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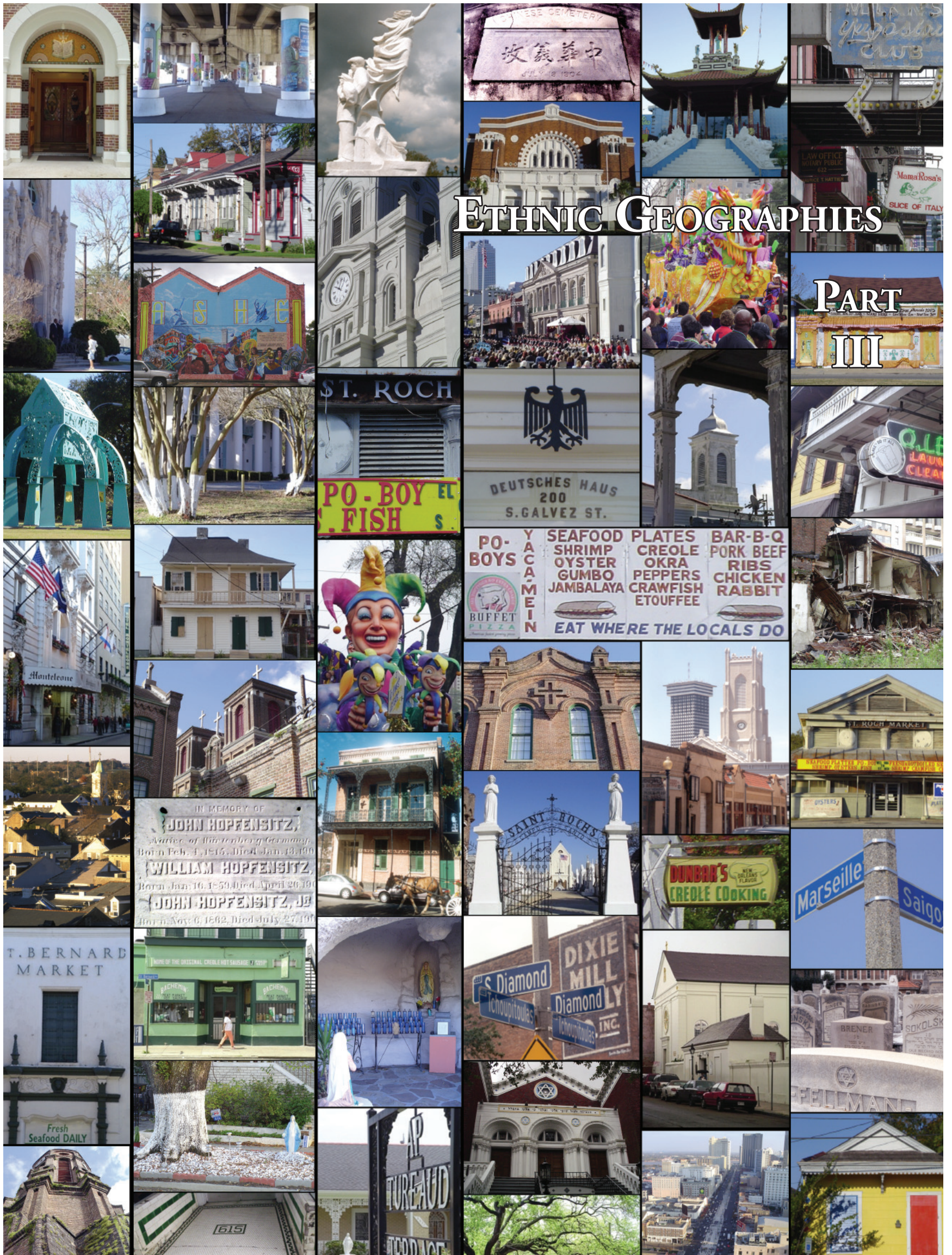
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ETHNIC GEOGRAPHIES

PART III

AMERICA'S FIRST MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY?

No city perhaps on the globe, in an equal number of human beings, presents a greater contrast of national manners, language, and complexion, than does New Orleans.

—William Darby, 1816¹

The population is much mixed, consisting of foreign and native French; Americans born in the state and from every state of the Union; a few Spaniards; and foreigners from almost every nation...; there is a great "confusion of tongues," and on the Levée, during a busy day, can be seen people of every grade, colour and condition: in short it is a world in miniature.

—John Adams Paxton, 1822²

Americans, English, French, Scotch, Spaniards, Swedes, Germans, Irish, Italians, Russians, Creoles, Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, and Brazilians. This mixture of languages, costumes, and manners, rendered the scene one of the most singular that I ever witnessed.... [They] formed altogether such a striking contrast, that it was not a little extraordinary to find them united in one single point. If there is a place [representing] the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel, it certainly is New Orleans.

—C.D. Arfwedson, 1834³

Truly does New-Orleans represent every other city and nation upon earth. I know of none where is congregated so great a variety of the human species, of every language and colour. Not only natives of the well known European and Asiatic countries are here to be met with, but occasionally Persians, Turks, Lascars, Maltese, Indian sailors from South America and the Islands of the sea, Hottentots, Laplanders, and, for aught I know to the contrary, Symmezonians.

—Joseph Holt Ingraham, 1835⁴

Jews and Gentiles, the Frenchman, Italian, Spaniard, German, and American, of all conditions and occupations.... What a hub-bub! what an assemblage of strange faces, of the representatives of distinct people! What a contact of beauty and deformity, of vulgarity and good-breeding! What a collection of costumes...!

—Henry Didimus, 1835-1836⁵

That nineteenth-century visitors to New Orleans regularly marveled about the diversity of the local population offers more than mere anecdotal evidence for the Crescent City's celebrated ethnic heterogeneity.⁶ These observers tended to be worldly, erudite, and, by the very nature of their waterborne arrival, usually familiar with other great port cities. Their comments may thus reflect fair comparisons to many other cities worldwide, and are buttressed by the assessments of prominent historians. "Almost from the beginning," wrote the late Joseph Logsdon, "South Louisiana had a diverse population of Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, Indians, Africans,

¹ William Darby, *A Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana* (Philadelphia, PA, 1816), 186.

² John Adams Paxton, *The New Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), 45-46.

³ C.D. Arfwedson, *The United States and Canada in 1832, 1833, and 1834*, 2 vols. (London, 1834), 2:56.

⁴ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee*, 2 vols. (New York, 1835), 1:99.

⁵ H. Didimus, *New Orleans As I Found It* (New York, 1845), 29-30.

⁶ For a sampling of nineteenth-century visitor impressions, see John M. Martin, "The People of New Orleans As Seen By Her Visitors, 1803-1860," *Louisiana Studies* 6 (Winter 1967): 361-75.

and Spaniards. It contained a mixed population well before Chicago, Boston, New York or Cleveland...." New Orleans' diversity "amazed early travelers...[who] could find comparisons only in such crossroads of the world as Venice and Vienna."⁷ Far more immigrants arrived to the United States through New Orleans—over 550,000 from 1820 to 1860, with 300,000 in the 1850s alone—than any other Southern city in the nineteenth century, and for most of the late antebellum era, it was the nation's number-two immigrant port, ahead of Boston and behind only New York.⁸ Moreover, New Orleans "was an almost perfect microcosm...of the entire pattern of human movement into the United States prior to 1860."⁹

Such superlative notions invite deeper investigation. Was New Orleans, as many observers have passingly commented, "the only 'foreign' city in the United States"¹⁰ and "America's first melting pot?"¹¹ How does New Orleans' population diversity compare quantitatively to those of other cities of the day? These questions are of great interest to a geographical inquiry. Early multiculturalism would indicate a widespread attraction of this place to peoples from dispersed lands. What attracted them? What impact did they have on New Orleans, and vice versa? And why did this attraction eventually fade? An atypical diversity would distinguish New Orleans from other cities of the day; identifying and explaining distinguishing characteristics among places is a premier mission of the geographer. Additionally, such a distinction begs investigation as to how these varied groups lived and intermixed here over the years, and what this means for a nation practically founded on the principal of the "melting pot"—or better yet, "gumbo."¹²

MEASURING HISTORICAL DIVERSITY

Is New Orleans indeed America's first genuinely multicultural society? There exist about as many ways to measure diversity as there are to define it. This chapter enlists numerical evidence toward answering the above question, then looks behind the question to causation. We begin with some methodological clarifications. Ethnic¹³ diversity is judged here not

⁷ Joseph Logsdon, "The Surprise of the Melting Pot: We Can All Become New Orleansians," in *Perspectives on Ethnicity in New Orleans*, ed. John Cooke (New Orleans, 1979), 8.

⁸ Treasury Department, Bureau of Statistics, *Tables Showing Arrivals of Alien Passengers and Immigrants in the United States from 1820 to 1888* (Washington, DC, 1889), 108-09.

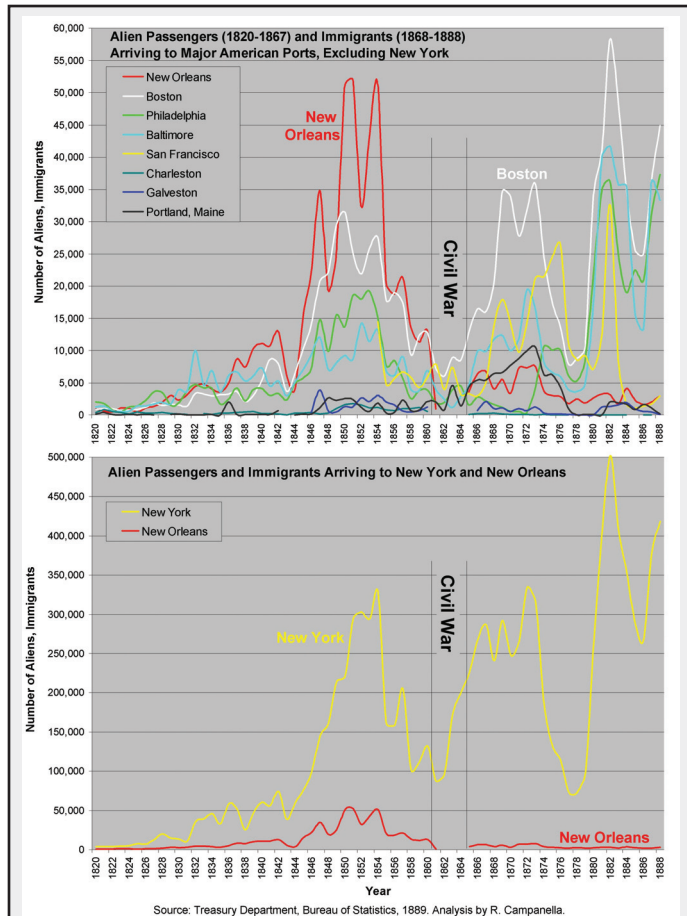
⁹ Frederick Marcel Spletstoser, "Back Door to the Land of Plenty: New Orleans as an Immigrant Port, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1979), vi.

¹⁰ Ingraham, *The South-West by a Yankee*, 1:93.

¹¹ Henry E. Chambers, *A History of Louisiana: Wilderness—Colony—Province—Territory—State—People* (Chicago and New York, 1925), 114.

¹² The old "melting pot" and "salad bowl" metaphors, used to describe ethnic interaction and assimilation in America, do not do justice to the process. Ethnic group identity neither completely "melts" into a new identity, nor maintains complete wholeness in a "salad" of other groups. "Gumbo" better captures the process: some elements blend; others remain distinct; and the whole differs from the sum of its parts. That gumbo is a classic dish of the New Orleans kitchen makes the metaphor that much more appealing.

¹³ An "ethnic group" may be defined as a self-identifying community united by a common ancestral or cultural bond, distinguished from the "charter" group, or host society. In historic New Orleans, that charter group comprised primarily the wealth-



More immigrants arrived through New Orleans—over 550,000 from 1820-1860, with 300,000 in the 1850s alone—than any other Southern city in the nineteenth century. For most of the late antebellum era, New Orleans was the nation's number-two immigrant port, ahead of Boston and behind only New York. All this changed after the Civil War. Graph and analysis by author based on 1889 Treasury Department-Bureau of Statistics data.

merely as the sheer number of groups coexisting in a locale, but their relative proportions. For example, a city in which only five groups resided in roughly equal numbers would be considered more diverse than a city in which twenty-five groups resided, but only one comprised 90 percent of the population. Additionally, one's state of origin is factored into this assessment. States were far more relevant to peoples' lives in antebellum America than they are today; one's nativity by state and region weighed heavily in self-identity and social interaction. (Consider that the era culminated when millions of soldiers in state militias fought a war over states' rights.) An Anglo from Vermont moving to the predominantly Anglo western frontier in 1820 may well have been seen as "different" for his Yankee origins, despite the similar bloodlines. The difference was that much greater in New Orleans, to which thousands of families from the North and upper South moved in the early nineteenth century. These out-of-state migrants differed—not only in ancestry but also in class, religion, language, political and economic philosophy, and over-

ier descendants of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Francophone and Anglo populations. This book, however, considers all groups, regardless of social position, as "ethnic" groups, so long as they perceive or perceived such bonds among themselves. New Orleans is one of the few American cities in which even the primary charter groups spent some time in the position of an ethnic minority.

all worldview—from the Creoles, whose identity was unified by a deep-rooted sense of colonial-era Louisiana nativity. When the data permitted, both Americans born out-of-state (presumably Anglo) and those born locally (presumably Creole) were considered as ethnically diversifying elements.

A distinction was also made between free people of color and enslaved populations, because their differing life experiences and ancestries made it seem reasonable to view each as an ethnic group within the larger black population. The two groups were seen as different castes in antebellum Louisiana society, the former allotted certain limited privileges and more likely to be Francophone Creole in culture; the latter at the bottom rung and more likely to have spent time in the out-of-state Anglo world. Because of restrictions on the in-migration of free people of color to Louisiana in the late antebellum era, most residing in New Orleans were native to the state, further differentiating them from their peers in other American cities.¹⁴

Whatever the ideal definition of ethnic diversity, we are, of course, limited to the data collected in the day (and surviving to today) if we seek to look at the question quantitatively. It is a matter of doing one's best with the scant data that do exist, rather than giving up because the optimal data do not exist. Spanish colonial-era censuses of New Orleans in 1769, 1778, 1787, and 1795-1799, and an early territorial-era census in 1805, offer only limited statistics comparable to those collected in the first two American censuses of 1790 and 1800.¹⁵ In the 1810 national census, the new American Territory of Orleans received only peripheral attention, and New Orleans proper even less.¹⁶ City-sponsored counts, tax lists, real estate records, and other ancillary sources of population information are useless in a comparative study if the same data cannot be found for other cities. It is not until the 1820 census that we find information detailed enough to allow for diversity comparisons of the nation's largest population centers. The 1850 census (and those following it) is a treasure trove because it was the first to record birthplace, a sound indicator of ethnicity. Late twentieth-century censuses went a step further by inquiring about peoples' "ancestries,"

¹⁴ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *American Diary 1857-8*, ed. Joseph W. Reed, Jr. (London, 1972), 98.

¹⁵ The Spanish census of 1778 counted 3,059 people living in New Orleans, 8 percent more than the previous year but less than the 1769 census. Fifty-one percent were white, 31 percent were slaves of pure African blood, 8 percent were free people of mixed blood, 7 percent were slaves of mixed blood, and 3 percent were free Africans of pure blood. Albert J. Robichaux, Jr., *Louisiana Census and Militia Lists 1770-1789*, vol. 1, *German Coast, New Orleans, Below New Orleans and Lafourche* (Harvey, 1973), 68; see also Roscoe R. Hill, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Documents Relating to the History of the United States in the Papeles Procedentes de Cuba Deposited in the Archivo General de Indias at Seville* (Washington, DC, 1916), 513.

¹⁶ The Territory of Orleans in 1810—roughly present-day Louisiana—contained 76,556 people, of whom 45 percent were slaves, 45 percent were free whites, and 10 percent were "all other free persons, except Indians not taxed." These totals were far more than any other American territory at the time—Mississippi, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. A census of New Orleans in the same year counted 17,224 New Orleanians, of whom 37 percent were white. Census Bureau, "Aggregate Amount of Each Description of Persons within the United States of America, and the Territories Thereof," 1810, Government Documents, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University; and Albert E. Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period, 1800-1840* (New Orleans, 1957), 257.

an even better gauge of ethnicity, and the 2000 census went further still by gathering information on an extremely wide spectrum of racial and ethnic intermixtures.

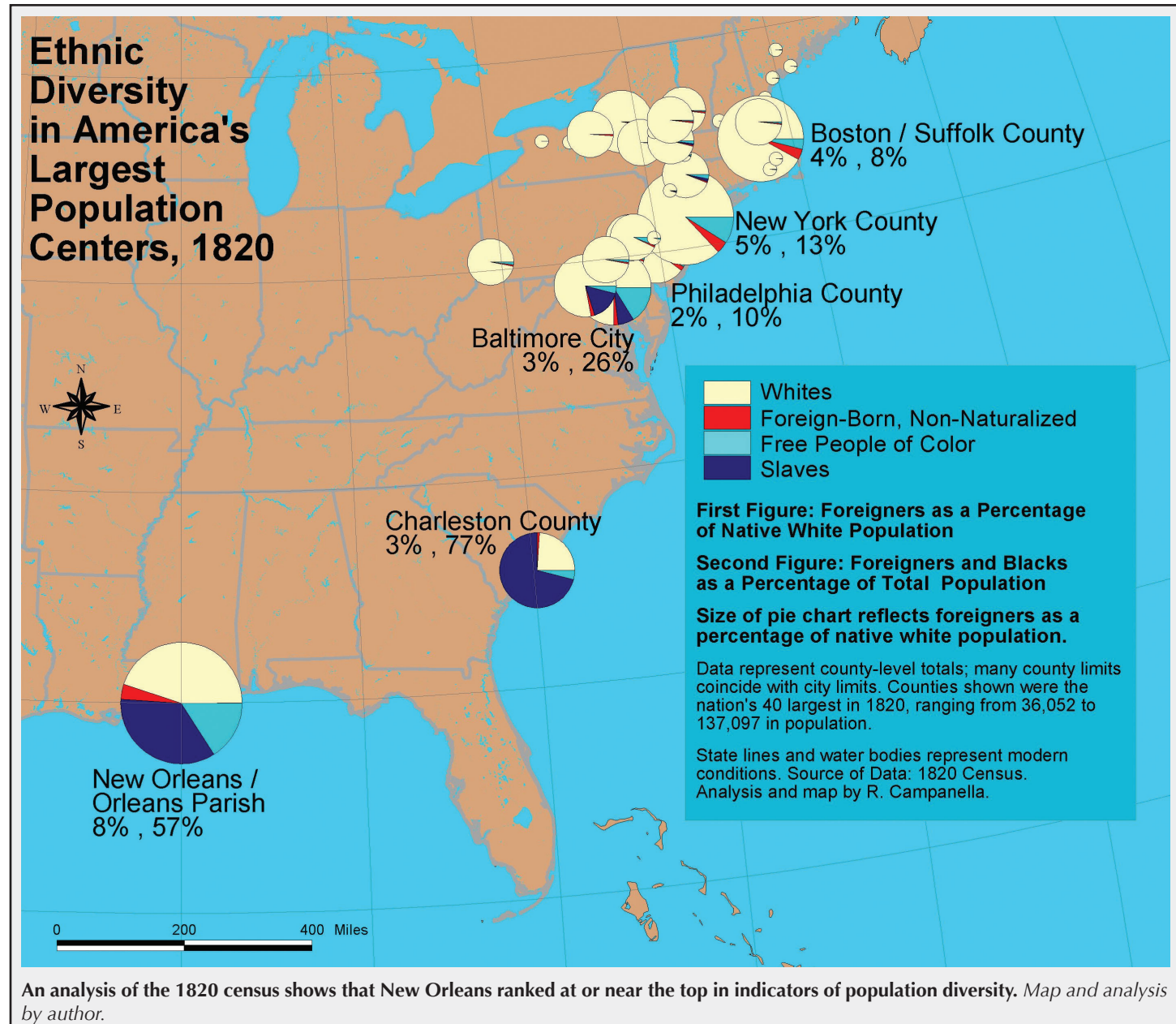
**A PLACE APART:
NEW ORLEANS IN 1820S AMERICA**

The compendium volume of the 1820 census categorized whites, non-naturalized foreigners, free colored people, and slaves at the county and city level for the nation's largest communities. Population-wise, Orleans Parish¹⁷ ranked twenty-fifth largest among counties, while New Orleans was fifth among cities in 1820, a year in which the rural county population was kept separate from that of urbanized New Orleans. From the perspective of sheer size, then, there were certainly larger population centers than New Orleans. But from a diversity perspective, Orleans Parish stands at or very near

the top. For example, if diversity is reflected by the number of foreigners and blacks (both free and enslaved) compared to the total population, then Orleans Parish ranks number two in the nation, at 57 percent, behind only the highly enslaved county encompassing the port city of Charleston. If we consider the white population as the denominator, the pattern persists: Orleans Parish is second only to Charleston County in the outnumbering of non-whites to whites. One may argue, of course, that such measures cannot help but rank Southern counties as extraordinarily diverse, as a statistical offshoot of slavery. Excluding slaves from the calculations, suddenly Orleans Parish becomes arguably the most diverse in the nation. It had by far the highest percent of unnaturalized foreigners compared to its white population (8 percent, ahead of New York's 4.8 percent), and the highest percent of foreigners plus free people of color to white population (45 percent, ahead of Baltimore's 24 percent).¹⁸

¹⁷ In the early American years, the term *county* was used (officially until 1843) to describe what we now call *parishes* in Louisiana, though for years both terms were used, often rather loosely. Orleans Parish in 1820 was not coincident with its present-day boundaries, having included much of today's Jefferson Parish.

¹⁸ County-level data from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center; city-level data from *Census for 1820*. Analysis by author.



Diversity in Major American Cities, 1850
 Analysis based on "Statistical View of the United States—Compendium of the Seventh Census" (1854), by J.D.B. De Bow. See source for details and explanations of discrepancies. Special thanks to Kate Iannuzzi for assistance in data entry.

Largest Cities, 1850	Total Population	Locally Born (in city or state)	Born Elsewhere in US	Born in England, Wales, or Scotland	Born in Ireland	Born in Germany, Prussia, or Austria	Born in France	Born in Spain	Born in Italy	Free People of Color	Slaves	Total US Born	Total Foreign Born	Total- Whites	Percent Foreign-Born plus Black to Total Population	Percent Foreign-Born plus Black to White Population	Percent Foreign-Born to White Population	Percent Foreign-Born plus Free Colored to White Population	Percent Locally Born to Total Population	Number of Ethnic / Nativity Groups Exceeding 5% of Total Population
New York	515,547	234,843	42,909	31,331	133,730	56,250	4,990	303	708	13,815	0	277,752	235,733	501,729	48%	50%	47%	50%	46%	5
Philadelphia	408,762	242,681	43,665	20,701	72,312	23,104	1,981	291	236	19,761	0	286,346	121,699	389,001	35%	36%	31%	36%	59%	5
Baltimore	169,054	113,583	16,908	2,658	12,057	19,454	346	16	67	25,442	2,946	130,491	35,492	140,666	38%	45%	25%	43%	67%	5
Boston	136,881	68,687	20,261	4,110	35,287	1,816	225	67	134	1,999	0	88,948	46,677	134,882	36%	36%	35%	36%	50%	3
New Orleans	119,460	34,101	16,369	3,524	20,200	11,554	7,522	1,150	658	9,961	18,068	50,470	48,601	91,431	64%	84%	53%	64%	29%	7
Cincinnati	115,435	39,322	21,236	4,853	14,393	33,540	797	4	152	3,237	0	60,558	54,541	112,198	50%	51%	49%	51%	34%	4
St. Louis	77,860	20,321	16,208	3,507	9,719	22,584	682	36	101	1,398	2,656	36,529	38,397	73,806	55%	58%	52%	54%	26%	4
Albany	50,763	28,738	2,424	2,622	13,079	2,876	97	2	1	860	0	31,162	16,591	49,903	34%	35%	33%	35%	57%	4
Louisville	43,194	16,285	8,794	882	3,105	7,526	422	4	112	1,538	5,432	25,079	12,461	36,224	45%	54%	34%	39%	38%	5
Charleston	42,985	16,066	1,743	869	2,369	1,817	187	23	56	3,441	19,532	17,809	4,643	20,012	64%	138%	23%	40%	37%	4
Providence	41,513	24,368	7,387	1,441	7,635	90	40	10	19	1,499	0	31,755	9,679	40,014	27%	28%	24%	28%	59%	3
Washington, DC	40,001	19,237	14,293	721	2,023	1,257	69	22	49	8,158	2,113	33,530	4,282	29,730	36%	49%	14%	42%	48%	5
Newark	38,893	21,477	5,084	2,389	5,564	3,828	240	8	0	1,229	0	26,561	12,322	37,664	35%	36%	33%	36%	55%	5
Chicago	29,963	5,831	7,862	2,493	6,096	5,094	234	2	4	323	0	13,693	15,682	29,640	53%	54%	53%	54%	19%	5
Richmond	27,570	14,138	1,403	451	685	760	68	5	34	2,369	9,927	15,541	2,102	15,274	52%	94%	14%	29%	51%	4
Detroit	21,019	6,323	4,732	1,719	3,289	2,858	282	4	4	587	0	11,055	9,927	20,432	50%	51%	49%	51%	30%	5
Portland	20,815	15,110	2,155	206	2,301	38	14	0	6	395	0	17,265	3,512	20,420	19%	19%	17%	19%	73%	3
Mobile	20,515	5,507	4,053	752	2,009	552	303	144	65	715	6,803	9,565	4,086	12,997	57%	89%	31%	37%	27%	4
New Haven	20,345	13,775	2,866	478	2,772	284	54	0	3	989	0	16,641	3,697	19,356	23%	24%	19%	24%	68%	3
Milwaukee	20,061	2,641	4,540	1,457	2,816	7,287	129	0	0	98	0	7,181	12,782	19,963	64%	65%	64%	65%	13%	5
Savannah	15,312	4,774	1,816	287	1,555	393	37	13	15	686	6,231	6,590	2,434	8,395	61%	111%	29%	37%	31%	4
Wilmington, DE	13,979	8,671	3,527	264	1,215	183	16	1	0	2,140	0	12,198	1,763	11,839	28%	33%	15%	33%	62%	4
Manchester	13,932	9,555	2,689	213	1,193	0	1	0	0	47	0	10,551	1,688	13,885	12%	12%	12%	12%	69%	3
Hartford	13,555	8,293	2,258	293	2,188	296	27	0	4	443	0	10,551	2,915	13,112	25%	26%	22%	26%	61%	3
Nashville	10,165	4,883	2,302	207	421	208	36	1	3	511	2,028	7,185	948	7,626	34%	46%	12%	19%	48%	4
Portsmouth	9,738	7,088	1,452	405	523	26	6	0	0	50	0	8,540	1,179	9,688	13%	13%	12%	13%	73%	3
Memphis	8,841	2,134	2,892	153	704	350	69	1	44	126	2,270	5,026	1,401	6,355	43%	60%	22%	24%	24%	4
Wilmington, NC	7,264	3,527	498	47	63	73	9	0	0	672	3,031	4,025	208	3,581	54%	109%	6%	25%	49%	4
St. Augustine	1,934	1,100	144	11	11	5	6	3	1	90	631	1,244	56	1,213	40%	64%	5%	12%	57%	3

When we consider city-level populations, the relative ethnic diversity of the New Orleans area intensifies. Though fifth in the nation in size, the Crescent City was either a close second to Charleston, or first in the nation (far ahead of such bastions of plurality as New York and Boston), in these rudimentary measures of diversity. According to the best available statistics, New Orleans emerges as one of the most, or *the* most, diverse city in 1820 America.

Numbers tell only part of the story. Other historical circumstances further add to the case for New Orleans' superlative multiculturalism. The city's geographical situation at the nexus of the North American interior with the southern seas availed it to populations largely beyond the influence of the great northeastern ports. The colonial ports of the Caribbean basin, the complex Creole societies of the sugar islands, and the ports of southern Europe and South America looked first to New Orleans, not New York or Philadelphia, when interacting with North America. New Orleans' whites, foreigners, free people of color, and slaves may "look" the same as those in Washington and Baltimore when listed in a statistical table, but in fact extracted from very different stock. Whites in most American cities were usually English in ancestry; whites in New Orleans were usually French. Africans in the upper South were absorbed into mostly Anglo-American culture; those in New Orleans were brought into Latin culture, often by way of French and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean. "The very history of New Orleans explains a population mixture that one cannot fail to notice even on the streets of the city," wrote a Russian visitor a few decades later. "Every one of the nationalities that took part in shaping the destiny of Louisiana left its representatives here, and down to the present day Spanish and French are heard along with English. Even the Americans have adopted foreign words into their language."¹⁹ Politically, New Orleans' foundation and possession by France, followed by about forty years of Spanish domination, rendered it fundamentally different from all other major American cities at the dawn of the nineteenth century. It was a French-speaking city in an English-speaking nation. It was a Catholic city in a Protestant nation. It legislated civil law in a nation of English common law. It watched the fighting of the Revolutionary War, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and the ratification of the Constitution from across international borders. New Orleans governed, worshipped, surveyed land, built structures, recorded deeds, celebrated holidays, and entombed the dead differently. And it attracted immigrants, investors, and interlopers who, more often than not, shared those cultural characteristics. French culture prevailed for many years after Americanization, as evidenced by this interview with prominent New Orleans lawyer M. Mazureau conducted by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1832:

Q. They say that in New Orleans is to be found a mixture of all the nations?

A. That's true; you see here a mingling of all races. Not a country in America or Europe but has sent us some representatives. New Orleans is a patch-work of peoples.

Q. But in the midst of this confusion what race dominates and gives direction to all the rest?

A. The French race, up to now. It's they who set the tone and shape the *mœurs*.²⁰

Intensifying this cultural distinction was New Orleans' geographical isolation, separated by a thousand waterborne miles from the South's number-two port, Charleston, and twice that distance from the hearth of Anglo-America. New Orleans in the early 1800s represented not only the nation's southwestern frontier, but also a new experience in its westward expansion: a century-old, sophisticated foreign society borne under very different circumstances, suddenly Americanized. These factors made New Orleans' early multiculturalism that much more extraordinary.²¹

ETHNIC GUMBO:

NEW ORLEANS IN 1850S AMERICA

By the midpoint of the nineteenth century, New Orleans had tripled its 1820 population, remaining fifth among cities in the growing nation and enjoying the height of its wealth and prestige. Its ability to attract newcomers—a sound gauge of a city's greatness—peaked in the 1850s. In fact, for most of the years between 1837 and 1860, the remote and isolated Crescent City attracted more immigrants than any other city in the South, and any in the nation save New York. In 1851, a city record of 52,011 immigrants arrived to New Orleans, almost the same number as recorded for Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore *combined*.²² Many of them, of course, arrived and promptly departed for other destinations up the Mississippi Valley; others remained and settled locally. Exactly how many can be determined not through immigration data but census data. An analysis of the 1850 census—which tabulated state or country of birth for the first time—provides additional evidence that New Orleans was at the very forefront of the American experiment of pluralism. Some observations about the 1850 census data²³ follow.

Ethnic Gumbo — New Orleans in 1850 was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, na-

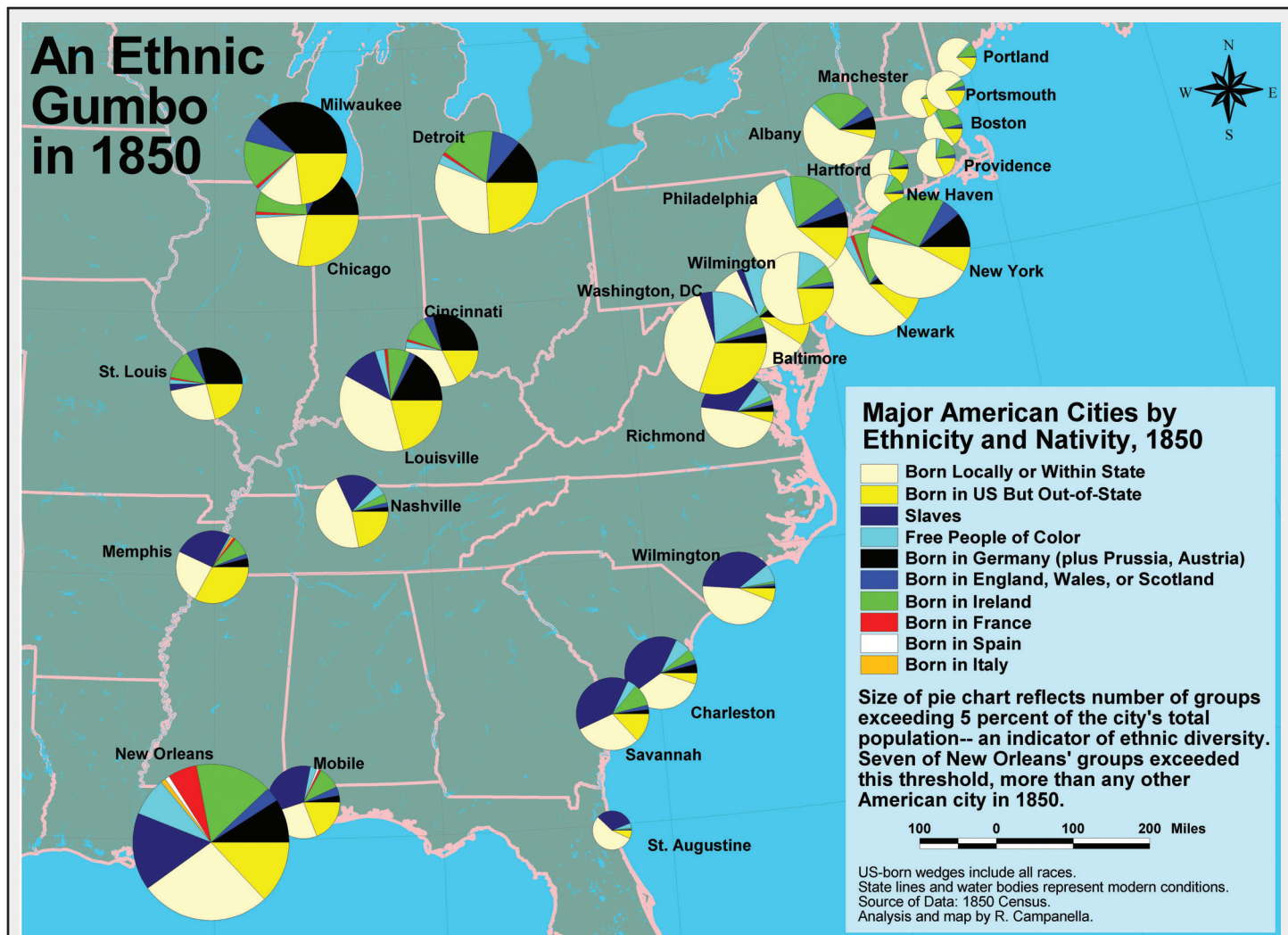
²⁰ As quoted in George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Garden City, NY, 1959), 397.

²¹ Among the best accounts of antebellum New Orleans' ethnic chessboard are found in the works of historian Joseph G. Tregle, Jr. Especially recommended is "The Ethnic Imperative" chapter in his *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge, 1999).

²² Treasury Department, Bureau of Statistics, *Tables Showing Arrivals*, 108-09.

²³ Analysis based on data in J.D.B. De Bow, *Statistical View of the United States—Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, DC, 1854), 395-99. Note: this source combines New Orleans, Lafayette, and Algiers for population figures on whites, slaves, and free people of color, totaling 133,650. But figures involving place of birth appear to have been held to different standards, representing only New Orleans proper, whose population in 1850 was 119,460 (91,431 whites; 18,068 black slaves; and 9,961 free people of color). I adjusted the data in the accompanying table such that only New Orleans proper is depicted.

¹⁹ Aleksandr Borisovich Lakier, *A Russian Looks at America: The Journal of Aleksandr Borisovich Lakier in 1857*, eds. Arnold Schrier and Joyce Story (Chicago and London, 1979), 232.



New Orleans in 1850 was home to more significantly sized ethnic groups (measured by ancestry, nativity, race, and enslavement status) than any other American city. Nearly three out of every four residents were born elsewhere. New Orleans claimed the highest numbers of French- and Spanish-born residents, and probably Italian-born as well. Foreigners and African Americans comprised a greater percent of the total population (64 percent) here than any of the other eight largest cities in the nation. Map and analysis by author.

tivity, race, and enslavement status) than any other American city. That is, when we break each of the twenty-nine major American cities' populations into the sub-groups tabulated by the 1850 census,²⁴ seven groups in New Orleans each comprised at least 5 percent of the city's total population. No other city had more than five such groups. New Orleans' diversity was thus significant in numbers of people *in* various groups, as well as number *of* groups. To push the metaphor, not only was New Orleans a rich gumbo of different ethnicities, but no one skimped on the ingredients.

A Town of Out-of-Towners — New Orleans had the lowest percentage of locally born people (26 percent born in the city or state) of those six American cities with populations over 100,000. Nearly three out of every four New Orleanians in 1850 were born elsewhere and came here from every corner on the globe. Four smaller cities near the western fron-

²⁴ The subgroups were aggregated as (1) locally born; (2) born elsewhere in United States; (3) born in England, Wales, or Scotland; (4) born in Ireland; (5) born in Germany, Prussia, or Austria; (6) born in France; (7) born in Spain; (8) born in Italy; (9) free people of color; and (10) enslaved blacks. De Bow, *Statistical View of the United States*, 395-99.

tier—St. Louis, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Memphis—had lower rates of nativity.

Vestiges of Colonial Ties — Nearly a half-century after the departure of the colonial regimes, New Orleans in 1850 still claimed the highest numbers of French- and Spanish-born residents (7,522 and 1,150, respectively) of any city in the nation—and by a wide margin, in both absolute and per capita terms. It also had the second-most Italian-born residents,²⁵ showing Catholic southern Europeans' preference for New Orleans above most other American cities.

A Majority of Minorities — Foreigners and African Americans comprised a greater percent of the total population (64 percent), and of the white population (84 percent) in New Orleans than any of the other eight largest cities in the nation. However, a number of smaller cities—Charleston, Milwaukee, Savannah, among them—ranked higher in these measures of diversity.

²⁵ Other tabulations of the same data indicate that New Orleans had the most Italians of any American city in 1850, in both absolute and relative terms. See the chapter on Little Palermo for details.

Foreigners — New Orleans ranked second in the nation (53 percent) in percent of foreign-born²⁶ to total number of whites, behind only Milwaukee (64 percent), a young city settled by a large German-born population.

Foreigners and Free People of Color — When we consider foreign-born plus free people of color as a percentage of total white population, New Orleans is again number two in the nation, at 64 percent, just behind mostly immigrant Milwaukee (65 percent).

EXPLAINING THE DIVERSITY

Though the specifics are subject to debate, both first-person testimonies and statistics show that New Orleans was among the most ethnically diverse major cities in nineteenth-century America. Which begs the question, why? What was it about New Orleans that attracted so many from so far and wide, so early? A series of interrelated factors—geographical, economic, sociological, and historical—explain the phenomenon.

Accessibility — A strategically located river/sea port city is, by definition, relatively cheap and easy to reach by waterborne transportation, especially when that river is the likes of the Mississippi, and that sea communicates not just with the Gulf and East coasts but societies in the Caribbean basin, Europe, and Africa. Water bodies, not land, connected New Orleans with the outside world, in an era when humans depended almost entirely on waterborne transportation for commerce and long-distance travel. Immigration routes followed commercial routes, which followed waterways. Fares were sometimes cheap, and ships from certain major world ports departed regularly and sailed directly to New Orleans. Accordingly, a wide diversity of peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gained easier access to distant New Orleans than to much more proximate smaller ports or landlocked communities. Being a major node in the world shipping system also instilled an international character in New Orleans, which augmented its diversity. Merchant marines, sailors, servicemen, multinational businessmen, consuls, and a network of support industries created a community of long-term visitors in New Orleans, many of whom married into the local population established permanent residence and brought brethren. The diversity imparted through the Crescent City's waterborne accessibility might have been greater had the city established a greater number of direct lines with European ports (beyond those associated with cotton exportation), had its local merchants owned and controlled their own shipping fleets, and had fares been consistently cheaper than those to alternative cities in the Northeast.²⁷

Hinterland — New Orleans operates, then and now, as a through-port in service of a vast hinterland. Through this

²⁶ Note that the "foreign" statistic in 1820 meant non-naturalized foreigners, while in 1850 it implied foreign-born—comparable, but not identical.

²⁷ Spletstoser, "Back Door to the Land of Plenty," 57-59.

port came people as well as products and raw material, many intent on settling in the interior. But a stop in New Orleans often meant a connection made or an opportunity seized—enough reason to stay in New Orleans. In other circumstances, "many immigrants who disembarked at New Orleans tarried or took up residence there because they arrived destitute and unable to continue their journey, or because they did not have the desire, knowledge, or skills to become agricultural pioneers in the interior valley."²⁸ Thus, originally drawn by the hinterland, they instead became New Orleanians. Historian A.A. Conway observed that New Orleans, like most large ports serving vast hinterlands, served as a filter on the flow of immigrants, and not necessarily to its benefit. The city often "was left with a residue of poorer, less desirable immigrants who lacked either the resources or the inclination to strike out for the West, [thus] it became a transit point for the best elements of the immigrant flow" into the hinterland.²⁹

Force — Tens of thousands came in bondage, directly from Africa or via the Caribbean, other Southern ports, and plantations throughout the lower Mississippi Valley. Slaves did not form one homogeneous community unified by race—a fact not appreciated by many slaveholders—but rather a multitude of ethnicities carried on from their life experiences and from those of their ancestors. Force was also the factor behind the arrival of some early colonial settlers, whose deportation to the Louisiana colony was the only alternative to imprisonment.

Prosperity and Opportunity — In the decades after the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans ascended to become one of the wealthiest cities in America, attracting the privileged and the ambitious as well as the job-seeking impoverished and destitute. The Crescent City was the talk of early-1800s America, a century-old society at the gateway of the Mississippi Valley suddenly thrown open to American commerce, precisely when the serendipitous advancements in ginning and granulation allowed lucrative cotton and sugar production to replace fading colonial-era crops such as tobacco and indigo. "New Orleans has been rated as the third city of the Union," wrote one proud partisan in 1838, "but she is in reality the third only in population, and second in a commercial point of view. Her imports are now exceeded only by New York and Boston; while her exports nearly triple any port in the United States except New York, which she exceeds by one third."³⁰ New Orleans in the early 1800s promised an opportunity to start afresh and to make it big; it offered both the excitement of a frontier town and the sophistication of an elder city. By the mid-1800s, however, New Orleans' relative lack of industrialization forced many "desirable" immigrants to proceed to interior destinations while the poor

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁹ A.A. Conway, "New Orleans as a Port of Immigration, 1820-1860" (M.A. thesis, University of London, 1949), 220-22.

³⁰ *Gibson's Guide and Directory of the State of Louisiana, and the Cities of New Orleans and Lafayette* (New Orleans, 1838), preface.

and destitute remained: the city could employ unskilled dock workers and canal diggers in much larger numbers than it could support middle-class professionals and skilled workers. Perceptions of economic opportunity for unskilled workers also attracted thousands of freedmen in the years after emancipation, diversifying the local urban black population with rural blacks of both Creole and Anglo ethnicity.

Marketing, Employment, and Recruitment — Marketing—often deceptive—encouraged some groups to immigrate to French colonial Louisiana, which was, in the early years, a land-development scheme predicated on its ability to people the land. Some immigrants were attracted by specific job offers from private enterprises, a tempting proposition for those suffering hopeless conditions in their mother countries. This was the case for the thousands of Irish who immigrated in the 1830s for the grueling and dangerous work of digging the New Basin Canal. Sicilians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were recruited out of desperate conditions by the marketing efforts of the labor-starved Louisiana sugar industry, abetted by the state of Louisiana. Sugar planters had earlier recruited small numbers of Chinese out of Cuba, California, and the Far East, to replace emancipated slaves. These immigrants often settled in New Orleans after toiling a few seasons on south Louisiana sugar plantations.

“Open Port” — Fredrick Marcel Spletstoser noted that no government agency regulated immigration at the port of New Orleans in the antebellum era, and no quarantine was practiced until 1855. Immigrants with diseases, disabilities, criminal records, debts, and other issues, who would have been turned away from New York, were allowed access to the United States through New Orleans.³¹

Familiarity — Certain groups established their home in or near New Orleans for its cultural similarity to their homelands. Acadians exiled from French Canada by the English in the 1760s and 1780s found their way to southern Louisiana in part for its familiar Francophone culture. Revolution in Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804 scattered thousands of French-speaking islanders throughout the Caribbean Basin, of whom over 9,000 arrived to New Orleans in 1809, again for its cultural familiarity. More so than any other American city, New Orleans attracted large numbers of immigrants directly from France, because the city retained its Francophone culture for decades after the colonial era. It is likely that many Sicilians who immigrated to New Orleans at the turn of the century felt at home with the city’s Vatican-oriented Catholicism, the same factor that played a major role in bringing Vietnamese refugees here after the Communist takeover of their homeland. *Physical familiarity*—the similarity of the physical environment to one’s homeland—is also said to have drawn immigrants to New Orleans, but this claim is dubious. The Acadians encountered in Louisiana a

physical environment quite different from the one they left in Canada. The Sicilians, we are told, embraced the Mediterranean ambience of the French Quarter—or do twenty-first-century observers simply read this conclusion into nostalgic photographs of disheveled Quarter courtyards and cluttered, Venetian-like street scenes? Usually, immigrants select their destinations with only passive regard for the familiarity of the physical environment,³² else we would see few Latinos in New York, or Germans in Texas, or English in Australia. Modern times have put an interesting twist on the notion of familiarity as a migration factor: the small but noteworthy in-migration to New Orleans in recent decades, mostly comprising educated professionals, empty-nesters, and young adults with a taste for the Bohemian, derives not from what is culturally or physically familiar about the city, but from what is distinctive, unique, and alternative to what is perceived as the monotonous American norm.

Chain Immigration — An established community of compatriots settled in a distant land offers a compelling reason for more to come: the settled group informs its brethren of opportunities, warns them of threats, and avails them a haven, a refuge, and a sense of security. The size of an established group may vary from a few dozen to a few thousand before a critical mass is recognized, but once established, immigration rates often rise dramatically, as wives, children, relatives, and friends make the move. While the original immigrants might have selected New Orleans for reasons X, Y, and Z, the next wave may choose New Orleans for only one reason: to join the first wave. This phenomenon of chain immigration is evident among Latin American immigrants to various American cities today, in which people of certain towns and cities in Mexico, for example, beeline for specific neighborhoods in American cities where their countrymen reside.

Commercial Ties — Old economic ties, often the byproduct of direct shipping lines, underlie the city’s age-old connection to certain world ports. A steady stream of cotton exports to Liverpool made for plenty of room for poor Irish immigrants to sail for New Orleans on cheap fares, serving as ballast in the otherwise-empty holds of ships.³³ Commercial shipping for the tropical-fruit industry connected New Orleans with Palermo in the early nineteenth century, and with La Ceiba, Honduras in the twentieth century. The old Palermo connection made New Orleans today home to the nation’s largest concentration of Sicilians. The old Central American connection, in which New Orleans-based banana companies (one run by a Sicilian immigrant, the other by a Russian im-

³² Perhaps the best local example of environmental similarity as an immigrant draw is the latter waves of Vietnamese arrivals, who came to the New Orleans area in the 1980s-1990s in part for its fishing opportunities and semitropical climate. But they might not have arrived at all had there been no Vietnamese community already established. That initial community of Catholic Vietnamese refugees connected with the city on cultural grounds: they were specifically invited here in 1975 by the Catholic Church.

³³ See Earl F. Niehaus, *The Irish in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge, 1965), 34-35, on the relationship between cotton exportation and Irish immigration.

³¹ Spletstoser, “Back Door to the Land of Plenty,” 130-31.

migrant) controlled extensive tracts of land and wielded great political power, has made New Orleans today the “third largest Honduran population center in the world.”³⁴

Isolation — At the dawn of the American era, New Orleans formed the nation’s most isolated major urban outpost.³⁵ The city’s remoteness, its separation from its immediate mainland by swamp, marsh, forest, and water, and its position about as far down the Mississippi River as geography would allow, made it the premier place to settle or stop over when traveling the southwestern frontier. The biggest, wealthiest, and most vivacious city naturally attracts the lion’s share of that region’s immigration and emigration, but when that city is isolated from neighboring cities and surrounded by inhospitable terrain, the attraction of newcomers amounts to monopolization.

Tolerance — New Orleans’ prevalent atmosphere of tolerance is a product of its diversity and, to some degree, a cause of it. Black freedmen emigrated to the city after emancipation mainly for economic opportunity, but also to seek refuge in the more liberal attitude toward race and racial subjugation perceived in the Crescent City, relative to the interior South. This civic attribute of tolerance also explains the historically large and currently growing gay population in the city.

“Creole Factor” — Connotations of *Creole*—nativity to the New Orleans region, and the blending of ethnic and racial heritages—add complexity to New Orleans’ ethnic diversity, and help distinguish it from that of other cities. In early and mid-nineteenth century usage, *Creole* implied those native to New Orleans and the delta region, who, whether white or black or mixed, traced their lineage back to colonial times and thus were more likely to practice Catholicism, speak French or Spanish, and exhibit locally tinged, Old World Latin cultural traits. The most profound ethnic dichotomy of antebellum New Orleans formed between these Creoles and the recently arrived, English-speaking, Protestant Anglo emigrants from the upper South and northeastern states. The early nineteenth-century understanding of *Creole* has since been supplanted by a modern usage (see next chapter for details), in which the word loosely refers to those black New Orleanians who descend from the free people of color or other mixed-race ancestors with some Francophone heritage. That the concept still survives today as a diversifying element of the black community illustrates yet another angle of New Orleans’ unique brand of multiculturalism. Another connotation of *Creole* comes in its process form—“creolization”—meaning, according to one observer, “the blending of

³⁴ Census data show about 10,000 Hondurans in the metropolitan area, but the Honduran consulate counts about 60,000 in the region, presumably including many American-born children. Jaquetta White, “Nagin Wants Honduran Trade,” *Times-Picayune*, June 13, 2002, Metro section, p. 1.

³⁵ See analysis in Brian J.L. Berry and Frank E. Horton, *Geographical Perspectives on Urban Systems* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1970), 22-23, in which historic New Orleans was found to be “well-suited to control the riverine internal trade but far distant from the areas which supplied domestic manufactures and from the heart of the domestic consumer market.”

different ethnic groups in forming an individual or group identity.”³⁶ To the extent that this means a racial blending, New Orleans society has traditionally recognized gradations between black and white unions, further diversifying the local ethnic and racial landscape. To the extent that creolization means that whoever arrives and intermingles in the steamy gumbo of a New Orleans neighborhood eventually assumes a new, local identity, born of different origin but unified by a sense of place—well, then, there is no greater testimony to New Orleans’ true diversity.

DIVERSITY IN DECLINE

New Orleans’ ethnic diversity in the early 1800s augmented later in the century, as peoples from southern and eastern Europe and elsewhere arrived to the city at rates greater than those of most other Southern ports. But its national primacy in multiculturalism began to diminish around the time of the Civil War, toppled by transformations both internal and external, gradual and sudden. One was foretold when the American flag first rose above the *Place d’Armes* on December 20, 1803: New Orleans’ underlying French Creole culture would slowly hybridize with, and eventually give way to, the dominant way of life of thousands of incoming migrants, backed by the larger American culture and government. “The moment the cession was made, crowds of needy Yankees, and what is worse, Kentuckians, spread all over [Louisiana], attracted by the hope of gain; the latter treating the inhabitants as little better than a purchased property,” recounted visitor Charles Sealsfield twenty-five years after the Louisiana Purchase. He continued,

Full of prejudice toward the descendents of a nation, of which they knew little more than the proverb, “French dog,” [many Americans] without knowing or condescending to learn their language, behaved towards these people as if the lands, as well as the inhabitants, could be seized without ceremony.³⁷

“There is little doubt,” wrote Richard Champion Rawlins in 1840, when the cultural transformation of New Orleans was well underway,

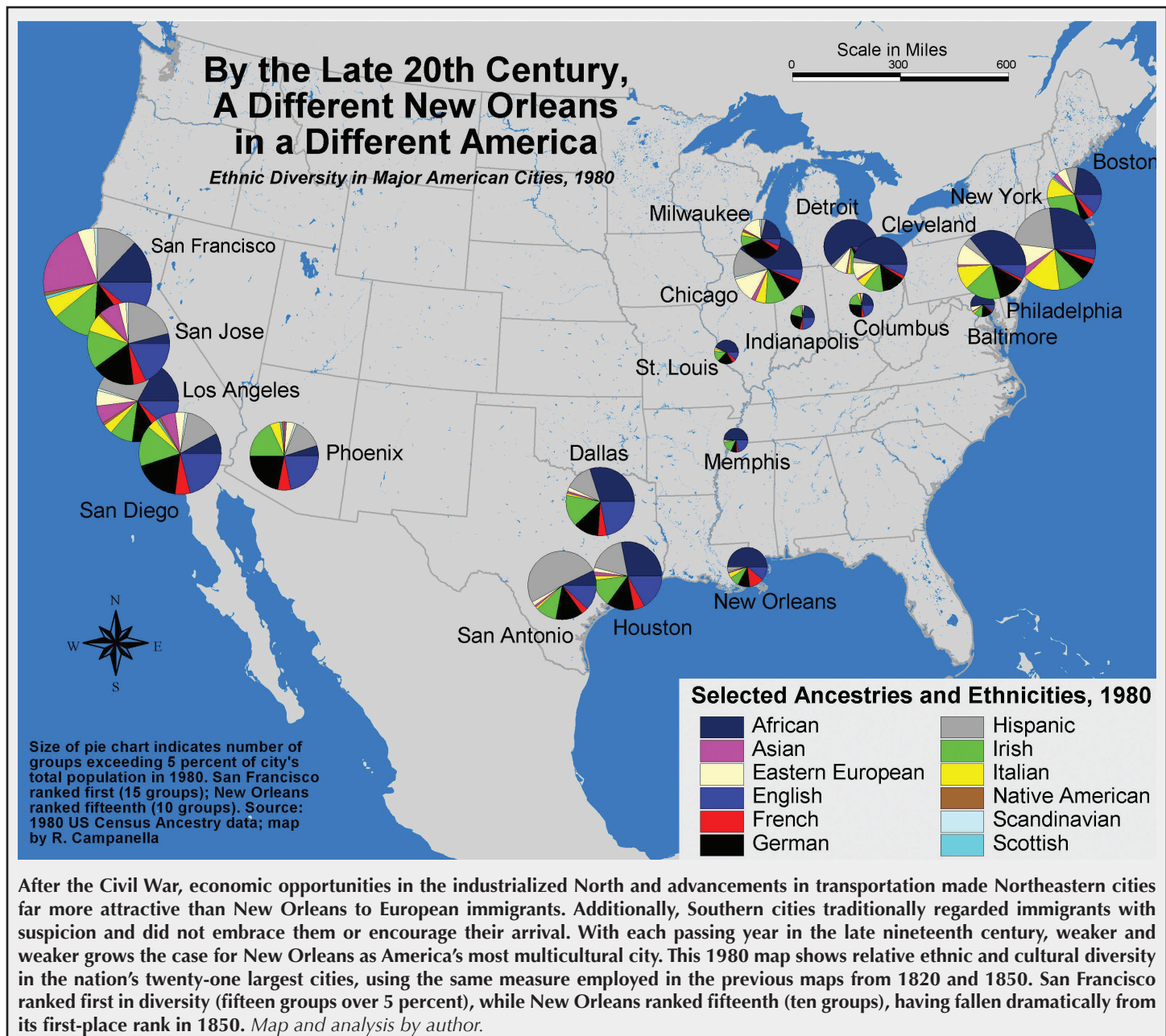
that before long the French will be almost unknown in this city as a distinct community...owing to the large influx of Americans into the city, whilst the French scarcely increase at all in numbers.³⁸

For most of the decades between Americanization and the Civil War, Creoles and Americans wrestled each other in politics, business, society, religion, and lifestyle, an omnipresent tension that underscored much of life in the antebellum city. But in no way could Creole culture have survived the onslaught. It was severed from its colonial-era taproot, outnumbered and overwhelmed by an ambitious people born of a vivacious new nation. Creoles had lost most of their political power by the time of the 1852 reunification of the mu-

³⁶ John Cooke, *Perspective on Ethnicity in New Orleans* (New Orleans, 1979), 1.

³⁷ Charles Sealsfield, *The Americans As They Are; Described in A Tour Through the Valley of the Mississippi* (London, 1828), 169-70.

³⁸ Richard Champion Rawlins, *An American Journal 1839-40*, ed. John L. Tearle (London, 2002), 106.



municipalities; City Hall moved uptown, English became the dominant language, Catholicism no longer accounted for all of the steeples in town, and interaction with the former colonialists decreased with every passing year. Though it would take many decades for most outward expressions of traditional Creole culture to disappear from the streets, New Orleans in the late nineteenth century was no longer the isolated bastion of foreignness that it was in 1803.

The ranks of Germans, Irish, French and others arriving in antebellum New Orleans, large as they were, might have been greater had the South in general realized their value and encouraged their settlement. Instead, according to historian A.A. Conway, Southern cities regarded immigrants suspiciously, as potential abolitionists, even as immigration swelled Northern cities and allowed them to industrialize. Nativist Know-Nothing activity in New Orleans might also have slowed arrivals. Advancements in ocean-going passenger vessels made Northeastern seaports more economically accessible than distant New Orleans, while Eastern railroads pene-

trated the Appalachians and reached St. Louis by 1857, making the central Mississippi Valley accessible via rapid overland transportation rather than the long, shipwreck-prone voyage through yellow-fever-plagued New Orleans.³⁹ Worst-ever "yellow jack" epidemics killed over 8,000 New Orleanians in 1853 alone (about one in twelve citizens), including a disproportionately high number of Irish and German immigrants. That immigration from both Ireland and the Germanic states nevertheless reached their highest levels in the early 1850s attests to advantages still perceived by those setting sail for New Orleans.

Political turmoil dropped the number of arrivals in New Orleans thirteen-fold between 1860 and 1861. The ensuing Civil War terminated most immigration and migration to the South, and to New Orleans in particular, which had surrendered early (May 1862) and subsequently suffered a massive disruption of shipping traffic and regional agricultural production. Immigration to the Crescent City would pick

³⁹ Conway, "New Orleans as a Port of Immigration," 223.

up in later decades, but never would it approach antebellum levels. The damaged economy and reputation of the South after the conflict directed most incoming immigrants to the industrialized, victorious North. Concurrently, the Mississippi River further relinquished its monopoly in accessing the Mississippi Valley. Whereas in times past one had to pass through New Orleans to penetrate the North American interior and extract its resources, Easterners in the postbellum age could now take railroads, canals, waterways, and roads across the Appalachians to reach the western frontier. Thus, as Creole culture waned, as war took its toll on the local economy, as new immigrants opted for Northern cities, as railroads competed with the Mississippi River, and as the nation outgrew its dependence on waterborne transportation, both New Orleans' economic strength and its ethnic diversity steadily diminished. We see this in the accompanying *Alien Passengers* graphs, in which the Crescent City rises above all American cities except New York starting in 1837, peaking in the 1850s, then plunging during the Civil War. New Orleans only weakly bounced back a decade later, when even Portland, Maine, attracted more immigrants.

With each passing year in the late nineteenth century, weaker and weaker grows the case for New Orleans as America's most multicultural city. New York, long the nation's leader in absolute numbers of immigrants, attained that distinction by the close of the century. By the late 1900s, San Francisco ranked arguably as the most diverse city in the nation, according to one analysis of the 1980 census data (see map, *By the Late Twentieth Century, A Different New Orleans in a Different America*), while New Orleans sank to fifteenth.⁴⁰ Today, cities such as Sacramento and suburbs of Atlanta or Washington, D.C. surpass New Orleans in most measures of diversity, while the Cortelyou neighborhood of Brooklyn ranked in 2000 as America's most diverse census tract. In terms of percent foreign-born, New Orleans ranks sixty-seventh in the

⁴⁰ New Orleans still managed to possess the nation's highest percent of French-ancestry population (13 percent in 1980), more than double other cities. *Census of 1980*. Washington, DC: Bureau of the Census.

nation, with only 3.4 percent of its population born outside the U.S., barely ahead of Louisville and Toledo, and far behind Miami's leading 61 percent.⁴¹ One-hundred-fifty years earlier, New Orleans was number two in the nation, with 53 percent foreign-born.

New Orleans' historically superlative ethnic diversity is, like many of its distinguishing characteristics, now a thing of the past. Yet it lives on in the ethos of the city, the built environment, the food and music, in the bloodlines and group memories of its citizens—and in a few remnant words and phrases surviving from the “great confusion of tongues”⁴² once heard in America's original genuinely multicultural metropolis.

Epilogue: In the ten days following Hurricane Katrina, Orleans Parish's original population of 462,000 declined to antebellum levels of about 100,000, then to French colonial levels of a few thousand. Around 70,000 had returned by late autumn, and around 250,000 are predicted to return permanently, in racial and ethnic mixes that can only be speculated about at this early stage. One possibility is that much of the black underclass will resettle elsewhere, leaving behind a smaller, whiter, more gentrified New Orleans. Another is that the city might see an influx of Latino workers to fill new jobs in the construction and tourism sectors. Whatever transpires, one thing is certain: New Orleans society is again making history, as the first modern American metropolis to depopulate entirely, reconstitute, and then reconstruct.

⁴¹ Ron Stodghill and Amanda Bower, “Welcome to America's Most Diverse City,” www.time.com (accessed October 18, 2002); U.S. Census, “American Community Survey—Ranking Tables, 2002: Percent of Population that is Foreign Born,” <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Ranking/2002/R15T160.htm>.

⁴² John Adems Paxton, *The New-Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), 45.

