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The Heart of New Orleans

Nathaniel Rich July 10, 2014 Issue

Bourbon Street: A History

by Richard Campanella; Louisiana State University Press, 368 pp., \$35.00

Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital

by Sheri Fink; Crown, 558 pp., \$27.00



'Bourbon Street Jazz Bars'; illustration by Franklin McMahon

Whenever I meet a stranger in New Orleans, one of the first questions I'm asked is where I'm from. It's a loaded question, and I tend to answer it warily because I have a loaded answer: New York City. It tends to elicit raised eyebrows because there is a general perception in New Orleans today that the city is being swarmed, occupied, and rendered unrecognizable by New Yorkers (and, to a slightly lesser extent, Angelenos).

Anecdotal evidence would include a surge in fawning depictions of the city in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* magazine; a handful of popular restaurants opening recently by former New Yorkers; and, most significantly, the doubling and even tripling of property values in neighborhoods desirable to transplants, such as Bywater, Faubourg Tremé, and St. Roch, forcing out longtime residents, particularly working-class African-Americans.

The city's population is undergoing a rapid expansion. Since Hurricane Katrina it has more than doubled from its lowest point of 158,353, to 378,715. (The population remains lower than the pre-Katrina figure of 452,170, and significantly lower than its peak, reached in 1960, of 627,525.) Last year *Forbes* ranked New Orleans the fastest-growing city in the United States. But the new citizens are not, despite appearances, New Yorkers. A recent poll found that the highest proportion of the recent arrivals had moved from Mississippi, followed by Texas and Georgia. A study by the Kaiser Foundation found that only one in nine New Orleanians had not lived in the city prior to Katrina, meaning that about 80 percent of the increase comes from the return of former residents displaced by the storm.

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The new New Orleanians have arrived in two phases. The first were city planners, environmentalists, educators, social workers, civil rights activists, and criminal justice reformers who came to help the city rebuild after Katrina. In a recent essay,¹ widely circulated locally, the Tulane geographer Richard Campanella calculated that this group numbered in the low- to mid-four digits, and largely left the city after three or four years, when funding ran out.²

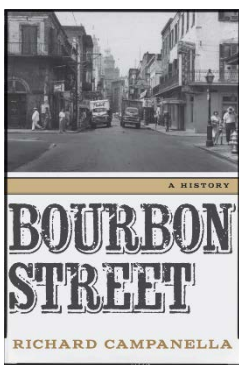
Campanella writes that in 2010, the year I moved to the city, a second wave of transplants began arriving, enticed by the relatively robust regional economy compared to the rest of the nation. These newcomers were greater in number (I estimate 15,000–20,000 and continuing), more specially skilled, and serious about planting domestic and economic roots here. Some today are new-media entrepreneurs; others work with Teach for America or within the highly charter-ized public school system (infused recently with a billion federal dollars), or in the booming tax-incentivized Louisiana film industry and other cultural-economy niches.

The second-wavers tend to have been drawn by cultural and financial motivations, seeking opportunities that were unavailable in more expensive cities. Far from showing ignorance of local customs, these transplants tend to exhibit an almost slavish obeisance to New Orleans's cultural institutions. They are frequent attendees of Second Line parades and Mardi Gras Indians celebrations, are among the most ardent defenders of the Lower Ninth Ward from redevelopment plans, have become devoted Saints fans, and, as Campanella points out, tend to avoid the French Quarter, reserving particular disdain for Bourbon Street.

The question of what it means to be a New Orleanian is at the heart of Campanella's absorbing new history of Bourbon Street and, less explicitly, Sheri Fink's *Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital*. The books serve as powerful correctives to the prevailing myths about New Orleans. They explain why Bourbon Street and the flawed response to Katrina are crucial to understanding the city's identity today—just not in the ways that most Americans, and even most New Orleanians, might believe.

Bourbon Street is at its heart a history of how New Orleans has seen itself, and how it has been seen by the rest of the world. There may be no one better qualified to write such a history than Campanella, the author of seven books about New Orleans, including his masterful *Bienville's Dilemma* (2008), which is the single best history of the city.

A transplant himself (he was born in Brooklyn), Campanella writes in a straightforward, unadorned style, combining a historian's scrupulousness, a sociologist's attention to demotic sources, and a geographer's fascination with the influence of terrestrial conditions on culture, politics, and development. Few cities are better suited to such an analysis



than New Orleans, a city created because of its unique geographical advantages—and despite its unique geographical disadvantages—as the subtitles of the chapters in *Bienville's Dilemma* indicate: “Questionable geography, questionable future”; “The high stakes of low elevation”; “The blessings and curses of levee construction on the Mississippi.” The chapter on Katrina is subtitled “Paying the piper.”

It was Katrina that first drew Campanella to Bourbon Street. Watching television coverage of the evacuated city he saw that a bar named Johnny White's had defied curfew orders and stayed open throughout the storm and its catastrophic aftermath, giving the city “a faint heartbeat that never quite flat-lined.” As electricity was restored and cleanup workers descended on the unflooded French Quarter, Bourbon Street became “the liveliest and happiest place in a city of death and misery.”

Like many transplants, Campanella had succumbed to the social pressure to think of Bourbon Street as an ersatz and degrading freak show best viewed as cultural negative space. I avoided it in my perambulations, glibly denounced its inauthenticity (as if I were the arbiter of reality), and discouraged newcomers from going there.

He had learned, as all newcomers do, “that declaring disdain for Bourbon Street is the first step toward showcasing [one's] taste and gaining insider status.”

But he was moved to see that Bourbon Street was the first part of the city to return to operation, “put on a party face,” and go on with its business—which is the business of making money. “I couldn't think of a better model for the city to emulate,” he writes. His book argues that Bourbon Street, long considered an R-rated theme park—a convenient gutter into which all of the drunk tourists can be swept—remains, in many ways, the “heartbeat” of the city. This is a truth that will sit uneasily with natives and transplants alike.

Native-born New Orleanians have been viewing newcomers with suspicion and resentment at least since the 1810s, when thousands of Americans from New England and the mid-Atlantic states began to arrive after the Louisiana Purchase. “The Americans [are] swarming in from the northern states[,] invading Louisiana as the holy tribes invaded the land of Canaan,” wrote Pierre Clément de Laussat, the last French governor of Louisiana. “Each one turn[s] over in his mind a little plan of speculation.”

The transplants from the north introduced a different language, religion, architecture, cuisine, and form of government (this last, perhaps, least successfully—autocracies and family dynasties continue to dominate state and local government to this day). The city's French-speaking population, provincial and culturally conservative, “fretted, then resented, then resisted the onslaught of les Américains.”

The introduction of steamboat technology soon boosted the port's economy and the city's population tripled. The most populous street was Bourbon, thanks to its central position in the original city plan. Bourbon is one mile long and runs parallel to the Mississippi River, four blocks back from the river's natural levee. The streets closest to the river, on the highest land, were naturally the site of port activity, and therefore dominated by warehouses and storehouses. In the back of town, several blocks beyond Bourbon, lay the swamp; the streets behind Bourbon were prone to flooding and mosquito infestation, and were reserved for the working class and free blacks. (The percentage of white residents decreased steadily with each street as one moved farther from the river.) Bourbon therefore offered sufficiently high elevation and distance from the nuisances of both the riverfront and the swamp. Lying in the middle, it was consummately middle-class, accessible to the wealthy and the poor alike, with an almost exact racial split among residents.

A busy port releases into the city every day a fresh supply of young men largely free of responsibilities and supervision, with vast appetites, money to spend, and gratification to obtain. As one public health official put it in 1851, “Probably no city of equal size in Christendom receives...a greater proportion of vicious people than New Orleans.” From its infancy the city, originally populated by French convicts, was associated with wantonness, disease, and venery, condemned as a “Great Southern Babylon,” and romanticized by writers like Walt Whitman and Lafcadio Hearn. Bourbon Street was only one of several different red-light districts that had formed to accommodate the expectations of the city's transient population.

It was not until World War II, when the city was overrun with servicemen, that Bourbon Street became its own attraction. It combined a surfeit of nightclubs, bars, restaurants, and liquor stores with a streetscape that, thanks to the efforts of local preservationists in the 1920s and 1930s, displayed the decadent grandeur that tourists sought to discover in the city. The preservationist movement had frozen the street in time, creating “a perfect space from which the social memory of New Orleans's historical hedonism could be commoditized and sold.” And sell it did. People began referring to Bourbon as “The Street.”

The city's prosperity during the war years transformed the French Quarter from a “quaint but shabby encumbrance” to “a mother lode waiting to be mined.” A national tourism magazine named New Orleans the most interesting city in the United States, just ahead of New York and San Francisco. Transplants—mainly artists, writers, intellectuals, jazz enthusiasts, and aesthetes—swarmed, and much like the transplants of today, “became more ‘local’ than the locals.” They bought and renovated historic properties, drove up real estate values, and loudly expressed their disdain for Bourbon Street. They launched a campaign for an ordinance limiting noise on Bourbon Street, but failed—just as a similar noise ordinance failed in the city council this May.

Speaking for this community was a jazz critic named Kenneth Hulsizer, whom Campanella identifies as “the world's first Bourbon Street curmudgeon.” Hulsizer advised his readers to avoid Bourbon Street and head, instead, two miles downriver to St. Claude—the same area that is today the site of the bars and clubs most beloved by transplants. “Loving Bourbon Street and hating Bourbon Street entered the public discourse simultaneously,” notes Campanella, “and they probably will forever coexist dualistically, with few people falling in between.”

It is here, halfway through the book, that Campanella rounds into his main argument: that a street largely seen as phony, sleazy, and shamelessly pandering to tourists is in fact utterly democratic, organic, and—that word again—authentic. As Campanella points out, Bourbon Street has no central entity, organizing body, corporate support, or marketing branch. The businesses on the street are owned and operated almost exclusively by New Orleans natives (the main exception are the strippers, who tend to come from all over the South, there not being enough strippers native to New Orleans to support the high demand). And not all locals shun it: the lower part of the street is the

city's main gay public space, home to the city's first gay bar and the widely attended Southern Decadence festival; and despite a legacy of racism and segregation, the street remains relatively popular among local African-Americans, who tend not to care too deeply about questions of "authenticity."

Bourbon Street exists in its current form—strip clubs, daiquiri bars selling drinks like the Hand-Grenade and the Jester ("The World's Strongest Drink"), clubs featuring live bands playing Journey and Bon Jovi songs—only because this form is exactly what most tourists want, and will pay for. In 2012, nine million people visited New Orleans; more than seven million of them came to Bourbon Street. One veteran of the street interviewed by Campanella even goes so far as to say that Bourbon businesses don't want locals on the street because they don't spend as much as the tourists.

Transplants who protest that the street panders to tourists miss the point. Bourbon Street has to appeal to tourists in order for the city to survive. Tourism is today New Orleans's leading industry, responsible for supporting the local economy in a city that, despite the recent boom, remains severely underpopulated. One out of every twenty jobs in New Orleans is located on Bourbon Street. Campanella estimates that it produces billions of dollars a year for the city. If most tourists mistake each other for locals, and see Bourbon Street as a true representation of New Orleans, it's not the city's loss. It's the city's gain.

Campanella is most persuasive, and most gleefully subversive, when he contrasts Bourbon Street to the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, beloved by "cultural cognoscenti" for its vast array of regional food offerings, musical acts, and exhibits devoted to local culture. You do not see beads at Jazz Fest, or flashing coeds, or Bourbon T-Shirts ("I Got Bourbon Faced on Shit Street"). The festival, as Campanella notes, "sees itself as a cultural refuge from all that phoniness." Yet Jazz Fest

was invented by a man from Massachusetts as part of a worldwide megafestival circuit—essentially a local franchise of a global chain. Meticulously choreographed and carefully policed, it is managed out of New York, coordinated by crack professionals, "presented by Shell" (a phrase now officially appended to the event's name), increasingly dependent on global superstar acts, subsidized by an on-site Acura showroom, and funded by Big Oil—not to mention an entrance fee that has risen 400 percent in ten years, to fifty dollars per person [now \$70, in fact], more than the median daily take-home pay for most New Orleanians.... Jazz Fest is the epitome of invented, planned, centralized cultural control that leaves nothing to chance and covers its tracks with the trappings and aesthetics of authenticity.

A distinctive mark of Campanella's work is his obsessive recording of statistics that are as revealing as they must be tedious to compile. Part of the delight of the various charts and maps included in the book is to imagine Campanella, clicker and stopwatch in hand, standing motionless amid the drunk, swelling mobs as he soberly records his data. Among his findings are a chart counting the numbers of people, broken down by gender and day of the week, standing on Bourbon Street balconies between 9:30 and 11:30 PM ("*figures represent averages over 35 evenings during 2010–2011*"); the geographical origins of pedestrians ("based on 423 individuals queried...on four typical evenings during 2010–2011"); and, most astonishingly, a graph of pedestrian traffic, broken down for all fourteen blocks of Bourbon Street ("*figures represent number of people passing a given spot every two minutes, between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m., surveyed every ten days from August 2010 to August 2011*"). There is also a pair of heat maps of downtown reflecting "The Geography of Cool" and "The Geography of Uncool." Bourbon Street, needless to say, is the epicenter of uncool.

Readers might concede Campanella's argument about Bourbon Street's democratic spirit, financial significance, and local pedigree, but still fail to be charmed into loving it. While the spectacle of the street can be fascinating, it is also numbingly predictable. As Campanella writes, "a walk down Bourbon Street today could be swapped for any evening twenty-five years ago with no great noticeable difference." The hawkers' patter, the Jesters and Huge Ass Beers, the songs heard ("Margaritaville," "Sweet Home Alabama," "Don't Stop Believin'"), the tchotchkes and T-shirts sold, the cons practiced by hucksters, the smell (equal parts vomit, beer, and urine), and the placards held by the street preachers ("Party in Hell Cancelled Due to Fire," "Are You God's Barf?") have remained unchanged since the 1980s. (The most obvious difference is the recent decline in public nudity, thanks to the ubiquity of smart phones.) The street shows no sign of changing, either, as the recent defeat of the proposed noise ordinance, which was supported by Mayor Mitch Landrieu, demonstrated. Bourbon Street may not be charming, but it turns a serious profit. The city, and its citizens, ought to be grateful for that.

Any anxiety felt locally about the ways in which Bourbon Street "single-handedly generates imagery and reputation about an entire metropolis" is dwarfed by anxieties about the negative attention brought to the city by Hurricane Katrina. Sheri Fink's *Five Days at Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital*, an expansion of a Pulitzer Prize-winning article written jointly for *The New York Times Magazine* and *ProPublica*, is full of surprising revelations, but none more startling than the degree to which local investigators covered up crimes out of a sense of civic shame.

In detail so abundant that it can be excruciating, Fink's book chronicles what happened when an Uptown hospital and its hundreds of patients were marooned for five days by the flood. As conditions deteriorated and evacuations proceeded at a glacial pace, doctors made the decision to euthanize the most infirm patients rather than let them continue to suffer, even though they had plenty of food and water and were only a mile from dry ground. As it turned out, some of these patients were not as infirm as they appeared, and the fatal injections were administered even after rescue helicopters had arrived and the evacuation was underway.

The book takes the structure of a crime procedural, proceeding chronologically. The first part is a moment-by-moment account of what took place during the five days at Memorial. The second part is the story of the legal disputes that followed. The prose is frequently stilted ("The stress of the disaster narrowed people's fields of vision, as if they wore blinders to anyone's experience but their own"), which is unfortunate because *Five Days at Memorial* is a stunning feat of journalism.

Fink reported the story for more than two years, interviewing 140 people, and examining debates over thorny legal, medical, and ethical questions. Her reporting was more thorough than the various official investigations into the matter. Several of the doctors acknowledged to her their role in hastening their patients' deaths. One even admitted smothering a man to death with a towel when the morphine did not finish the job.

Fink doesn't vilify the doctors for their actions, but explains how a toxic combination of weak leadership, abhorrent conditions, panic, and inadequate training led them to betray their own ethical codes. The real sin was committed later, during the investigation, when doctors conspired with hospital officials to obscure the truth about the murders. "It's in nobody's interest for these things to see the light of day," says one lawyer. In their defense, doctors referred to their behavior as "battlefield triage," despite the fact that the method of triage they used was not conducted on any battlefield. When all else failed, the defendants claimed, self-servingly, that they couldn't be held legally accountable for their actions because "New Orleans at the time of Katrina had not been America."

Opposing this rhetoric was the finding, by various independent forensic analysts, that at least twenty of the deaths were homicides. The ethicists who were consulted by investigators disputed the various mitigating arguments by pointing out that "the death of a patient cannot be the goal of a doctor's treatment." This, it would seem, should have been enough to secure some convictions.

But the man with the greatest influence on the grand jury investigation was the city's longtime coroner, Frank Minyard (recently retired), who believed that his obligation to tell the truth was diluted by an obligation to do "what was best for his city." "He felt it was his duty to take into consideration the potential effect of his rulings on the community," writes Fink. This meant he was less inclined to convict Anna Pou, a surgeon arrested for murder in connection with the Memorial deaths, because she was beloved locally. She was seen as a hero, having toiled "without sleep and without nourishment" under desperate conditions and was being victimized callously by the same governmental forces that were responsible for so much of the city's devastation.

Minyard, who was close to several members of Pou's family, felt pressure from those who supported her and from "the bad publicity the city was getting." Worried that public condemnation of Pou would look bad for the city, he failed to make a strong ruling, calling the cause of death "undetermined" in nearly every case. During his Grand Jury testimony, he told Fink, "he looked into [the jurors'] hearts and saw they were not interested in bringing charges."

One juror admits as much to Fink. Even though the juror "was convinced—and, she believed, all of her fellow jurors were too—that a crime had occurred on that fifth day at Memorial," the jury voted to refuse the charges nonetheless. Vindicated, Anna Pou went on to a lucrative career on the national lecturing circuit as a speaker on "ethical considerations" in disaster medicine, giving speeches in which she lied about the conditions at Memorial and neglected to mention her decision to inject her patients with fatal doses of morphine.

Pou's lawyer was right when he said that it was not in anybody's interest for stories like that to see the light of day. The only thing that's worse is when stories like that don't see the light of day. Like so many New Orleans stories, the value of the Memorial story is inversely proportionate to the candor with which it is told.

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1. Richard Campanella, "Gentrification and Its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans," *New Geography*, March 1, 2013. In the interest of full disclosure: I know Campanella slightly, having appeared with him on several panels, interviewed him for an article, and sought his assistance for historical research I've conducted. [↪](#)
 2. Another recent major population wave, largely ignored by Campanella and most everyone else, is the influx of Latino immigrants, who represent as much as 10 percent of the population, up from only 4.4 percent before Katrina. Many came for work during the rebuilding effort, stayed on for the cleanup of the BP spill, and now are finding employment thanks to the current boom in home construction and renovation. [↪](#)