (in fact foreign-born 'whites') led to the development of an increasingly harsh racial regime and the ethnic division of the city.[40]

After the Civil War, this pattern intensified as a result of the huge influx of freed slaves from the North, and conflicts arose between the often well-educated French-speaking (and Catholic) 'creoles of colour' and the Protestant and usually illiterate Blacks from the North who settled in the north of the city.[41] Just how alien the social life of New Orleans had to appear to travellers from the North is well documented. Visitors recorded their shock at the 'racially mixed' social life, the Sunday balls and ubiquitous music, and the custom of *plaçage*, which meant 'mixed-race' couples and families would appear openly in public.[42] Particularly scandalous were the mass public African-American rallies and dances accompanied by music and percussion on Congo Square: "African slaves [...] who [...] rock the city with their Congo dances".[43] These events were only finally suppressed in 1851, and had continued on Sundays following the general ban on mass gatherings of Blacks and an explicit prohibition in 1835.[44] The dance and music events

37 Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016, 111–112. Creolization here refers to race mixing; Black Creoles, Creoles of Color established themselves as a distinct group in contrast to the French colonists, who identified as Creoles.

38 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 263–270.

39 On the "slave-breeding industry" cf. Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 220–239.

40 As late as 1820, only some 1/8 of the population was English-speaking (Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 266); the 'Anglo-Americans' settled above all in the west of the city, in what is today the Central Business District and in the western part of the Garden District; the Creoles in the French Quarter and in Tremé; Marigny and Baywater were mixed, Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016, 112–113.

41 Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016, 113.

42 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 273–274.

43 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 271–288, the quote is from 276.

44 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 286.

have their roots in Caribbean custom.[45] As long as Francophones had the upper hand in New Orleans, Black music (ultimately influenced by population groups with origins in Senegal and Congo) could also be found there of the kind also found in Cuba, Jamaica and the Antilles. This music, featuring drums and banjos, was of incalculable value for the development of jazz, rock and pop.[46] From the start, the form of music practised by African-Americans had a role in the formation of identity and in politics. It was associated with spiritual concepts and certainly represented a vigorous form of cultural resistance. It must therefore be included alongside other syncretic practices such as the popular form of voodoo practised around New Orleans, which was celebrated outside the city and marketed as a tourist attraction as early as 1870.[47]

A Biased View: Heritage, Tourism and Racism

New Orleans' Black heritage, which stands in a line stretching back to the founding of the city, has inestimable political significance in two regards. On the one hand, it provides a necessary corrective to the American founding myth. The dominant American narrative of a nation whose origin lies in revolution (Equality, Liberty, Fraternity) and the wars of independence against the English, French and Spanish is here counterposed with aspects of US history that are frequently suppressed but are structurally central to the process of American nation-building, namely violence, exploitation and repression. Following the large-scale eradication of the continent's indigenous population, this was most conspicuously manifested in the enslavement and disenfranchisement of and ongoing discrimination against African-Americans. At the same time, with its diverse and flourishing cultural achievements, New Orleans possesses a tradition of alternative bodies of knowledge. This prevents Black heritage from being reduced to misery, powerlessness and speechlessness – extremely powerful traumas that are reproduced in the memory of slavery and, loaded with racism, all too often lead to new forms of discrimination and denigration.

Today, the city's African-American heritage is subject to a double threat: the threat stemming from marginalization, exclusion and extinction (as can be seen, for instance, in the reconstruction of the city following Katrina), and the threat of cultural exploitation by the white mainstream.[48] The way New Orleans both presents itself and is perceived is, to this day, extremely one-sided. In the USA, New Orleans is considered to be "deeply compromised and […] strongly energized", to stand for sex and drugs, corruption and crime.[49] The city has long been considered a site of transgression and the

45 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 274.

46 According to Sublette, the banjo, fiddle and semitonal music were brought by Senegalese and related early Islamic ethnic groups, while the drum and brass-dominated style of music that dominates the entire Caribbean is linked to Congo. Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 275-281.

47 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 285.

48 Cf. Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007.

49 Ostendorf, The Mysteries of New Orleans, 2016, 107–108.

ideal destination for a white middle class keen to experience its supposed permissiveness on a timeout from the constraints of a puritan Protestant existence. The backdrop for these small acts of escapism is provided by an antebellum architecture that appears to Northerners as colourful and colonial, spiced with the omnipresent colonial French (Creole and Cajun) food and infused with an exotic 'blackness', whose lines of perspective converge on sex and jazz (fig. 5). [50]

Figure 5: Heritage as a brand. Tourists in the Vieux Carré (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

This image of the city, familiar from 1001 tourist brochures, was in no small part the co-creation of the heritage conservation establishment. Indeed, New Orleans' preservationist movement long remained trapped in antebellum nostalgia, something that J. Mark Souther describes in his inspirational text on the disneyfication of the Vieux Carré. He illustrates this with reference to the ballroom of the Catholic school for African-American girls, Saint Mary's Academy, which was threatened in the 1960s by plans to build a new hotel. Martha Robinson (1888–1981), a women's rights activist and one of the leaders of the heritage movement in the 1960s (and herself the descendant of slave owners) identified the ballroom (falsely) as one of the places where the legendary "Quadroon Balls" had been held, arguing that it was vital to preserve it as "the scene of some of the most glorious social events in the history of the city".[51] The gulf between this conception and that of the African-American community appears to be insurmountable. For the latter, such dances, at which meetings were arranged between plantation owners and Afro-Creole women, understandably evoke painful memories of slavery and oppression. This was no doubt exacerbated by the fact that racist

50 Long, Rethinking the Notion of Sexually Liberal New Orleans, 2019; Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 138–139.

51 Souther, The Disneyfication of New Orleans, 2007, 807.

segregation made dialogue on heritage issues that transcend the boundaries of class and ethnicity appear illusory for so long. From the very start, the Vieux Carré/French Quarter was formed as a place of "white memory", in an image that provided few points of identification for the Black population.[52]

In terms of architectural history, New Orleans' showcase district, the Vieux Carré, is a remarkable example of colonial building, the syncretic amalgamation of Creole-French, Spanish-Caribbean right up to Victorian forms.[53] Its reception as a historical "tout ensemble" of antebellum Southern magnificence is of course also the result of heritage-making processes. The rescue – better termed the invention – of the Vieux Carré in the early 20th century is already typical of the preferences of a particular – white, English-speaking – educated class, a specific mixture of elite charitable clubs and the artists and bohemians that increasingly settled in the rundown city centre.[54] It was on their initiative that the first efforts to purchase and renovate threatened houses were carried out. The granting to the Vieux Carré of the status as one of the first Historic Districts in the United States enabled extensive restoration, but (following a change the law in 1940) also a harmonizing historicization. The latter included, for instance, the demolition of many buildings that were considered "out of character". The result was to establish the Vieux Carré as a marker of authenticity – with major consequences.[55] While the modernist mainstream did penetrate the French quarter in the 1960s, with the erection of car parks and supermarkets, and even plans for high-rises,[56] at the same time, the first comprehensive inventory of the district was carried out by Tulane University (1961–66).[57] Since around 1980, the city has increased its efforts to create an icon with as few 'blemishes' as possible, erecting numerous 'pastiches' of historical-themed architecture, including many luxury hotels built in the antebellum style with the 'typical' iron balconies.[58]

The construction of a standardized cultural image by means of tourism can be seen on many levels in New Orleans.[59] In order to establish an antebellum quarter for consumption by tourists, every 'problematic' aspect of heritage was systematically banished.[60] In the 1960s, therefore, the plan was to drive out the strip clubs, red-light bars and alcoholic excesses from the French Quarter, which was, in the words of Mayor Victor H. Schiro (1961–70) to become clean and safe, a "Coney Island-like *fun spot*" for the

52 Souther, The Disneyfication of New Orleans, 2007, 807.

53 Full details in: Campanella, An Architectural Geography, 2016, 139–154.

54 Cf. Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 85–89; Ellis, Madame Vieux Carré, 2010, 22–35.

55 Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 85–94.

56 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 119–120.

57 The first comprehensive study on the historic Vieux Carré is based largely on these findings: The Vieux Carré Historic District Demonstration Study, 8 vols (ed. Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) for the City of New Orleans, New Orleans 1968. Cf. Campanella, Geographies of New Orleans, 2006.

58 Souther, The Disneyfication of New Orleans, 2007, 807; Campanella, An Architectural Geography, 2016, 137.

59 For details, Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, especially 69–94.

60 Details in: Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003. Cf. Ellis, Madame Vieux Carré, 2010, 133–152.

middle class.[61] The fact that a 2/3 scale copy of the French quarter was opened by Disney in its Southern California theme park in 1966 may have played a role, influencing visitors to expect the original to be a homogenized district for tourist consumption in which the social conflicts that continue to exist – and thus the real heritage of the city – had to be hidden.[62] In many regards, it can also be shown that tourism has contributed structurally to racial discrimination and segregation.[63] Nor did this change significantly with the end of formal segregation. The 1984 Louisiana World Exhibition is considered rather to have intensified the standardization of the New Orleans tourist experience under the label "most authentic city", with the city's uniqueness becoming its stylized selling point: striking a careful balance between the image of a vibrant and permissive metropolis and the needs of middle-class tourists for security, cleanliness and predictability.[64] In this way, according to Souther, the white elite "rescued" the French Quarter, marginalizing and destroying other districts of the city in the process. While it proved possible to generate civic engagement to prevent the construction of Robert Moses's Riverside Expressway, which would have cut the French Quarter off from the river, Interstate 10 was nonetheless driven through the neighbouring Tremé district, the "cradle of the black community". Neighbourhoods such as Tremé, which also encompasses the legendary red-light district of Storyville, were considered slums and threatened by programmes of urban renewal and redevelopment in which impoverished residents were frequently resettled elsewhere.[65]

Between Marginalization and Exploitation

Similar processes of reducing, excluding and homogenizing heritage can also be observed with respect to intangible heritage, for instance, in the reception of Black music. With the boom in tourism in the 1970s, New Orleans was branded the "Birthplace of Jazz".[66] The rise of this style of music and improvisation, which was developed by African Americans and has a complex relationship to forms of African music and dance,[67] is indeed inseparably connected with New Orleans, and particularly with the above-mentioned red-light district of Storyville, where a professional Black music scene was able to develop. After the suppression of Storyville in 1917, many of the leading figures on the jazz scene were forced to leave the city. At the same time, jukeboxes meant there was less call for live acts; by World War II, jazz had largely disappeared from New

61 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 120. Italics in the original.

62 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 2003, 120–126; Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 143–145.

63 Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 80–85.

64 Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 133-141; Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 128–129.

65 On Storyville, cf. Long, The Great Southern Babylon, 2004.

66 On New Orleans' mythic role in jazz, cf. Knauer, Do You Know What It Means, 2017.

67 This thesis is at the heart of Ned Sublette's stimulating book, Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, especially 271–292.

Orleans.[68] The tightening of segregation laws (Jim Crow) also made it harder for professional Black artists to make a living. The jazz renaissance only came about with the opening of Preservation Hall in 1948 as a new centre for live acts. Yet this, too, was soon to be captured by the mainstream and the tourism industry in the form of Dixieland.[69] In 1956, Louis Armstrong was forced to leave his home city when a new law prohibited Black and white musicians from appearing on stage together.[70]

The status of New Orleans' African-American heritage remains highly ambivalent to this day. Precisely because it does not fit within the narrative of mainstream society, it is an important selling point and is exploited for (white) tourism and portrayed accordingly – cut to size, reduced. At the same time, the Black community has itself been increasingly developing a self-awareness about this heritage, one in which questions of self-determination, rehabilitation and justice play a central role. In the USA, as in all post-colonial societies that are divided by racism and social conflict, discussions about cultural heritage always raise issues of power. If it is hard to reach consensus on the interpretation of a history characterized by violence and exploitation, and if an unresolved legacy such as that of slavery and its consequences divides different heritage communities – often irreconcilably – then institutionalized heritage designation processes inevitably reflect more or less exactly the distribution of power in society.

Figure 6: A parade for the white middle class. Louis Armstrong Park (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

68 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 118, 122–123.

69 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 124–125.

70 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 125.

To this day, the Black history of the city remains dramatically underrepresented. It is a tragedy how even its central sites have been neglected. Louis Armstrong's birthplace was torn down in the 1960s to make way for a police headquarters – and Armstrong Park was laid out, fake and sterile, created for white middle-class tourists (fig. 6).[71]

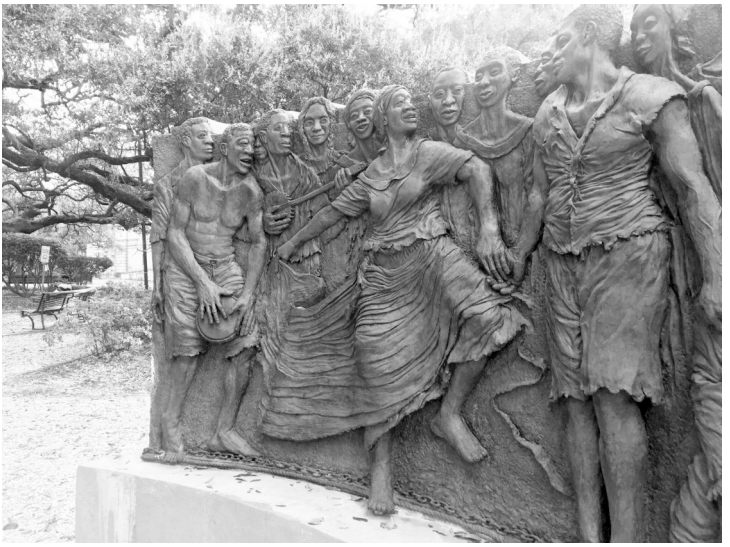

Figure 7: A lively colourful scene? Monument at Congo Square (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

Congo Square, often mentioned as an early hot-spot of Black heritage practices, is now a little frequented annex of the park. A single memorial portraying Black dancers and musicians is all that remains to remind of the historical significance of this place, and it can do little to counter the establishment view that exoticizes a romantic image of the "lively, colourful scene" (fig. 7). Few of the relevant sites of memory, such as the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, the Eagle Saloon Building or Congo Square are included in the National Register of Historic Places.[72] Even the Louisiana African-American Heritage Trail, which was established in 2008 by the State of Louisiana and includes some 26 sites, appears rather randomly thrown together and includes only five locations within the city itself: besides Congo Square, the others are all schools and churches.[73] The most visited museum in the city is the World War II Museum, an ostentatious structure that opened in 2000 to tell a heroic story and that has been designated by Congress as America's National World War II Museum. The second largest museum in New Orleans is the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA), which was founded as early as 1911, and which, thanks to generous donations, contains a marvellous collection of art situated in an extensive sculpture park. The Louisiana Jazz Museum, which after many

71 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 134–135.; Souther, The Disneyfication of New Orleans, 2007, 808.

72 Cf. Website Wikipedia, National Register of Historic Places.

73 Website LouisianaTravel, African American Heritage Trail.

changes of management is now again run by the State of Louisiana, appears currently to be in a state of transition and gives a distinctly underfunded impression. Nonetheless, the History of Music section contains several rooms that deal with the origins of jazz and the significance of African-American percussion styles and Second-Line drumming for the development of jazz (and popular music generally). New Orleans' main Mardi Gras exhibition (in The Presbytère Museum) is still trapped in a very 'white' perspective: the ambivalence of the Zulu parades, for instance, which provided one way for 'black faced' African-American groups to participate in (white) Mardi Gras events during segregation in the early part of the 20th century, is barely mentioned,[74] while the conspicuous fact that Mardi Gras was long used to drive racial segregation is entirely ignored.[75] The establishment in Tremé in 1996 of the New Orleans African American Museum (NOAAM), which is funded by the city, is certainly a major step forwards. Built on the land of a former plantation, it has found a new use for one of the best preserved 'Master's Houses' in the city.[76] In a neighbourhood where a particularly high number of 'Free People of Colour' used to live and which is still an important centre of Black life, the location is well chosen. It is near other important historic African-American sites, such as Saint Augustine church, one of the oldest African-American Catholic parishes in the nation.[77] Close by, the Backstreet Cultural Museum keeps alive the Black tradition of Mardi Gras and Mardi Gras parades with displays including many of the hand sewn costumes of the 'Indians' (fig. 8).[78]

This is a small, poorly funded, private institution that relies on a great deal of personal initiative and engagement.[79] It provides yet further evidence that a cultural sector that relies heavily on private sponsorship disadvantages contested and marginal cultural heritage in particular. Especially in a city like New Orleans, it makes sense to rethink the idea of heritage in terms of concepts such as a "sense of place".[80] In the medium term, greater financial support from local government, the State of Louisiana or the federal government would no doubt help to initiate a broad societal discourse and to ensure that appropriate attention is paid to precarious bodies of heritage.

74 Souther, America's Most Interesting City, 2003, 117–118. On the Zulu Parades cf. Smith, Things You'd Imagine, 2019.

75 Gotham, Authentic New Orleans, 2007, 89–94.

76 Website NOAAM, History.

77 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 304–311.

78 Website Backstreet Cultural Museum. The future of the museum appears uncertain since death of the founder and curator, Sylvester Francis, on 1 September 2020 (Website Obits, Sylvester Francis).

79 It is with great regret and sadness that I heard that the museum's founder and curator, Sylvester "Hawk" Francis, who guided us through the museum so expertly, died on 1 September 2020.

80 Morgen/Morgen/Barrett, Finding a Place, 2006.

Figure 8: Hidden treasures. Sylvester Francis (1946 – 2020) in the Backstreet Museum he founded (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

Decolonization: Toppling Statues

The vigour of conflicts over the interpretation of history and heritage is apparent in the Black Lives Matter movement, which places itself squarely in the lineage of post-colonial struggles. Conflicts over Confederate monuments that have been simmering for some time aim at the revision of national and local heritage politics and target the racist context that is explicitly or implicitly invoked by the incriminating statues. In New Orleans, following a 2017 decision by the city's government, four of the controversial monuments were removed,[81] and a further three were torn down by activists this year (June/July 2020).[82] The website of the most important activist group *Take Em Down NOLA* (slogan: "Take down all symbols of white supremacy") details many more for future consideration. The profound entanglement of heritage politics and ongoing discrimination is also evident with respect to monuments that appear at first glance to be innocuous. The Ninth Ward Victory Arch (238 Burgundy Street), erected in 1919 and dedicated to local veterans of World War I is considered perhaps the first permanent monument of this kind in the USA. It only reveals its racist message on closer examination (fig. 9).

81 Le Blanc, Cost of removing Confederate monuments, 2017; New Orleans baut Bürgerkriegsdenkmale ab, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 18 December 2015.

82 Website TakeEmDownNOLA, The Symbols.

Figure 9: Segregation to the grave and beyond. Ninth Ward Victory Arch (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

The fallen soldiers are shown as still segregated in death, with 'whites' on the front and 'blacks' on the back of the arch, which was placed in its current position in 1951. Articles published to commemorate its unveiling over 100 years ago appeared not to consider this fact worth mentioning[83] – and it is still passed over in silence in contemporary online registers of war memorials.[84]

The most emotional conflict concerns another monument, the equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson on the city's main square, right in front of the Vieux Carré (fig. 10).[85] Entirely different narratives of American history collide here, as do diverse conceptions of heritage values and heritage politics. Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States (1829–37), is considered by many in New Orleans to be a revolutionary hero for commanding US forces at the decisive Battle of New Orleans, the last great battle between the British and the Americans, which cemented the former colony's independence. Like most of the early American presidents, Jackson was a slave owner.[86] What is more controversial, however, is the role he played in the displacement, disenfranchisement and extermination of Native Americans when he broke with the policy of his predecessors, who had sought to conclude treaties at least with the 'Five Civilized Tribes'.[87] The extent of the controversy around the figure of Jackson is revealed vividly

83 For example in *The Time-Picayune*, New Orleans, Louisiana, 9 November 1919 (sect. 3, p. 3, col. 3), cf. Website RootsWeb, To Commemorate Services of Men who served in War.

84 Website RootsWeb, The Victory Arch in Macarty Square; or Website Louisiana Digital Library, The Ninths Ward's Tribute.

85 Website TakeEmDownNOLA, Past Actions.

86 Cheathem, Andrew Jackson, 2011.

87 Zinn, A People's History, 1980, 149–170.

by the decision taken under President Obama to replace Jackson's portrait on the $20 bill with that of Harriet Tubman, an African-American icon of the abolitionist movement. President Trump not only reversed this decision, but also gave a prominent place to a portrait of the infamous Indian hater and racist Jackson in the Oval Office.

Figure 10: Scourge of the Indians, Slave Owner. Andrew Jackson's Monument at Jackson Square (Photo: G. Vinken 2020)

The Andrew Jackson monument also reveals a clash of perspectives at the level of theory. The main square in New Orleans, previously known as the Place d'Armes, was modelled on the Place des Vosges in Paris. The square was rebuilt on a grand style in 1850, and the equestrian statue of Jackson was positioned at its centre in 1856.[88] In the view of the conservationists, the square, now renamed in Jackson's honour, is certainly,

88 As one of four copies of the original by Clark Mills in Washington D.C., cf. Website Wikipedia, Equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson.

given its historical and architectural significance, a heritage ensemble of the highest rank. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1960 (the highest category of monument, of which there are today only 58 in the whole State of Louisiana)[89] "for its central role in the city's history, and as the site where in 1803 Louisiana was made United States territory pursuant to the Louisiana Purchase".[90] In 2012 the American Planning Association designated Jackson Square "one of the Great Public Spaces in the United States".[91] This reveals the long shadow of a conservation movement with its roots in the 19th century that was committed to – supposedly universal – cultural and historical values, and which has trouble to this day in effectively taking account of central questions of social order such as race, class, gender (and religion). The unreflected perpetuation of a standard of nationalist, 'white' historiography in which the heroic monument is a central symbol is today being challenged on several fronts.[92] Before Jackson Square was redesigned as a grand urban plaza, it was the place of execution of criminals and 'rebellious' slaves. In a broader sense, the heroic equestrian statue keeps the ambivalences and racist brutality of the wars of independence out of sight. In the famous battle, African-Americans and Native American warriors fought on both sides. Many 'privateers', who were deeply implicated in the illegal import of enslaved persons, also fought on the side of the US troops. An indirect consequence of the American victory at New Orleans was to enable the conquest of nominally Spanish Florida, which had until then been a refuge for Native Americans and escaped slaves. From 1815, their villages were systematically destroyed, and survivors were often returned to slavery.[93] For many, the emancipation that the wars of independence stand for in the American national narrative led to increased unfreedom, degradation and death. It therefore appears indispensable that these aspects of history are not just taken up in academic discourses; there also needs to consideration of how to present them in public space, implementing appropriate measures. This is because, ultimately, it is not a matter of statues of generals and presidents but of memory and remembrance, of the identity of a nation and the right to self-determination of its constituent parts. It is about pride and tradition, but also trauma and injustice, which culminate in a legitimate demand for a new heritage politics.

89 Website National Park Service, List of National Historic Landmarks.

90 "Jackson Square" on Website National Park Service, List of National Historic Landmarks, and Website National Park Service, NHL nomination for Jackson Square.

91 Website American Planning Association, Jackson Square.

92 On this dispute, include the legal aspects, cf. Mock, The Fight to Remove, 2016.

93 Sublette, The World that made New Orleans, 2008, 269.