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# Musicking New Orleans Street Musicians: A Methodology for Writing About Music

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MUSICKING NEW ORLEANS STREET MUSICIANS:  
A METHODOLOGY FOR WRITING ABOUT MUSIC

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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B.A., Pennsylvania State University, 2010  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This project argues for the use of performative writing as a methodology for writing about musical performances. An analysis of recent scholarship on music and musical performances written by performance studies scholars supports the use of performative writing in texts that address musical performances. In order to further this methodological claim, this study uses performative writing to document both historical and present day accounts of musical performances of street musicians in New Orleans. Utilizing Foucault's theories on and Roach's model of genealogy, Bruner's notion of reflexive ethnography, and Small's concept of musicking, I theorize, on a meta-methodological level, that performative writing enhances genealogy and reflexive ethnographic research, while simultaneously acting as an extension of the music or musical performance about which it is written.

## CHAPTER ONE: WRITING ABOUT MUSIC

The raspy ring of her voice catches the air, simultaneously tender and rough. The note rings out over the thrummed chords of her ukulele, a syncopated rhythm. Hers is the call of the crooner, her voice like a record from the 30s. My heart skips a beat, but the needle of her voice catches in its groove, and for a time she sings my heartbeat unknowingly. She sits in a doorway, her back to the green of the frame, singing a song I've never heard before. I'm tempted to call it the blues or folk music, but I can't pin it down. Her dreadlocks pulled away from her face, I see beads of sweat shining on her brow. Her eyes closed, she smiles as she sings, her voice an emblem of a past neither she nor I ever knew first-hand, for we are both too young. The large yellow Labrador lying beside her shifts his pose before settling back into sleep. She beckons forth memories of Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald with her soulful singing. Her warble cracks and she digs deep for that jagged texture of the low note channeling Janis Joplin for a moment. Then I realize that she's singing Joplin's "Stealin'" and I smile.

"I'm stealin', stealin',/ Pretty mama don't you tell on me./ I'm stealin' back my same old used-to-be" (Joplin n.p.).

I think about the way this performer recalls ghosts, history reverberating as she sings. Whether intentionally or not, she is a medium at a séance, allowing these women singers of the past, all long gone, to project their voices through her mouth. And yet, this music is hers. Her performance is not a reproduction of Janis Joplin's song, but rather, it is a re-appropriation of it. History effuses the present, and in that seemingly beautiful way that coincidence occurs, I register the words of the chorus: "I'm stealin' back my same old used-to-be" (Joplin n.p.). The words suggest a return to a former self, a remarkable departure to history from the present. Her performance, as I observe her, is a tangle of layers and complexity brimming with ghosts and



potential. I attempt to project her music onto the page through my writing, in much the same way that her song performs, projects, and cites a particular and partial history of female vocalists through its highly specific sound. I wonder how I can record a written account of the intricacies of this musical performance, which is infused with a multitude of voices, and I realize just how inadequate certain uses of language can be for the task of describing and depicting musical performance.

### **The Difficulties and Failures of Writing About Music**

As scholars, on our best days, we use language as a tool. On our worst days, we wield language as a weapon. We revel in our ability to diminish and compress objects, events, performances, etc. into words, and when words fail us, when language fails us, we find ourselves frustrated. Music, by its very nature, is not confined to the discourse of language, but rather, as Jacques Attali notes, “music is inscribed between noise and silence” (19). Performance scholar Richard Rogers takes a similar point of view when he suggests that music is “the imposition of order onto noise” and noise exists outside of language (224). Music communicates without the necessity of language, and language is often inadequate for the task of describing, analyzing, and disseminating information about musical performances. In his book, *Image Music Text*, Barthes muses upon this problem: “How, then, does language manage when it has to interpret music?” (179). Barthes argues that when a person attempts to translate music into language she is unable to translate it into anything more than “the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective. Music, by natural bent, is that which at once receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: this music is *this*, this execution is *that*” (179). While Barthes makes a valid criticism, perhaps he overlooks the value of the adjective. Certainly the purpose of an adjective is to illustrate the signified object or event, in this case, the music, which offers the reader, or listener, additional descriptive

information about the music. However, Barthes's argument against the translation of music into language continues on in spite of any perceived value that the adjective might hold. Barthes writes, "No doubt the moment we turn an art into a subject . . . there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form, that of the epithet" (179). Clearly, Barthes dislikes adding descriptive words to subjects, and it is not difficult to understand why this is the case. Arguably, scholars ascribe generic and abstract adjectives to their signified object too often. For example, descriptions such as "beautiful music" or "harmonious music" do little to translate music into language. However, the use of more precise adjectives can be an effective means of communicating something specific about the music. In contrast to the above examples, the description of "the sharp staccato of the upper register of the strings" certainly does more work to translate the music into language. Still, for Barthes, this is not enough; it is not a translation of the music into language.

Barthes argues that

there is an imaginary in music whose function is to reassure, to constitute the subject hearing it . . . and this imaginary immediately comes to language via the adjective . . . [I]t is not by struggling against the adjective . . . that one stands a chance of exorcising music commentary and liberating it from the fatality of predication; rather than trying to change directly the language on music, it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language. (179-181)

Even when language is thrust upon music, even when words appear adequate to describe a musical performance, the music refuses translation.

Writing about music and about sound, in general, has been met with frustration in the field of communication studies, not only because of the issues Barthes notes, but also due in large part to the particular qualities of music and noise. According to Attali, "noise is violence: it disturbs" (26). Noise is disorganized, and as noted by Joshua Gunn, Greg Goodale, Mirko Hall,

and Rosa Eberly, “[noise] has come to refer to that ‘sonic dross’ or ‘acoustic void’ that eludes a given, historical moment’s dominant regimes of meaning making” (484). Noise, with its violence, and its ability to escape meaning making, becomes an object difficult to study. How does one study an object that can only be heard and felt and which, by its very nature, evades meaning making? Sound studies scholars have only recently undertaken this task. One such scholar, Hillel Schwartz, suggests that we look at the place where stillness and noise meet. He writes that “[w]hat disrupts the initial stillness is at first and always noise; having disrupted the stillness, noise is forever conditioned by nostalgic yearnings for a calm that is no more” (20). This disruption of stillness, the violence done to the calm, to the silence, creates a rupture wherein music is created according to Attali. He gives consideration to the instability of music, despite the fact that it “is an organization of noise” (4) when he writes, “I would like to trace the political economy of music as a succession of *orders* . . . done violence by *noises* . . . that are *prophetic* because they create new orders, unstable and changing” (19). Sound studies scholars similarly note that music is an unstable object (Gunn, Goodale, Hall, Eberly 478). This instability produces various methodologies used by those studying sound. Music’s instability also accounts for rather vague and, at times, cumbersome definitions of sound studies. Sound studies is, according to Bull and Back, “primarily concerned with sound,” however, they “do not want to supplant our ‘primary sense’ with another” (3). Rather, Bull and Back echo the sentiments of Adorno who writes of “the habit of thinking with his ears” (19). Sterne, a critical scholar, also entreats us to think with our ears when he argues that to

think sonically is to think conjuncturally about sound and culture: each of the writers . . . used sound to ask big questions about their cultural moments and the crises and problems of their time. Sound studies challenge us to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomenon in relationship [*sic.*] to one another – as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves – whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performance, or another path into sonic life. (3)

To think conjuncturally, according to the footnotes in Sterne's book, is to consider context. This goal was undertaken by Robert Francesconi in his article, "Free Jazz and Black Nationalism: A Rhetoric of Musical Style," in which he analyzes the evolution of jazz music in the United States in terms of the re-appropriation of musical traditions held by black (African) communities by white (European) communities, in terms of meaning making, and in terms of the creation of community. Francesconi states that "the Free Jazz Movement played a distinctly rhetorical role through its conscious development of associations between the black American community and the cultural and musical heritages of the victims of colonial powers around the world" (37). In order to complete his study, Francesconi employs a rhetorical analysis of music. Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Eberly argue that "[e]mbracing the unstable object makes the appeal to a more established discipline's conceptual hobby-horse inevitable" (478). Like critical studies scholars, rhetorical scholars also find themselves concerned with sounds (e.g.: music, noise, and particularly voice) upon which they impose their own preferred methodological approaches, which generally include analysis of genres and styles (Matula; Gunn), a combination of the musical and lyrical sections of songs (Sellnow and Sellnow), or isolated musical elements (Gonzalez and Makay; Sellnow and Sellnow; Francesconi; and Rasmussen). Further, Matula argues that

rhetorical approaches have become increasingly sophisticated in translating musical form – notation, harmony, tempo, and other tools borrowed from musicology – into constructs appropriate for rhetorical criticism, such as emotional expression (Sellnow & Sellnow, 1993; Sellnow & Sellnow 1996; Meister, 1996), ascriptive power (Gonzalez & Makay, 1983), symbols (Rasmussen, 1994), and other indicators of feeling and connotative meaning. (219)

However, recalling Barthes argument, the rhetorical approaches Matula describes seem likely to be facing problems with the translation of music into language. In fact, as noted by Thomas Rickert, scholars must "rethink much of our rhetorical theory and practice" (3). He implores

scholars to “understand rhetoric as ambient” in “an ambient age” (3). In consideration of Rickert’s book, Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Eberly assert that

Rickert argues that rhetoricians’ traditional focus on speakers, audiences, and tropes misses a majority of the frequently unconscious ways in which people are persuaded in soundscapes, including our material environments, our interactive technologies, and our own bodies. (482)

This call to rethink the ways that rhetoricians address music can be applied not only to rhetorical scholars, but also to cultural studies scholars and to performance scholars.

Scholars invested in music must also consider the ephemerality of sound. Sound is fleeting, and while we write about it, reproducing it can be problematic despite a growth in technologies that allow recording, reproduction, and replay of sound. Walter Ong argues, “Sound, bound to the present time by the fact that it exists only at the instant when it is going out of existence, advertises presentness” (101). This presentness exists not only in sound, but also in performance, which offers a possible link between the ways that performance scholars address performance and the ways that they might address sound.

At times, writing about music and musical performances is maddening and may even seem to be impossible. In his book review, “Performing the American Songbook,” Gura writes:

Why is it so difficult to write sensibly about performance? [. . .] No one who discusses performance escapes the frustration that arises from trying to describe something as evanescent as the *viva-voce* engagement of text and performer. Moreover, discussing the other stuff is so much easier. Musical notes stay on the staff where the composer put them, and the lyricist’s words are printed on the page: much less elusive targets for analysis – and you can Xerox them to corroborate your assertion. Performance, on the other hand, must be described and, worse, it hogs space . . . And description is notoriously unreliable – one man’s sour screech is another’s plaintive wail. (459)

While writing about all performance is met with frustration, perhaps one of the most frustrating forms of performance to write about is musical performance, if only because music refuses to be collapsed into language, refuses to be written or talked about in its totality. While language is

able to communicate musicality through certain forms and formats, activated music (not only lyrics, or a page of printed music, but the actual production of sound through lived and/or live musical performance) will never be present in the academic language commonly found in our field's scholarly journals. For this reason, I argue that in order to discuss musical performance, the whole of it, including: lyric (if words or language are used in the music), the musical composition (the notes, melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and composer), and the actual performance (the physical performance, including the performers, the labor of the performance, the location of the performance, and the audience of the performance), in such a way that the music may be evoked, a different approach to composing such discourse is necessary. While Barthes suggests changing the musical object, I suggest a different approach to the ways that language is used to talk about musical performances. The writer must strive to craft a description of the performance that evokes the musicality of the performance, even as the writer acknowledges the absence of the music in the words she has written. Michael Bowman writes, "performing *difference* must carry with it a willingness to perform *differently*" (14) and it is this charge that urges my argument forward. In order to write about music and musical performances in such a way that we are able to articulate musicality and to evoke the music of the performance, we must write differently, we must allow the subject to dictate the form with which we write about it, in this way we allow our writing to take on some of the qualities of its subject, to become an extension of the music or of the musical performance

**Claiming Carnality:  
The Body as Central to Music and Writing<sup>1</sup>**

Our field has come to a place that not only accepts performative writing, but at times, our field, or members of our field, champion(s) performative writing. Linda Park-Fuller writes,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to DeChaine's article, "Affect and Embodied Understanding in Musical Experience."

“Theories and methods of performative writing allow for creative expressions of enacting and re-enacting . . . experiences on the page and on the stage (Miller and Pelias; Pelias, “Judging,”

*Writing; Pollock*)” (289). In “Performing Writing,” Della Pollock states:

I want to explore some of the ways what we have come to call ‘performative writing’ answers discourses of textuality not by recovering reference to a given or ‘old’ world but by writing into a new one . . . The discourses of textuality have removed the veil of innocence from language, drawing us away from questions of what words do and don’t mean into the complex problem of *how to mean* in words and yet tend to limit the answer to such questions to the reiteration of social, historical, textual formations. The question thus turns back on itself, deflecting the possibilities for normative critique of the way we write or do writing and of what writing does that it nonetheless implies. (75)

“Writing as meaning,” for Pollock, becomes “writing as doing” (75). Further, writing as doing creates possibilities. Moreover, Pollock outlines the tenets of performative writing. She states that performative writing is: (1) evocative; (2) metonymic; (3) subjective; (4) nervous; (5) citational; and (6) consequential (80-94).

Pollock’s first tenet of performative writing is that it is evocative. This means that “performative writing evokes worlds that are other-wise intangible, unlocatable: worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight” (Pollock 80). In this way, the text performs, and makes material that which is/was previously immaterial. The text calls forth the intangible; it “uses language like paint to create what is self-evidently a *version* of what was, what is, and/or what might be” (Pollock 80). Giving consideration to performative writing’s evocative nature, I surmise that it can be used to evoke elements of music from ephemeral musical performances, particularly given music’s contact with memory, pleasure, and sensation.

That performative writing is metonymic means that “it is a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering that takes its pulse from the *difference* rather than the *identity* between the linguistic symbol and the thing it is meant to represent” (Pollock 82-83). Performative writing

highlights its own limitations, considers the gaps between itself and the thing about which it is written. Pollock notes:

It recognizes the extent to which writing displaces, even effaces “others” and “other-worlds” with its partial, opaque representations of them, not only not revealing truths, meanings, events, “objects,” but often obscuring them in the very act of writing, securing their absence with the substitutional presence of words, effectively making absent what mimetic/metaphoric uses of language attempt to make present. (83)

The substitutions, the absences marked by performative writing, emphasize the holes in the telling, the incompleteness of the account. Certainly, while music cannot be translated into language, performative writing can be used to call attention to the absence of the music or musical performance through its use of language. Moreover, Pollock states that “metonymic writing is often . . . filled with longing for a lost subject/object . . . that has disappeared into history or time, and for what, in the face of that disappearance, may seem both the inadequacy and impossibility of evocation” (84). In this way, performative writing also operates in a historical capacity, attempting to recall something from the past by underscoring its absence through language. By focusing on the elements of a musical performance that has passed, but which still exist for the writer, she simultaneously addresses what is, or what was (e.g.: physical descriptions of the performers, sensory depictions, attention to the genre of music performed, etc.), while calling attention to that which is absent from the telling (e.g.: the actual music).

According to Pollock, performative writing is also subjective. By this she means that the writing concerns itself with the “relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and/or reader(s). Writing that embodies this kind of subjectivity tends to *subject* the reader to the writer’s reflexivity” (86). In this way, the writing allows for an added amount of reflexivity on the part of the writer, for a deep consideration of relations between the writer and her subjects, for acknowledgement of privilege and bias on the part of the writer, and for the



writer to ask the readers to speak back. Performative writing's subjectivity offers the writer room to negotiate her relationships with her subjects and her readers, and therefore, it also offers her the ability to negotiate and renegotiate her own production of self/selves. Pollock writes, "The self that emerges from these shifting perspectives is, then, a possibility rather than a fact. . ." (87). The subjectivity of performative writing cuts through the perceived stability of the writer and her relation to her subjects, acknowledging the way her relationships, her tellings, and her sense of self are constantly shifting, thus offering yet another layer to the reflexivity of her writing.

Performative writing is nervous. Pollock suggests, "It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders" (90-91). This restlessness, this lack of a linear model, interrupts and disrupts. The nervousness of performative writing "operates by synaptic relay, drawing one charged moment into another, constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferal" (Pollock 91). The fracturing caused by the nervousness of performative writing calls attention to the creation and form of the telling, and in so doing, it creates distance between the text and the writer, and the text and the reader. Pollock argues, "It takes its pulse from a specifically Foucauldian sense of history as a discontinuous recurrence of disciplines and practices, of 'interpretations' incorporated in history as events" (91). These ruptures and discontinuities remind both the writer and the reader of the power struggles inherent in the act of writing about an/other.

When Pollock states that performative writing is citational she means that, "citational writing quotes a world that is always already performative – that is composed in and as repetition

and reiteration” (92). These repetitions are important to performative writing as they call attention to the imperfect nature of reproduction (Pollock 93). Citational writing allows the writer to disrupt repetitions and reproductions and fill them with difference. Citational writing places current writings in conversation with the writings and performances that came before it. The citationality of performative writing allows for a deeper level of engagement with the act of writing and re-writing. In fact, Pollock writes, “It is the performance of writing, pressing on through hyper-aesthetics and the enclosure of writing within writing, into ‘affective alliance’ with writing itself” (94).

Finally, performative writing is consequential, which is to say that writing becomes doing. This writing provokes action via its ability to “[subsume] the constantive into the performative” (95). Pollock argues that

performative writing throws off the norms of conventional scholarship for an explicit, alternative normativity. It operates by a code of reflexive engagement that makes writing subject to its own critique, that *makes writing* a visible subject, at once making it vulnerable to displacement by the very text/performances it invokes and shoring up its capacity for political, ethical agency. (95-96)

In being able to critique itself, in making itself a visible subject, performative writing is a form of critical scholarship comprised with and containing a great deal of reflexivity. Catherine Becker and Frederick C. Corey write, “Performative writing is the explication of a cultural phenomenon from the subject position” (206). It is both subject and object, capable of responding to itself.

To add to Pollock’s concept of performative writing, Park-Fuller argues that

Performative writing also makes apparent the broad ranged levels of agency experienced by a reporting researcher and by the reader of the report, as alternating performing and performed identities, confirming and arguing ideologies, subjective and objective discursive positions become created and then fade and are replaced in the acts of writing and reading. (305)

Despite having identifiable properties, performative writing is not rigidly formulaic, like most academic writing. The subject of performative writing often dictates the form of composition, thereby making the writing an extension of its subject. For example, a writer whose subject is a rushing river with turbulent rapids might find that she is inspired to write highly stylized, frenetically paced poetry, while a writer whose subject is a still pond on a morning in mid-May might find that she is inspired to write lengthy artistic prose.

While Barthes suggests altering the musical object to meet the needs of language, I argue that we should tailor our use of language to meet the needs of the musical object. Susanne Langer notes in *Feelings and Form* that “[w]hen words and music come together in song, music swallows words . . . . Song is not a compromise between poetry and music . . . . The principles of music govern its form no matter what materials it uses” (152-153). Why not experiment with moving the song into poetry, or aesthetic prose, then? Why not allow the music to continue to dictate the form? Performative writing is a tool that can be used in order to talk about music and musical performances in ways that we otherwise might not. Music is emotional. Sellnow and Sellnow argue that “music sounds the way feelings feel” (397), just as Langer writes in *Philosophy in a New Key*: “Music is not the cause or cure of feelings, but their logical expression” (218), while “Wolfe urges scholars to play closer attention to emotions and sense we neglect or exclude as noisy distraction” (Gunn, Goodale, Hall, and Eberly 485). Performative writing offers us a platform to explore the emotions found within music and musical performances through a variety of written forms. Moreover, while language can never fully translate musical experiences into words, performative writing is much more likely to evoke the music of a musical performance than other types of writing because its form is fluid and able to adapt to the form and/or style of the music and musical performance, thus, enabling performative

writing to take on characteristics of certain types of music and musical performances. In her essay, "Call It Swing," Tami Spry writes, "Maybe what we need is a language *interrupted* with empathy and compassion, with a jazz swing, with truth and reconciliation" (276). While Spry's focus is the jazz swing music played by her father, his band mates, and others, she understands the importance of performative writing as a means of conjuring the music about which she writes. In this poem, Spry illustrates the connection between writing as doing and the musical performance of jazz swing:

writing as *doing* replaces writing as meaning  
*you walk out on stage*  
writing becomes meaningful in the material,  
*you lift your heart with your instrument*  
dis/continuous act of writing.  
*and begin....to play*

.....  
In other words,  
to make writing  
perform.  
*and you begin to swing.* (280-281)

Performative writing has the unique ability to resemble or evoke its subject in both form and content. It shifts the shape of our language from strict, constrained, and concise academic dialect, to a loose, fluid, and evocative artistic medium ready to be molded by its subject(s).

Moreover, performative writing and music share a carnality, that is to say both practices are based in the body. As Patricia Pace stated of language poetry, "From a postmodern perspective, a writer's style or 'voice' might be more productively understood as a carnal condition, a fact of the body, precluding any mystification or fetish of the original" (26). The voice of the writer is quite similar to what Barthes calls "the grain of the voice" with regard to music, which is the space in which he believes the "dual production . . . of language and of music" occurs (181). D. Robert DeChaine regards the grain of music as "music's body or, more

accurately, music's sound bodied forth" (83). The voice of the writer and the music's body are products of performance: the performance of writing, and the performance of music being played. Moreover, DeChaine writes:

To claim a certain 'carnality' for music, however, means also to posit an alternative conception of the experiencing of music – an interdiction, an entrance of the body into the music, of the sound-in-music into the body, in synergistic combination . . . a sensation of being in the music, my body and the sonics intertwined, simultaneously engorged with euphoria and yet disquieted, jarred. The body offers itself up *in collaboration* with sound in the production of the musical text. In this way, it functions as both performer and instrument. (83)

This intertwining of the body and the music speaks to the experiencing of the music, as well as providing a relation between the body and the music in time and space. Such relations are also accounted for in performative writing, as demonstrated by Pollock:

Thinking about writing as a material practice, I want to stipulate a more specific sense of the performative self or subjectivity as the performed relation between or among subjects, the dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous (rather than continuous) relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and/or reader(s). (86)

The performance of music is experienced in the body, and the relation of the body to the musical performance can be accounted for through the act of performative writing. Moreover, because performative writing allows for creative expression, the actual art of the music need not be completely lost if performative writing is used to describe the musical performance.

Additionally, when writing about music, the writer writes from a very personal point of view about her experience of the music or musical performance (DeChaine, Auslander).

Auslander states, "[P]erformance analysis is understood to be specifically from the spectator's point of view" (3). However, DeChaine contends, "to limit the power of musical experience to the realm of the isolated individual elides the obvious and immense phenomenon of bodies coming together in music as performers and spectators, interimbricated as participants in a social drama" (91). Recognizing that the experience of the music or musical performance is individual

is appropriate; however, we must also acknowledge that musical performances do not occur in a vacuum. As individuals, we must also account for the collective experience of spectators and performers coming together at the performance event. However, in performative writing, the writer is key and all things are established in relation to the writer. For this reason, performative writing articulates the relations between the writer and the music, and between the writer and the collective experiencing the music.

In order to test my hypothesis that performative writing is an appropriate methodology for writing about music, I propose a brief study of New Orleans Street musicians. This study, using the methods of genealogy and reflexive ethnographic research, applies performative writing throughout in order to attend to the musical performances of the street musicians. On the surface, this project considers the history, habits, performances, and present community of New Orleans street musicians; however, this study is two-fold. On a deeper level, this project allows me to study the uses of performative writing as a tool for writing about music and musical performances, while simultaneously providing me with the ability to undertake a meta-methodological analysis of the uses of performative writing within genealogical and reflexive ethnographic approaches to research.

**The Musical Object:  
Musical Performances of New Orleans Street Musicians**

As a fixture in the city of New Orleans, street musicians contribute to the iconography of the city itself. Street musicians serve as images easily recalled in the memories of those who have been to the city, as images of a culture specific to the geographic location of the Big Easy, as images marketed to entice tourists to visit New Orleans, and as images of music itself. They perform their music on the streets of the city, interspersed between other people engaged in non-musical performances, usually with a tip jar or an open instrument case nearby to collect their

earnings. These musicians labor under the hot Louisiana sun in summertime and endure wet Louisiana winters to earn their keep in the city, spending their workdays outdoors entertaining tourists and locals alike. A passion for music and a love of their craft led most to choose the life of a self-employed street musician. Their lifestyle and music affords them a certain luxury of freedom, though only the most dedicated and talented musicians find long-term success as street musicians in New Orleans.

While various types of performers operate throughout the city of New Orleans, including, but not limited to, human statues, dancers, psychics, artists, and magicians, this study focuses on the street musicians who play music inside of the city of New Orleans. For the purposes of this research, I define a street musician as any person who plays music on the streets of New Orleans in exchange for gratuities, which account for the sole or majority of income of that person. Many street musicians are transients, coming to New Orleans during the calm weather of the spring or fall to play their music for a few months before moving on to other locales (often on the Busker's Circuit, which includes Key West, FL, Harvard Square in Boston, MA, Washington Square in New York City, NY, and Venice Beach, CA) or to other jobs. However, the majority of recognizable street musicians in New Orleans live in the city year round. Some are locals, born and raised in the Big Easy. Others migrated to the city for one reason or another and never left. These street musicians, the ones who play year round, the ones who play on the same highly trafficked French Quarter street corners each day, the ones whose faces and names one comes to recognize and know, occupy the upper echelons of the social strata in the street musician community in New Orleans. These musicians possess the gumption to turn their passion for music into long-term careers in musical performance. This feat commands the respect of peers

and audiences, as dedication to a career as a street musician requires individuals to be highly self-motivated and willing to labor outdoors in difficult conditions.

### **A Brief Literature Review And Notes About Methodology**

This project occupies the intersection of performance studies, ethnomusicology, and tourism studies, an intersection particularly well suited for the study of the musical performances of street musicians in New Orleans. While my academic interests lie squarely in performance studies, elements drawn from scholarship in tourism studies and ethnomusicology enable me to better understand the various musical performances of the street musicians as communicative, culture-induced, culture-making, and historically situated events.

Ethnomusicology, as a field of study, originated in the 1880s and 1890s. Over time ethnomusicology has taken on various definitions and has been used to undertake a variety of goals with regard to understanding of music. Mantle Hood suggested a narrow definition of ethnomusicology:

[Ethno] musicology is a field of knowledge, having as its object the investigation of the art of music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon. The [ethno] musicologist is a research scholar, and he aims primarily at knowledge about music. (2)

Two years after Hood's proposed definition of ethnomusicology, Alan P. Merriam crafted a broader definition of contemporary ethnomusicology, which asserts that ethnomusicology is "the study of music in culture" (6). Both Hood and Merriam state that one of the purposes of ethnomusicology is to consider and understand music as communicative. However, ethnomusicologists are quick to caution that music is not a universal language, instead as noted by George Herzog, "our music . . . consists of a number of dialects" (11). Herzog states that not all musical dialects are understood outside of the culture in which they are produced, though Leonard Meyer suggests that "while recognizing the diversity of musical languages, we must



also admit that these languages have important characteristics in common” (62). At this point, much of the conversation about commonalities in musical dialects moves to the technical aspects of music and toward music theory. However, to return to the importance of considering music as a means of communication, Merriam reminds that

it is possible that music may be useful as a means of understanding things about other cultures. In music, as in the other arts, basic attitudes, sanctions, and values are often stripped to their essentials; music is also symbolic in some ways, and it reflects the organization of society. In this sense, music is a means of understanding peoples and behaviors and as such is a valuable tool in the analysis of culture and society. (13)

I draw from ethnomusicology to acknowledge music as a mode of coming to know a culture. For, as noted by both Merriam and Theodore Gracyk, music is a human phenomenon, and as such, the human creation of music says something about the culture in which that music is created. Gracyk writes, “performances of music are physically embodied manifestations of a culture” (16). This sentiment points me back to the consideration of the musical performance itself. As I ruminate on musical performances, I am reminded that the performances of New Orleans street musicians are often staged for tourists, which in turn brings about a consideration of the ways in which music and tourism operate and co-operate within the culture of New Orleans.

In conjunction with elements gleaned from ethnomusicology, I use ideas and modes of understanding musical performances as a means of communication from tourism studies with an emphasis on research done in the area of music tourism. Music tourism is on the rise in New Orleans due to the fact that the city’s unique music culture is one of the most interesting, and often one of the most exoticized, features of the city. According to Gibson and Connell, music tourism developed slowly:

[Over] time, travel in search of music, in various guises, became a central component rather than merely an adjunct of travel, however enthusiastically received, at least for an

emerging niche group . . . . [Music tourism] has shaped distinct patterns of recreation and tourism, transformed some places, become a valuable source of income generation, and reshaped memories and identities of music and musicians. (8-9)

New Orleans seems to understand that the marketing of its rich musical legacy will inevitably lead an influx of music tourists to the city, which will lead to an increase in revenue. Further, because New Orleans is a popular music tourist destination, I acknowledge the musical performances of the street musicians as a part of the music tourism industry and consider the impacts of these performances to tourism studies.

The music of the city is steeped in various histories, which are re-produced and re-presented in every instance of musical production in the city. Much of New Orleans' cultural identity and public memory is linked to its music. In her essay, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies," Sara Cohen states, "People choose music as a pathway . . . because it provides a context for activities and relationships, and a means for the expression of personal and collective identity and value; and because it allows for the meaningful structuring of their actions in time and space" (128). If music functions as a pathway to understand identity and values, relationships and activities, then music must also function as a pathway to its own history and the histories of the people it represents.

Histories are inextricably tied up in identity and memory, so music must certainly act as a vehicle for remembering and forgetting the histories to which it is linked. As noted by scholar Tara Brabazon:

[T]he best . . . music acts as a tour guide, visiting not only significant places but pertinent times from the past . . . . Rhythm is the glue that adheres the jagged spaces of memory . . . . The familiar is validated and the nostalgic promoted . . . between the fluidity of melody and the fixity of lyric, a place can be located and remembered . . . . The craving for rhythm feeds a desire for meaning and memory. (112)

Brabazon's concept of music as tour guide suggests that music tourism is not only about the music in the place, in this case music in New Orleans, but it points to how the music creates a very specific New Orleans. The history of the city of New Orleans is contained in the music and musical performances of New Orleans. Moreover, the music of New Orleans is a cultural reproduction in which the consensual narratives that comprise the popular histories of New Orleans are remembered through certain musical performances. Further, the musicians of New Orleans are the keepers of these specific histories. They are responsible for producing the musical performances that elicit the remembrance of particular histories of New Orleans.

In order for sense to be made of the histories that are elicited and elided in the musical performances created by the street musicians in New Orleans, both the musicians and the music tourists must be able to connect to the music. According to Arun Saldanha:

Music has effect, but never in itself, never as an ideal *form* or abstract *function*. It can only be constituted as powerful through other, extra musical forces . . . . We can identify music's 'own' positive agency only because of its concrete, material *connections* . . . . I think the most crucial connection is with human bodies . . . . But human bodies are peculiar; for them to connect to music, they have to *know* how to do it. (54)

According to Saldanha, "All corporeal experiences . . . are connected . . . . It's impossible to isolate sensory inputs from the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, legs, stomach, lungs, skin" (56). Therefore, what is experienced through the ears is also experienced through the eyes, the nose, the mouth, and so forth. Music tourism, while based upon soundscapes, is dependent upon the other senses too, particularly sight. Saldanha writes, "Via its production and reception, music connects to visual, visible, situated and interactive bodies. [Richard] Leppert says a 'sonoric landscape' . . . attains meaning because both musician and audience can see the music being made and listened to" (55). These concerns over the visibility of music relate to Carol Mavor's concept of the gaze of in/visibility. Mavor writes, "[Yet] the invisible goes beyond the visible

and is not limited to the visible . . . . [In] a culture that privileges the seen over the unseen, invisible caresses, invisible sounds, and invisible smells are often elided (overlooked)” (196). For Mavor, invisibility goes beyond visibility, that is to say that what Mavor terms as “in/visible” can exist in what is visible, but that it also appeals to the other senses: audible, olfactory, kinesthetic, and gustatory. With this in mind, the actual physical production of the music, the laboring bodies of the street musicians, is quite visible, while the sound of the music is in/visible. We cannot see the vibrations and sound waves emitted by the instruments of the musicians, yet we recognize them as present, and in some cases, privilege that sound of the music over the sight of the musicians playing the music. Additionally, the initial production of the music, the composing and arranging of the music, and the prior performances of the music are in/visible. That is not to say that these past performances do not exist, but rather that they are bound up in the histories and culture of the New Orleans. Both the music and the musical performances are sites of cultural production and cultural re-production steeped in multiple histories.

A social act, history is made by many people, and as such, multiple histories exist. Some histories find their way into the consensual narratives of a culture, while other histories are repressed, oppressed, and forgotten. Roach notes, “selective memory requires public enactments of forgetting, either to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed” (3). Ultimately, the memories selected to be retained and presented as part of the consensual narrative of a culture require a variety of performances given by the participants of that culture.

Moreover, performance and history carry on a symbiotic relationship in which performance marks and is marked by history, history is capable of performing, and performances can create histories.

The nexus of performance and history is complex as both history and performance are acts of restoring, remembering, and forgetting. In writing these histories I have questioned my own voice, which speaks from a position of authority about my subjects: the street musicians of New Orleans, the Mississippi River, various genres of music, the flood of 1927, and to a smaller extent, Storyville and Hurricane Katrina, even as I acknowledge that the histories I am writing are incomplete, even as I acknowledge that I could not possibly fully understand my subjects. Still, my work is valuable in that it considers the ways that the performance of class, in/visibility politics, remembering, and forgetting are intertwined with the history of people, places, and things. In writing down the performances I witness, referring to performances from the past documented by others, and revisiting performances mostly forgotten over time, I am able to pull together disparate narratives that comprise part of the culture of New Orleans street musicians. Additionally, using the ideas of Balme as noted in Roach's book, *Cities of the Dead*, this genealogy seeks to "juxtapose living memory as restored behavior against a historical archive of scripted records (Balme)" (11).

Through the use of genealogy à la Foucault and Roach, I compile a fragmented history of the New Orleans street musicians and their musical performances. In his writings regarding genealogy, Foucault focuses much of his energy considering the domination and representational violence that occur in history and histories – i.e., the forces of history. He acknowledges that culture is both situated by and within history, a fact that I, as a researcher, also acknowledge. In fact, in my work I "needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin" as I "cultivate the details

and accidents that accompany every beginning” (144). For Foucault, the act of descent and the act of emergence comprise genealogy: “As descent qualifies the strength or weakness of an instinct and its inscription on a body, emergence designates a space of confrontation but not as a closed field offering the spectacle of a struggle among equals” (150). The act of descent, then, is one of entering the domain of the body. Foucault considers the ways that the history of a culture and the choices made by a person’s ancestors imprint themselves upon the body “in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus; it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate body of those whose ancestors committed errors” (147). He addresses the ways in which the body and mind must adapt to and compensate for past events, errors, desires, and past experiences. He writes, “The body – and everything that touches it: diet, climate, and soil – is the domain of the *Herkunft* [descent]” (148). As the researcher, I enter into the domain of the body where I examine individual artifacts (i.e., performances, narratives, geographic location, attitudes, histories). These artifacts represent fractured pieces that comprise the unified whole of the individual body on a micro-level and of a culture on the macro-level. The descent, according to Foucault, “disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (147). In my work, I collect the artifacts that call to me the loudest, that resonate with me, and I emerge with them. I place these artifacts on a stage for examination, while leaving the rest of the artifacts below/behind, thereby, deconstructing that which was previously considered unified or whole. Foucault looks at history as struggle, dissention, and disparity, and so the act of emergence “is always produced through a particular stage of forces” (148-149). For Foucault, genealogy is the carnival, in that artifacts that were studied during the descent and then brought to the surface during the emergence are placed on a “stage” within, upon, and against each other.

This staging forces the artifacts to retain their divisions, discontinuities, and disparities. The staging works to deconstruct the culture that had previously appeared unified by exposing “the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us” (Foucault 146). Ultimately, the staging of the artifacts leads to a power struggle wherein certain artifacts dominate, while others are dominated.

In addition to taking a genealogical approach to the musical performances of the street musicians in New Orleans, I also take a reflexive ethnographic approach to understand these performances and the musicians who create them. Ethnography, which is rooted in anthropology, is defined by John Van Maanen, as a “written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” (1). While my ethnographic account is certainly a representation of certain aspects of the street musicians in New Orleans, I find it difficult to separate my experience as a researcher of the culture from my understanding of that culture, and as a result my ethnographic work contains several elements of autoethnography as well. For this reason, I recognize my work as neither a full-fledged ethnography, nor as autoethnography, but rather, I take a reflexive ethnographic approach to studying my subjects and their performances. According to Robin Baylorn, “Autoethnographers look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural” (413). My research makes certain fragile connections between my personal life and the street musicians in New Orleans in order to offer an understanding of my point of entry into the culture. Through these connections, my own personal biases and interests become most evident, and likely offer a rationale for my study of musical performances of street musicians in New Orleans. Moreover, my personal interest in creative work accounts for my affinity for the methodological approaches used in this study. While my personal experiences as

a researcher and as a music tourist frame certain sections of this study, I strive to remain faithful to traditional ethnographic approaches as well. Striking a balance between ethnography and autoethnography is not an easy task. In his essay, “Autoethnography’s Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences,” Craig Gingrich-Philbrook states, “In the case of autoethnography, the two strands of barbed wire manifest as a demand to create knowledge (the epistemic) and a demand to create art (the aesthetic)” (303). Throughout the crafting of this section of my research, I became aware of the competing demands to “create knowledge” and to “create art” within the text. As a result, I found myself moved to allow the aesthetic to permeate the autoethnographic sections, while attempting to maintain a faithfulness to the epistemic throughout the more traditionally ethnographic sections. The aesthetic is represented in this study through the inclusion of detailed fieldnotes, which read like short stories. Despite their unconventional form, the content of the included fieldnotes speaks volumes to the findings of my study. Further, the compositional choice to write this section of my research in a piece-meal fashion by placing autoethnographic approaches against ethnographic approaches, ethnography against theoretical exposition, and theoretical exposition against fieldnotes that resemble literary art, is intentional. The style mimics the genealogical approach taken in the work. Moreover, the writing style is not only a compositional choice; it is an aesthetic choice. I do not wish to give my reader the experience of reading a smooth, polished report of my study because the undertaking of this study was not a smooth and polished experience; it was rough and at times frustrating, though always a worthwhile experience, and I wanted to communicate that through the chosen structure. According to Murray Krieger in his essay, “My Travels with the Aesthetic,” the aesthetic

. . . alerts us to the illusionary, the merely arbitrary claims to reality that authoritarian discourse would impose upon us; because, unlike authoritarian discourse, the aesthetic



takes back the “reality” it offers us in the very act of offering it to us. It thus provides the cues for us to view other discourse critically, to reduce the ideological claims to the merely illusionary, since there is in other discourse no self-awareness of their textual limitations, of their duplicity – their closures, their exclusions, their expressions. (225)

In making and acknowledging the compositional and aesthetic choice to create sections in this study that function as fragments of autoethnography, ethnography, theory, and literary art, I have, as Foucault suggests in his work on genealogy, placed these competing powers, events, and objects on a “stage” within, upon, and against each other (148-149). This staging forces these events, objects, and powers to confront one another, to retain their divisions, discontinuities, and disparities, to contest the forces of one another in an effort to dominate, or to be overcome or dominated by other forces against which they have been set. Krieger argues that “the role of any text, when we allow it to function in an aesthetic mode for us, is not to counter one ideology with another, but rather, as with the moment of carnival, to reveal the inadequacies of ideology itself, as conceptual discourse, to deal with errant particularity” (227). I hope this study functions not only epistemologically, but also aesthetically, thereby allowing my reader to view the discourses present in my research critically.

The portion of my study utilizing the reflexive ethnographic approach is comprised of observations, interviews, and stories. Harry Wolcott writes, “Every account has a story behind it. Make that two stories, the public one that may be at least partially revealed, both in the writing and in the acknowledgements, and the private one that may remain totally beneath the surface” (37). The street musicians of New Orleans who consented to be a part of this study provided the stories, and for every story provided, others remain private. For every story that was written down in part or in whole in this body of work, other stories belong to us, the musicians and me, which I have chosen not to share. A third story also exists, the story of the construction of this ethnography, which belongs to me and me alone. And yet another story exists for the musicians

of their experiences as informants for and participants in this ethnographic project. Ultimately, an excess of stories exist, which are public and private, shared and private, being and in the process of becoming. This portion of my study contains but a small sampling of the total stories that comprise it. A multitude of voices, which are both mine and not mine, comprise this study. In “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” Dwight Conquergood states that

A commitment to dialogue insists on keeping alive the inter-animating tension between Self and Other. It resists closure and totalizing domination of a single viewpoint, unitary system of thought. The dialogical project counters the normative with the performative, the canonical with the carnivalesque, Apollonian rationality with Dionysian disorder. Instead of silencing positivism, the performance paradigm would strive to engage it in an enlivening conversation. Dialogicalism strives to bring as many different voices as possible into the human conversation, without any one of them suppressing or silencing the other. (11)

The multitude of voices present within this reflexive ethnographic research support Conquergood’s assertion: they speak to each other, with each other, and against each other, but they do not speak for each other, nor do they seek to silence one another. My commitment to dialogue within this reflexive ethnographic research acknowledges the importance of the stories of others and dedicates itself to upholding the fidelity of those stories.

The reflexive ethnographic research employed within this study operates by sharing stories of my encounters with street musicians and stories of their performances. Edward Bruner argues that “ethnographies are guided by an implicit narrative structure, by a story we tell about the peoples we study” that ethnography is “a genre of storytelling” (139). Through my understanding of ethnographic research as a form of storytelling in conjunction with Christopher Small’s statement that “all human musicking is a process of telling ourselves stories about ourselves and our relationships” (140), I am able to understand the importance of the narrative structures and the act of storytelling as it exists in this study. Engaging in the acts of

ethnographic research and musicking simultaneously yield an excess of stories. Bruner notes, “Stories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and future. But narratives change, all stories are partial, all meanings incomplete” (153). By that same token, Small argues that musical performances of the same music change over time. This is an argument echoed by some of the street musicians I interviewed. Small writes:

[All] musical performances evolve over time, [and] the relationships the performance brings into being are also evolving. The relationships at the end of the performance are not the same as those at the beginning . . . . Who we are has changed, has evolved a little, either through our having been confirmed in our concepts of ideal relationships and of who we are or through having had them challenged. (140)

This idea of change in the narratives we tell, in the stories to which we give credence, in the musical performances that we music, in the people we are and will become is central this work. If Bruner is correct when he writes, “The ethnographer appears not as an individual creative scholar, a knowing subject who discovers, but more as a material body through whom a narrative structure unfolds” (150), then I am certain that I am tangled up with the musicians and their performances, with this research in such a way that I cannot be separated from it. This attachment, this proximity to my subjects, made possible by my ethnographic research methods and by my participation in the musical performances through that act of musicking, calls for a certain amount of reflexivity in this study.

### **Limitations**

Certainly my history of street musicians will be incomplete, as histories are multiple. I offer only one history. Moreover, the genealogy I provide stages forces against and upon each other, wherein a representational violence is done to these artifacts as they dominate or are dominated by one another (Foucault). Further, this genealogy often chooses to place upon its

stage artifacts that represent silenced histories, histories of the oppressed, and contested histories, which disrupt, subvert, or challenge common power dynamics and the normative history of New Orleans street musicians.

Additionally, my reflexive ethnographic study of street musicians in New Orleans concedes that I had difficulty accessing certain members occupying the upper echelons of the social strata of the street musician community. The community gatekeepers are exceptionally adept at keeping outsiders at bay, until the outsider has gained an appropriate level of trust and respect from the community. For this reason, I have few interviews from my first year of this study, though I have proven myself worthy of greater access to the community in subsequent years. Also, I should note that this was not an immersive experience for the researcher. I did not live in the street musician community in New Orleans, and I have never attempted to make a living as a street musician in the city. My interactions with this community are far from casual, despite the fact that I am an outsider; however, I must admit that I might be missing out on key insights into the community through my distance and lack of experiential knowledge of my objects of study.

Finally, I do not have one theoretical lens through which I examine street musicians and their musical performances throughout this dissertation. Instead I rely on several different theories and ideas from philosophy, performance studies, music studies, and tourism studies to create the framework for this study. While I do not believe this will be the case, the potential exists for one or more of these theories or ideas to be at odds with the rest of my theoretical framework, thereby, disrupting my study.

## Significance

This research contributes to the body of knowledge about New Orleans street musicians. Several books, articles, and essays written about buskers and street musicians in various places exist; however, none of them approach the musical performances of street musicians in New Orleans from a performance studies standpoint. To do so is of particular relevance at this moment in time as the field of performance studies is currently experiencing “the musical turn” (Roach n.p.). The approach I take offers insight into the culture via the musical performances, while also considering the histories, geographic locations, and physical production of the music. Further, this research adds to the existing body of work regarding music tourism in New Orleans, while simultaneously adding to the work that considers music a means of communication in a culture within ethnomusicology. This research also contributes to the ongoing dialogue between current performance studies scholars writing about music and musical performances (Holman Jones, 2010; McRae, 2010, 2012; Shaffer, 2010; Shoemaker, 2010; Spry, 2010).

However, most importantly, this study contributes to the extant body of work that pertains to writing about musical performance. While the literature reviewed in previous sections of this chapter show the pitfalls and difficulties of writing about music, this study advocates for the use of performative writing as a methodology for writing about music and musical performances. It speaks to the strengths of performative writing as a method of writing, and it works to demonstrate the benefits of utilizing performative writing in order to attend to musical performances. Clear analysis of the performative writing within this study assesses the advantages and the disadvantages of the use of this methodology for writing about music and musical performances. Further, a meta-methodological inquiry provides a review regarding the manner in which performative writing operates within the methodologies of genealogical and

reflexive ethnographic approaches to research, and the reasons for such operations. Finally, this study will enable future scholars in various areas of study to consider taking a new approach to addressing music and musical performances via the use of the methodology of performative writing.

### **Chapter Previews**

Chapter Two of this study focuses on performative writing. I begin by reviewing music research by performance studies scholars. Then, I offer original examples of poetic and prosaic descriptions of specific musical performances given by New Orleans street musicians. I provide specific analyses regarding the relation between the writing and the music, and the ways in which the poetic and prosaic perform. In Chapter Two, each description of a musical performance uses performative writing for specific purposes, which are addressed in the brief analyses that follow each writing sample. These examples return in Chapters Three and Four. In these chapters, the performative writing remains in its original form as introduced in Chapter Two. Thus, I show how performative writing enhances the genealogy of Chapter Three and the ethnographic study of Chapter Four.

Chapter Three considers the histories of New Orleans street musicians. Utilizing the method of genealogy as outlined by Foucault and Roach in conjunction with performative writing, it provides fragments of histories that are elided and remembered, that are fact and fiction, and that are practiced and forgotten. It acknowledges its incompleteness and revels in its disruptions and discontinuities. The histories told here provide a way of looking back into the pasts of the New Orleans street musicians, of considering the ways in which their musical performances have come to unfold and change over the centuries, of acknowledging troubled and

troubling racial and class divides within the city of New Orleans that have come to affect the community of street musicians.

Chapter Four uses a reflexive ethnographic approach to researching the present day community and performances of the street musicians in New Orleans. Again, I use performative writing to attend to musical performances given by the street musicians. The composition of this chapter is also fragmented, and it works to critique itself; I weave interviews, fieldnotes, and analyses of observations and interviews together in a non-linear fashion to highlight the differences that exist among the musicians that comprise this community with regard to their personalities, personal histories, musical preferences, playing styles, and attitudes toward tourists and each other.

Chapter Five concludes this study. It provides a review of the materials of this study and an analysis of each chapter. An evaluation of the uses of performative writing as a methodology for attending to musical performance offers future scholars important and innovative ways to address writing about musical performances.

## **CHAPTER TWO: EXAMPLES OF POETIC AND PROSAIC DESCRIPTION**

### **Writing about Musical Performance**

Writing about musical performance is tricky, even leaving aside the obvious inadequacies of language. Often, those who choose to write about music focus on lyrics, or musical composition, or some peripheral issue related to the music, such as identity or history. Such peripheral issues are often a large part of the actual musical performance; however, most scholars refrain from discussing the musicality of the performance, or the music itself because the act is challenging. However, performance studies scholars have begun to move toward representing music and musicality through their sophisticated understandings of musical performance as a form of human communication that is located in the body (i.e., the laboring of a body to produce the music and the absorption of the music by the body through the act of listening and musicking) despite the ephemeral nature of the performance itself. In his essay, “Singing ‘I Will Survive,’” Chris McRae considers the various meanings of the song “I Will Survive” as performed by Gloria Gaynor, by Cake, and by McRae, himself. McRae finds new meanings of and through the numerous performances of the song at various points in his life, which resonate with him as his relationship with the song changes as he moves from being a listener to being a performer. McRae writes of “I Will Survive, “My own story is tangled up in the multiple performances and experiences of this one song” (332). McRae’s relationship to the music as both listener and musician is an important contribution to the discussion of musical performances, as are other such essays that focus more on the lyrics, or musical composition, or some peripheral issue related to the music. Further, McRae discusses his musical performances of the song to some extent, so moments exist where the musicality of the performance takes the forefront of his discussion. In this way, McRae’s movement from the discussion of identity and



his relationship with the music toward a discussion of the musicality of his performances of the song, and perhaps, of the music itself, becomes apparent. In her essay, “Music as a Performance Method,” Tracy Stephenson Shaffer notes that, “As more scholar/artists take up Auslander’s call to address music in their creative and written scholarship, other approaches to music in/as performance will emerge” (324). McRae’s essay is an example of a scholar who has taken up the call to address music as he works to find new ways to approach music in/as performance. For example, his more recent essay, “Listening to a Brick,” moves even closer toward a new approach to music in/as performance when he considers “performative listening . . . [as] an approach to theorizing” (335). He writes:

Performatively listening to a location or life story is like listening to music in terms of both the larger social and cultural structures that constrain and produce the act of listening, and in terms of the embodied and subjective experience and production of understandings. If performative listening to a location or to the other is *like* listening to music, then this act of listening can be understood as a particular mode that is shaped by a location and historical contexts. (336)

McRae points out that “. . . musical sounds are produced, and the production of those sounds (at the level of genre, recording technology, performance venue, historical moment, etc.) shapes not only what can be heard, but the act of listening itself” (“Listening to a Brick” 336). As a result of McRae’s understanding of the similarities of performative listening and musical listening, he is able to flesh out his argument regarding the importance and implications of the act of performative listening, while simultaneously addressing the power dynamics inherent in musical performance, in the act of hearing, and in the act of listening.

Like McRae’s essay, “Singing ‘I Will Survive,’” Deanna Shoemaker’s essay, “Queer Punk Macha Femme,” concerns itself with a mix of peripheral issues and musical performances. Specifically, Shoemaker studies the musical performances of Leslie Mah in Tribe 8, though at times Shoemaker broadens her view to include the various performances of other Tribe 8

members, the specific performances that Shoemaker takes in, the venues for those performances, the composition of the audience of those performances, and the instruments played by the performers. Shoemakers writes, “A woman playing an electric guitar wields technology and resists naturalizing discourses associating women and nature . . . A woman playing an instrument disrupts the tendency to reduce women, especially the vocalists, to pure display in musical performances” (302). However, Shoemaker takes her observations of the musical performances and applies these observations to the performance of identity. Shoemaker’s focus on Tribe 8, and specifically Mah’s musical performances, is less about the music and more about the performances of race, gender, and queerness. Shoemaker concludes her essay with a call to continue considering musical performances and the relation of those performances to identity: “As research on musical performances expands within the field of performance studies, and as studies of female youth culture proliferate, perhaps more queer women of color in punk music and riot grrrl culture will be written into the pop culture, feminist, and music history books” (305). With this call, Shoemaker advances Auslander’s call for performance studies scholars to study performances of music.

On a rare occasion, a scholar writing about musical performance focuses fully on the actual performance of the music, including the music played, the actions performed by the performers, the setting, the instruments played, the audience, in addition to elements such as the performance of identity, the performance of history, or the performance of culture in the musical performance. Stacy Holman Jones encourages performance scholars interested in musical performances to write about the actual performances. In her essay, “Singing It the Way She Hears It,” Holman Jones writes:

In shifting the focus of musical analysis from composition and text to performance, our approach highlights the interactional, political, emotional, and emergent in music . . . The

stories performed by, in, and through music materialize contest and possibility – here obliquely and there overtly – in musical content and form as well as in their voicing and embodiment. (268)

In fact, Holman Jones takes up her own charge to shift “the focus of musical analysis from composition and text to performance” in her essay, “Burnt.” In “Burnt,” Holman Jones discusses the torch singer as performer, and the performances of the torch singer. Holman Jones states, “In contrast to musical performers and performances as conscious constructions of purposeful identities (separate from the musician as person), the torch singer and her performances are understood as an inevitable collapse of person, performance persona, and character” (“Burnt” 283). In this way, the music cannot be separated from the person, nor from the performance persona, nor from the character. Like McRae, Holman Jones addresses the act of and the importance of listening as well as demonstrates the way that her life stories are bound up with the life stories of the torch singer Billie Holiday. Moreover, Holman Jones’s essay contains the musicality of the performances about which she writes as a result of the way she writes. Holman Jones incorporates performative writing in her essay, which aids in evoking the musicality of the performances of Holiday. Holman Jones states, “I create a text that performs like the music I listen to – a narrative that moves and changes with each repetition of a note, a line, and a song” (“Burnt” 284). As though to illustrate this point, Holman Jones crafts this text about Holiday’s performance:

Her voice grew heavy. She began to use dramatic, dying notes. Diminished and ravaged, her undertones and low notes began to sound *burnt*. After that, her voice came and went, though she refused to let on that anything had changed.

She keeps on singing, undermining her very personae by taking unexpected turns, producing erratic performances, and distorting the lyrics to her famous songs. Her burnt-edged digressions become louder. Her mistakes are amplified in the playback. Nothing – not age, not abuse, not being hushed or dismissed or labeled – *nothing* could silence her voice. She creates a world where her voice can be at home. She sings a fictional and a real body, an unforgettable circumstance and history, a solemn protest and violent love

song. Her sound, her body, and her language tell (an)other story. Her burnt, torched voice isn't only evidence of her surrender to a destined decimation but also the promise of new growth after the fire. ("Burnt" 288-289)

This excerpt demonstrates the use of performative writing to evoke the musicality of Holiday's performances. While Holman Jones certainly addresses Holiday's performance of identity, the performance of history, and cultural performances in this essay, she never abandons the music or the musical performances to discuss peripheral issues. Instead, she works peripheral issues into her very discussion of the musical performances of torch singers, of Holiday, of torch songs, leaving the music and the musical performances at the forefront of her essay, working hard to evoke the musicality of the performances through the text she crafts.

Like Holman Jones, Gura is in favor of a holistic approach to addressing musical performances. Gura argues:

an intelligent and useful analysis of performed music requires the ability to command three extremely dense constellations of forces: *music* (melody, harmony, and rhythm are its chief constituents); *lyric* (featuring the skillful manipulation of language, structure, and diction); and *performance* (emphasizing the stylistic, physical, and vocal choices selected by the performer. (458)

However, Gura notes later on the same page that too often researchers privilege the music composition and the lyric over the actual performance. He charges these researchers to be "courageous," to "focus on what happened when *this* singer met *this* music and *these* lyrics in *this* setting with *this* audience" (462). This is a challenge that I advocate to demonstrate the capability of performative writing to describe a musical performance.

### **Dancing The Charleston**

The two dancers whirled about as the eight piece jazz band played "The Charleston" on Royal Street. The woman, a skinny brunette in a blue dress reminiscent of the 1940s, kept perfect time with her partner, a tallish man in a grey button down shirt, black trousers, and a black

bowler hat. Behind them sat two saxophone players, a trumpeter, a trombone player, a bass player, a guitarist, and a percussionist, all white men in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties and all flanked by the singer. The clothing of each of the musicians indicated a different, older era, perhaps the 1920s or the 1930s, though their clothing also marked them as working class. She bounced around to the beat of the music, singing with her soulful, scratchy voice, “Charleston, Charleston/ Made in Carolina/ Some dance, some prance/ I’ll say there’s nothing finer” (Cecil Mack and James Johnson n.p.). Her brown, curly hair shining in the October sunshine, the singer never fully took “center stage,” instead preferring to allow the dancers the majority of the attention. Beside her the band members played their instruments. One of the saxophone players closed his eyes and leaned back, allowing his soprano saxophone a shrilly sigh. The bass player slapping the strings of his upright bass, his forehead beaded with perspiration despite the breeze that was blowing through the city, squinted through the sunlight in my direction. Tall shadows, cast by the colorful buildings surrounded in iron-work balconies that line both sides of the street as far as one block away, crept toward one another in a long and arduous march to nowhere. As the song continued on at its brisk, syncopated pace, a crowd of pedestrians gathered at the base of the steps of the Louisiana Supreme Court Building. I had been lounging in the shadows of the courthouse watching the band play for close to twenty minutes before they performed “The Charleston,” and it was only with the performance of this well-known song that crowds of people seemed to swarm the stairs on which I sat. The previously played songs only brought in wanderers that observed the performance for a short while before moving on. “The Charleston,” by contrast, drew an influx of people all wanting to stake a place on the staircase, enabling them to view the performance easily. Some of the people watching the performance began to dance as well, though they kept a safe distance from the band. Perhaps this song’s place in our culture, its

iconicity, its upbeat energy, is what made it such a crowd pleaser. This song exists in our cultural memories, often working as a metonym for the 1920s in the U.S., often working as a metonym for pleasure and excess. More to the point, in a city advertised as a pleasure center where excess exists almost everywhere, where excess is, in fact, celebrated, “The Charleston” is a perfect fit. And so as the crowd grew, so too did the energy, an energy that was taken in by the performers, and then returned to the audience through the musical performance. The relationship between the performers and the audience was reciprocal, was symbiotic. The pleasure that I derived from the performance was put into my body by the music, by the performers bodies in relation to mine, and that pleasure escaped my body through my enthusiastic and energetic response to the performance, which was absorbed by the bodies of the performers. As the music drew to a close and the song’s last notes were played, a momentary stillness washed over the performers and the crowd, and then applause erupted from the audience, monetary “donations” were thrown into a bucket that sat on the street in front of the performers, and CDs were bought and sold. Realizing that the performers were taking a break, I stood up and began to wander down Royal Street.

### **Analyzing The Charleston**

This piece of writing about the performance of “The Charleston” on Royal Street in October of 2011 is not fully performative, but at the same time it is not wholly academic. I attempt to evoke the performance through the use of thick description, while still offering a commentary on the performance that I am attempting to describe. Further, I assume that most readers are familiar with “The Charleston,” since it is an iconic song, and for that reason, I am able to rely on the assumption that simply stating the title will evoke the music of “The Charleston” for my reader. I describe this musical performance through narrative because I feel that telling the story of this performance is an effective means of talking about the performance. I



The hardness of diamonds  
Cut through her croon  
And split her voice wide

Like thunder rolling between canyons

And the softest sigh

R E M N A N T S

OF

H U M A N I T Y  
Clung to each note

Warped, and unique

Like a record skipping

Magnified through the mouth

Of a medium

Who sang with the voices of

O  
H S T & G O D S  
G S

## II.

He said, “I like that,” before taking a swig of his Highlife.

“What?” I asked, only just barely hearing him.

“Grit and gravel... You said she sang with grit and gravel and I like that.”

I glanced away from the buxom blonde singing soulfully in front of us on this sweltering summer night and I pondered his words for a minute. I couldn't think of any other words more fitting and I told him so. I rarely choose my words carefully when I speak, but somehow the perfect words usually find me. He smiled shyly at me, then glanced at his feet.

“Sometimes she does this Beyoncé thing with her voice. I hate when she does that. I hate flashy musicians, you know?” he said it just loudly enough for me to hear him. He has always been so critical of other musicians, believing that the music should stand for itself, free of the pretenses that often accompany performance. I understand what he means, though I appreciate the spectacle as much as the music in most cases. He's a traditionalist though, and a bit of a snob, but I suppose being an accomplished New Orleans street musician who gets paying gigs in clubs



on the side affords him the luxury of snobbery, so I don't say anything. Instead, I just smile and turn back to the blonde singing her soul into the night air.

### **Analysis of Grit 'N' Gravel**

This set of writings focuses on the same event, which occurred on Frenchman Street in New Orleans in June 2013, though it offers two different written forms, and it performs two separate functions. The poem works to evoke the musicality of the experience of the woman's musical performance. The spacing and posture of the letters and words creates a landscape that is both visual and verbal. To write simply that the singer held the notes low slung provides information in a descriptive fashion, however, such a sentence does not fully invest in the potential of evocation. This simple sentence has lost some of the music, the pitch and the tenor of the moment. However, to see on paper:

She held the notes

L            W  
          O  
S            G  
      L        N  
          U

the reader is able to picture the way that the singer scooped the pitch as an emotional gesture, the reader is able to visualize the effect, to read it. The visual image of the words imitates the sound of the singer's voice. The visual, written/verbal, and aural elements work together: the words express and describe the action of the singer, the sound she produces, the music she performs, while the placement of the words on paper provide a visual mirror of those elements. Moreover, I chose to place spaces between letters of certain words to create length in the words in order to mimic notes she held for several beats. Words that are broken up, with letters curling up and down on the page create a visual cue to the reader of an arpeggio, or some movement up and

down the musical scale. These visual cues concern themselves with melody, as much as pitch, tone, and rhythm, and they work to evoke, the musicality of the street musician's performance.

The second section of this piece is a prose-based narrative that critiques the same performance about which the poem was written. While I was watching this woman sing on the street with her guitar, a street musician whom I have gotten to know over the last few years was standing beside me. We were sharing the experience of the singer's musical performance. While I was passively observing her performance, working to keep an open mind and absorb what I was experiencing, the street musician standing openly critiqued the woman singing in a brief conversation with me. His critique was important because it showed that there are different types of street musicians who favor different genres and styles of music. This particular musician detests showmanship and believes that the music should speak for itself. His stance, as I have learned over the years, is that a talented musician does not need showmanship, and musicians who are showmen are generally less talented than other musicians and are undeserving of large audiences. While this prose narrative does not go about evoking the musicality of the performance, it does work to critique that same performance and in so doing, it allows the reader to learn certain things about the woman's performance, such as her vocal styling for this particular musical performance, and her flair for giving flashy performances. Moreover, while the second piece acts as a critique of the initial performance, it does so while still maintaining the conventions of performative writing through its subjectivity, nervousness, and citation.

### **Peter Bennett**

#### **I.**

He stood there on Decatur Street by the inlet of Jackson Square, his craggy face smiling in the dusk. His gray hair, like spun cotton candy, hung down to his shoulders and swayed

slightly in the humid breeze. The torn white cotton of his rumpled t-shirt, which clung limply to his thin body, moved only as he did. Warm blue eyes looked on from beneath black wire-framed glasses. His eyes drifted in and out of focus, the pupils dilating, then shrinking, then dilating again as he remembered the music that his worn, crinkled hands played. Twenty-four water goblets sat in front of him upon a make-shift table that was covered with a thick black felt cover. Each goblet was a different shape and size: one small and globular, another slightly larger with a bell shaped lip. Each goblet held varying amounts of gleaming water. A small metal dish filled with cold water stood on the table to his right. He dipped his long index fingers into the water, and then quickly moved his hands back to the goblets, sliding his wet old-man fingers around their rims, setting them alight with vibrations. The intensity of the vibrations made the silvery water in each goblet ripple and jump as though by magic. It was as though the sound waves of this wonderful goblet music were a visible energy radiating from his old, knobby fingers. The soft light of dusk illuminated his liver-spotted skin, and as he concluded the song, the lines of his leathery face grew deeper and his mouth stretched into a tight smile. He slowly nodded his head.

## II.

“Fur Elise” rose through the sticky dusk of New Orleans in June, sounding strange, somehow celestial and tinny at the same time. It was a slightly dissonant sound, but enchanting all the same. I followed it down Decatur Street and found a street musician playing an “organ” comprised of water goblets. In the growing shadows of the evening, his music comforted me. As he ended the song I asked him about his curious instrument, and he told me that it took him over a dozen years to find the perfect goblets to create it. He also told me about music: harmonics, sharps and flats, scales, arpeggios, and arias, insisting that he could play any song that ever existed upon his watery instrument. I could not help but smile at the thought of this man playing

music on water goblets, and I asked him if he would show me how to make the glasses sing. After dipping my finger into some cool water I slowly circled my index finger around the rim of the glass, feeling the tickling vibrations run up my hand and into my arm, making my funny bone sizzle in my elbow. Meanwhile, the glass sang as the street musician explained how each goblet represents a different note and how all he has to do is press his fingers to the lip of the glasses to make music. I pulled my hand away from his pretty goblets and asked him if he would play a song for me. He nodded his head and proceeded to play “Somewhere over the Rainbow” on his fragile instrument.

### **Ain’t Nothin’ Free**

Hands gliding, slipping, sliding skillfully to press old fingers upon fragile glass lips, buffered by water (that ebbs and flows with the tides and currents and lunar cycles) to breathe life into somewhere over the rainbow, created by water vapor tempering, reflecting, refracting light, tempering friction into music	somewhere over the rainbow  way up high  there’s a place that I’ve heard of  once in a lullaby (E.Y. Harburg n.p.)
--	--

My right hand dug through my purse, found a five-dollar bill, and deposited it in the street musician’s tip jar as a token of my appreciation for his music. Then I walked away, feeling the vibrations of his music follow me down Decatur Street.

### **Analysis of Peter Bennett I, II, and Ain’t Nothing Free**

In the excerpt provided, I use both prose and poetry to talk about a specific performance. The first segment, “Peter Bennett I,” is comprised of prose in its entirety. This section privileges

the visual aspects of the performance, rather than privileging the sound, which may seem strange when considering that the performance is one of sound. However, the visual impact of the performance is also important, especially given the unusual instrument that the performer was playing. As stated by Lawrence Grossberg:

The importance of live performance lies precisely in the fact that it is only here that one can see the actual production of sound, and the emotional work carried in the voice. It is not the visual appearance that is offered in live performance but the concrete production of the music as sound. . . . (204)

I comprise this example through three different sections utilizing both poetic and prose writing to attend to a single, specific performance. In evoking the image of the performance through my writing, I evoke the image of the production of sound even as sound is (intentionally) elided by my privileging of the visual. Moreover, it is worth noting that every sentence in, “Peter Bennett I,” is of similar length. The length of the sentences corresponds with the length of the movements of the performer, which were smooth and even.

In the section, “Peter Bennett II,” rather than privileging the visual aspects of the performance, I instead worked to privilege the kinesthetic and aural aspects of the performance. I describe the way that it feels to make the music. The final section, “Ain’t Nothin’ Free,” attempts to breathe life into my description of the musical performance through the use of poetry, in much the same way that the performer breathes life into the music he is playing. The music is complete in its incompleteness. More to the point, the holes in my telling of the performance suggest that the performance is still alive, unfinalized by my words. The combination of “Peter Bennett I,” “Peter Bennett II,” and “Ain’t Nothin’ Free,” enables the reader to access the visual, kinesthetic, and aural aspects of this musical performance. Moreover, the musical performance dictated the style of writing I chose to use in each of these sections, and my writing engaged the musicality of the performance in such a way as to evoke the music of the performance.

## Displaced Bluegrass Melodies

### I.

“shoo – uka – shoo –uka”  
the folds of the washboard  
glint, reflect the sunlight  
extended fingers trace  
linear arcs of rhythm  
steadfast  
a breastplate of beats  
hangs from his neck  
    press bow to strings  
    an eruption of vibrations  
    calloused fingers scream  
    across the fingerboard,  
    a tendril of horsehair snaps  
    from the friction  
    her fiddling as fiery as  
    her red hair  
        the twang in his voice  
        matches the snap of  
        his banjo, familiar friends  
        “twenty one years  
        on a Rocky Mountain line”  
        all tinny and ringing  
        harken to a memory  
        of another place and time  
            silver glimmer, a ring pick  
            caught in a casual strum  
            he trills out of the side  
            of his mouth  
            his head droops, eyes shaded  
            beneath a dusty fedora  
            everything about him  
            seems easy  
                “it takes a worried man  
                to sing a worry song”  
                no worry on their faces  
                this foursome’s sound  
                suggests bluegrass roots  
                displaced and divorced  
                from its native tongue  
                presented to strangers

## II.

The four-piece bluegrass band clusters into a doorway on Decatur Street. The guitar player sits on the doorstep strumming the strings of his instrument casually, trading verses of a song back and forth with the banjo player. The shadow of his fedora hides much of his face and he adjusts his tie and his waistcoat between. To the guitar player's left stands the washboard player, wearing suspenders and a newsboy cap. He keeps the rhythm of the group easily, his hands moving up and down in practiced movements. In front of the washboard player, the banjo player sits on a white bucket. The unevenly rolled pant legs of his gray trousers expose his brown leather shoes tapping in time. Every time it is his turn to sing a verse he closes his eyes. To his right, the fiddler, a woman with bright red hair and a khaki scarf, leans against the building playing her violin. She saws the bow across the strings so quickly and with so much force that several horsehairs snap amid a flurry of rosin dust during a single song. There is familiarity here. The proximity of their bodies, their ability to keep such perfect time with each other suggests a lengthy relationship as a band. Their sound is old, perfect bluegrass. Their twangy music sounds lonesome and slightly apathetic. They sing of hardscrabble lives in the Rocky Mountains and in Appalachia, and I think of the geographic distance separating New Orleans from these mountainous locations. This music is hundreds of miles from its homeland, and yet, it is just as at home on the streets of New Orleans as any other music found here.

### **Analysis of Displaced Bluegrass Melodies**

The poetic text representing a performance of bluegrass music on Decatur Street in New Orleans contains five stanzas with eight lines each. I created one stanza for each member of the band, and the final stanza considers the band as a whole. This choice mirrors the five-stanza structure of the song they perform. This text is nervous, moving from band member to band

member. The descriptions within the poem bounce from the sense of sight to the sense of sound, from the idea of memory to the idea of place, and from the present to the past. Intending to evoke the elements of this performance through the use of performative writing, this poetic text calls attention to specific details about the performance, such as the shape of the movement of the washboard player's hands, the snapping of the horsehair from the violinist's bow, the lines of the song that the banjo player croons, and the slumped, easy posture of the guitar player. As the poetic text moves into its final stanza, it analyzes the performance of the musical group as a whole by considering the displacement and citationality of the bluegrass music being performed on the street in the French Quarter.

The prosaic text attending to this performance describes the scene easily. Once the scene has been set, an analysis of proximity begins, which points to the relationship of the musicians with one another. Finally, this text moves into a consideration of the sound of the music and the relation of that sound to the history and location in which the genre of bluegrass music/the song/the sound was birthed. Again, I consider the citationality of the performance, and I account for the imperfection of reproduction.

### **Conclusion**

While music cannot be translated into language, scholars may evoke music and musicality with certain types of written language, specifically through the use of performative writing. In order to write about music and musical performance in a way that does not lose the essence of the music or musical performance, in a way that does not reduce the writing about the music to an "epithet," the subject (the music or musical performance) must dictate the form used to write about it. The writing will inevitably absorb some of the characteristics of the music or the musical performance, such as rhythm, pace, mood, pitch, and intonation. These qualities, in



addition to the form and content of the writing, work to evoke the music of the performance, or at the very least, work to evoke the musicality found within the performance. Rather than altering the musical object, we should listen to the musical object, ask what it needs from us, allow it to converse freely with us, allow it to dictate the form of written language that we use to talk about it. In this way, performance studies scholars will be better equipped to discuss and analyze the musical performances we have struggled to engage in our scholarship for so long.

### **CHAPTER THREE: HISTORIES OF NEW ORLEANS STREET MUSICIANS**

“Genealogy... seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations” (Michel Foucault 148).

#### **O Memory**

I ventured to the French Quarter in New Orleans for the first time in the fall of 2009. While I was there, I chanced upon several street musicians who fascinated me.

One musician, in particular, drew me in, a musician I stood watching for nearly an hour without realizing that time was passing. He sat on a stoop outside of a red brick building on Frenchman Street playing a guitar in an unconventional way. The man played songs in a staccato rhythm by using a pair of drumsticks to strike the strings on varying frets. The resulting sound was beautiful: ripples of sound blossoming in the air at different pitches and blending together to make soulful music. As I watched the musician, I was struck by his uncanny resemblance to one of my ex-boyfriends, also a musician. A growing cluster of people stopped to watch this curious performer, their bodies pressing against each other, against my body, in order to get closer to his music. Suddenly the closeness was unbearable, and I realized that my legs were sore from standing still for so long. I found my way through the small crowd and back down Frenchman Street hoping to find more music as I walked.

#### **Theoretical Sediments**

Like history, the riverbed of the Mississippi River is full of sediment. While some of the sand and silt washes away, thousand-year-old pebbles find new resting places on the disappearing barrier islands of Louisiana. Long forgotten raindrops that fell into Lake Itasca in Clearwater County, Minnesota, become the brackish water of the bayous in Southern Louisiana after their journey down the Mighty Mississippi. The river rushes forth, the current urged on

steadily by the passage of time. The sea sweeps in to meet it, ravages the coastland: Louisiana's vanishing coastline. Remnants. Fragments. And much like history, none of the sediment in the riverbed, none of the fragments of coastline remain whole.

Della Pollock states that “[h]istoricity is, in effect, where history works itself out, in and through and sometimes against its material objects. It is where concrete practices not only ‘embody and perform differences’ but also contest claims for material agency” (4). History constantly negotiates and re-negotiates itself in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Guided walking tours present history to tourists. The architecture of the buildings provides glimpses of history. The street musicians perform history. The music played, while varied, is often jazz, a genre of music full of elided and forgotten histories. Yet, this genre of music has come to represent the sounds of an entire city, perhaps at the expense of forgetting the racial politics of New Orleans that led to the creation of jass music, the predecessor of jazz.

Pollock argues that we should “preserve the vanishing” by remembering forgotten histories through performance (11). I take up this charge through the creation of a genealogy of New Orleans street musicians. In his own genealogy of specific cultural performances in New Orleans, Joseph Roach notes that

genealogies of performance document – and suspect – the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations . . . . Genealogies of performance also attend to “counter-memories,” or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences. (25-26)

This genealogy is no different. This genealogy documents the history of street musicians and their music in New Orleans. It calls attention to the inconsistencies of that history. It disrupts itself so that the reader does not forget that history by its very nature is fragmented, multiple, and incomplete. History hemorrhages with the excess of the enactment of public memory, of

celebratory performances on the streets of New Orleans, of reverie and revelry, of displaced transmission,<sup>2</sup> while simultaneously remembering moments of violence, oppression, poverty, loss, and destruction.

I compose this genealogy of performance as a researcher, as a performance studies scholar, and as a tourist. Utilizing Michael Bowman's concept of experiential ambiguity, which involves "sharing in the perceptions, sensations, emotions, and ideas generated in a given performance," while attempting "to fashion a position from which [I] can distance [myself] from those sensations so that [I] might speak as other-than-tourist," allows me to better understand the relations between and the contestation of the competing narratives I encounter in the performances of street musicians in New Orleans (154-155). The technique of experiential ambiguity enables me to uncover and address "contest between a site's official or consensual narrative . . . and alternative or oppositional versions of the story" (Bowman 152). In this way, experiential ambiguity relates to Roach's notion of "counter-memories," and further enables me to provide a layered account of the histories of New Orleans street musicians.

### **A Chronology of Absence**

Jackson Square can be found in the Vieux Carré, which is located on the East Bank of the Mississippi River in New Orleans. New Orleans was founded in 1718, by Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, and was sold to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase during Thomas Jefferson's presidency in 1803. In New Orleans, traditional jazz music, birthed from an improvised mix of blues, ragtime, and brass band music, and rooted in New Orleans Black

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<sup>2</sup> Roach writes, "Displaced transmission constitutes the adaptation of historic practices to changing conditions, in which popular behaviors are resituated in new locales. Much more happens through transmission by surrogacy than the reproduction of tradition" (28-29).

Creole culture, was created.<sup>3</sup> Outside of New Orleans, traditional jazz music became known as “jass,” which referred not only to the type of music, but also to New Orleans, sex, sexual innuendos, and a carnivalesque type of fun. Traditional jazz music spread throughout the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The artist community of New Orleans, bolstered by the increasing prevalence of traditional New Orleans jazz music, witnessed the advent of the modern iteration of street performers, who have become so commonplace in the French Quarter. Today, jazz musicians, dancers, human statues, fortune tellers, painters, escape artists, magicians, jugglers, clowns, and all other manner of performance artists can be found there.

### **Cryin’ In The Streets**

Street musicians have existed in New Orleans since the city was founded by the French. However, early street music barely resembled the street music that can be found in the streets of New Orleans today. One common type of early street music consisted of religious hymns being sung to the accompaniment of military music in a procession through the streets to the Ursuline Convent (John Baron 283-284). Under Spanish control, New Orleans saw an increase in the presence of military music. According to John Baron, “From reveille in the early hours of the morning until taps at night, the fife and drum of the army would sound out over the city” (285). Street criers figured prominently into the music heard on the streets of New Orleans. Baron writes:

[The] town crier, whose announcements to the citizenry of the latest news and ordinances were heralded by the sound of a trumpet. On July 17, 1763, a trumpeter summoned the townfolks to hear the town crier announce that the Jesuit church was to be dismantled and its contents sold. (287)

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<sup>3</sup> While many musicians argue that jazz music was created in Chicago and then developed into modern jazz music in various cities throughout the United States, I focus on the improvised traditional jazz music that was born out of New Orleans, not the popular jazz music that came out of Chicago.

Street criers moved away from announcing news and became known for selling their wares.

Saxon accounts for the different types of street criers and gives examples of the songs that they sang to get the attention of potential customers. The type includes the Oyster Man and the Waffle Man, the lady selling strawberries and dewberries, and the man selling watermelons. There are street criers who sell fresh fish and ice cream. Each street crier performs a ditty or a series of ditties to attract the attention of customers in order to sell their wares. Saxon gives the following account of a street crier:

The Negro [sic] vendor cups his hands before his mouth and bellows:

Watermelon! Watermelon! Red to the rind,  
If you don't believe me jest pull down your blind!

I sell to the rich,  
I sell to the po';  
I'm gonna sell that lady  
Standin' in that do'. (27)

The street criers in Saxon's book are a racially diverse population, though he notes that “[most] of the French and American slave-owners of long ago were a thrifty lot, and those slaves too old to be of other use were often put out into the city streets to peddle the surplus products of the plantation” (30).

As time marched on, new and varied types of street music gained popularity in New Orleans. Vincent Panetta notes that “[around] 1890, the dogs and carriage mules of New Orleans were generously exposed to music of variable quality: contemporary accounts reflect that the streets of the city were hosts to musical outbursts of many sorts” (10-11). One of the musical performances that began to gain traction in New Orleans at this time came from spasm bands that performed alongside the street criers. Saxon writes:

Spasm bands, composed of small [black] boys using makeshift instruments, who tap-dance and ‘put it on’ for pedestrians, are often seen in the streets of the Vieux Carré.

They run behind strollers and, catching up, immediately go into violent twistings and contortions, accompanied by pleas of ‘Gimme a penny, Mister! Gimme a nickel, Mister!’ Some do their dances without any musical accompaniment at all, and some of the dances are definitely individual. (48)

These early examples of performances of street music in New Orleans show a diversity of genre and purpose. Whether for religious reasons, to disseminate information, to sell wares, or to entertain passersby in exchange for gratuities, street music has existed in New Orleans for many years.

### **Geography**

Prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Mississippi River ran parallel to the Red River, and the Atchafalaya River did not exist. Then, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Mississippi River turned westward and created a loop known as Turnbull’s Bend. Turnbull’s Bend intercepted the Red River, and the Atchafalaya River was created as a distributary of the Mississippi River. According to the America’s Wetlands Resource Center, in 1831, “Capt. Henry M. Shreve, founder of Shreveport and a world-renowned river engineer, dug a canal through the neck of Turnbull's Bend, thus shortening river travel time” (“Louisiana Old River Control Structure and Mississippi River Flood Protection” n.p.). Over time, the northern portion of Turnbull’s Bend clogged with sediment and closed, though the southern portion of Turnbull’s Bend remained open and was renamed the Old River. The Old River links the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya River. As time passed the Atchafalaya River grew deeper and wider and began to capture more of the water from the Mississippi River as it moved through the Old River. In 1953, “[the] U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concluded that the Mississippi River could change course to the Atchafalaya River bed by 1990 if it were not controlled. This observation came from studies that monitored latitude flow over the years” (“Louisiana Old River Control Structure and Mississippi River Flood Protection” n.p.). Such a change in the course of the Mississippi River would have catastrophic

effects on the areas that rely upon the Mississippi River for their survival, including the Louisiana cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. To halt the change of the course of the Mississippi River, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began work on the Old River Project. By 1963, the Old River Project, which resulted in the digging of the overflow channel and the navigation channel, and the building of a low sill structure, a closure dam, an overbank structure, and a navigation lock, was completed.

### **O Memory**

I swear I heard him singing, “You say yes/ (I say yes)/ I say no/ (Do-re-mi-no)/ You say stop/ (I can stay)/ And I say go, go, go/ (Till it's time to go)” (The Beatles n.p.). Or maybe he sang, “You’re the one that I want/ (You are the one I want)/ Oo oo, honey” (Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta n.p.). Or maybe, maybe he didn’t sing anything. Maybe he just sat there playing his guitar with his drumsticks, and it was as though I heard him calling to me with song lyrics that never escaped his lips. A thrumming staccato of notes filled the air and in my ears I heard it again, the voice, his voice saying: “Hey. Hey you! Hey you, girl! Hey you, girl with the tattoos! Hey you, girl with the tattoos, stop! Hey you, girl with the tattoos, stop and listen! Hey you, girl with the tattoos, stop and listen to me!”

### **1927**

The melting of the heavy snowfall in the Midwest in the spring of 1927 led to the swelling of the Mississippi River. Heavy rains fell over the Mississippi delta during that same period of time and the raging waters of the Mississippi River rose. Despite the fact that the United States Army Corps of Engineers reassured citizens along the Mississippi River that the levees would hold, this was not the truth. As the waters rose and the river widened, the levees were raised to as high as 38.5 feet. The river flooded over its banks, broke levees, destroyed



towns, and the land surrounding the river remained inundated for 153 days. Greenville, Mississippi, found itself at the “epicenter of the worst flood in the history of the United States” (Stephen Ambrose n.p.). According to Ambrose, “[twenty-seven] thousand square miles were inundated. This was about equal to the combined size of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont. By July 1, even as the floods began to recede, 1.5 million acres were under water. The river was 70 miles wide” (n.p.). While the U.S. government recorded a death toll of 246 people, the historian Pete Daniel argues that the flood of 1927 accounted for the deaths of 443 people (213). Further, historian Russell Bearden notes the loss of “9,305 work animals, 26,451 head of cattle, 127,983 hogs, 1,559 sheep, and poultry in the hundreds of thousands. 931,159 people were directly affected by the flood” (388).

### **Musical Interlude I**

A musician sits down on the River Walk by the Mississippi River at twilight, pulls out her guitar, and plays a fragment of a song for herself. She can’t feel the strings beneath her calloused fingers, nor can she see them, but she trusts they are there. The quiet of the evening envelops her. It’s as though the world has stopped and her music is the only thing that exists. It comforts her. She begins strumming a song, her soulful voice sings:

There is a house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun.  
It's been the ruin of many a poor girl and me, O God, for one.  
If I had listened what Mama said, I'd be at home today.  
Being so young and foolish, poor boy, let a rambler lead me astray.  
Go tell my baby sister never do like I have done  
To shun that house in New Orleans they call the Rising Sun. (Georgia Turner n.p.)

A couple approaches the musician. They listen as she sings.

The woman whispers to her companion, “Is this a new version of the song?”

“I’ve never heard it before,” he shrugs in reply.

The musician continues playing:

My mother she's a tailor, she sewed these new blue jeans.  
My sweetheart, he's a drunkard, Lord, Lord, drinks down in New Orleans.  
The only thing a drunkard needs is a suitcase and a trunk.  
The only time he's satisfied is when he's on a drunk.  
Fills his glasses to the brim, passes them around. (Georgia Turner n.p.)

She smiles at the couple standing in front of her and they smile back. The man puts his arm around his female companion as the musician begins the final stanza of the song:

One foot is on the platform and the other one on the train.  
I'm going back to New Orleans to wear that ball and chain.  
Going back to New Orleans, my race is almost run.  
Going back to spend the rest of my days beneath that Rising Sun. (Georgia Turner n.p.)

She strums the final chord and takes a deep breath.

“Where did you learn that version of ‘The House of the Rising Sun’?” the man asks.

“My dad taught it to me,” the musician says, “The song you’re referring to was made famous by The Animals, but the song I just played is its predecessor. It’s a folk song called ‘The Rising Sun Blues.’”

“I had no idea that there was another version of ‘The House of the Rising Sun,’” the woman laughs as she begins to dig through her purse.

The musician smiles, “Most people don’t know about ‘The Rising Sun Blues.’ My dad told me that the American Folklorist, Alan Lomax, made the first recorded version of the song. And the version of the song that my father taught me was sung by Georgia Turner in 1941. He was really interested in the history of music, my dad I mean.”

“Well, thank you for the song and the history lesson,” the man says as the woman drops a few crumpled dollar bills into the musician’s guitar case.

“Sure, and thank you,” the musician answers as the couple begins to walk away hand in hand. She grins to herself, watching the last of the color fading from the sky, the lights of the

boats, the bridges, and the River Walk reflecting on the dark waters of the Mississippi River as she begins to play another song.

## 1927

There is static. Nothing is coming in clearly and then suddenly, a song cuts through the static, projecting from the radio speakers. A woman is singing, “Wade in the water/ Wade in the water, children/ Wade in the water/ God’s gonna trouble the water” (Eva Cassidy n.p.).

The white noise of rain takes over, the static droning on, unbroken. Until a man’s voice wails, “If it keeps on rainin’, levee’s goin’ to break/ If it keeps on rainin’, levee’s goin’ to break/ When the levee breaks I’ll have no place to stay” (Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie n.p.).

The winds howl through the rain, a static scream rising until it is nearly impenetrable. The radio registers nothing. Suddenly R.E.M. blasts from the radio speakers, “It’s the end of the world as we know it./ It’s the end of the world as we know it./ It’s the end of the world as we know it/ and I feel fine” (n.p.).

The soft snow of static crackles on again. An occasional squeal cuts through the fog of noise as the rain continues to fall. A low hum picks up, and comes into focus, “Crickets a-chirpin’/ The water is high/ There’s a soft cotton dress on the line hanging dry/ The windows wide open/ African trees bent over backward in a hurricane breeze/ Not a word of goodbye/ Not even a note/ She’s gone with the man in the long black coat” (Joan Osborne n.p.).

The radio falls silent.

## O Memory

I am not sure why I listened to his voice. All I can say for certain is that just as he spoke to me, I spoke to him, though I never actually said a word.

I called to him, “Hey. Hey you! Hey you, mister! Hey you, mister man! Hey you, mister, man with the guitar! Hey you, mister, man with the guitar, keep on playing!”

Our eyes met for an instant before I looked down at my ragged blue jeans. They were a decade old, these jeans. Growing up poor had its consequences, and even now, I see the frugality in keeping clothing until it falls apart completely. As the fingers of my right hand tugged self-consciously at the soft denim lip of the pocket of my jeans, I ventured to look up at him again. His eyes were closed as he beat his drumsticks against the strings of his guitar. His shirt was ripped and stained, and his shoes had holes in them. However, despite his tatty physical appearance, I could not seem to look away from him as he sat there on the stoop playing music. Perhaps I loved him for a fleeting second. At the very least, I envied him. Part of me wished that I could join him, sitting against the building, playing music for the air and the passersby. He tapped his tattered shoe against the pavement, keeping time, as he opened his eyes, looked at me, and smiled.

“You look like my ex-boyfriend,” I wanted to tell him, “John is a musician, too,” but instead I noticed the crowd gathering around us, him and me, and I felt suffocated by their pushing bodies. I moved away from him, and looking back over my shoulder once before he was out of sight I wondered how he reconciled art with violence, for surely he had experienced both.

## **2005**

A category five at her strongest point, Katrina roared toward the Gulf Coast. Class and race were of no concern to her. Her eye did not see. Her fury did not discriminate as she lashed across land, an intense category three hurricane. Her reputation preceded her.

It is perhaps ironic then, that this storm and the subsequent flood that were so blind to the class and race of their victims, that harshly doled out punishment upon the land that they

touched, became a metonym for the violence inflicted upon the lower class and the black communities of New Orleans. The city, known for its segregated communities, saw widespread flooding and devastation. Many residents from all walks of life either chose to stay behind, or were left behind without the means to transport themselves to safety, forsaken to wait out the rising floodwaters in homes that would be swallowed up. The flood of 2005, reminiscent of the flood of 1927, was caused by a levee breach following Katrina, and it swallowed up entire sections of the city of New Orleans.

In the wake of national media attention, New Orleans' local and state government officials came under fire for not doing enough to properly evacuate the city, and for not being properly prepared for the state of emergency caused by Katrina and the subsequent flood. At the federal level, FEMA was criticized for its slow mobilization and the poor coordination of rescue and aid efforts in New Orleans.

### **Birthing Jazz Music**

The merging of the musical traditions of the blacks and the Creoles led to the formation of jazz music in the late 1890s. The Creole musicians were trained in a classical music tradition, which used a 12 note chromatic scale. According to A.C. Turley, they were also trained in “standardized Western playing techniques for instruments.... [and] these were, of course, white European music traditions” (119). Creoles learned musical arrangement and music notation as well. Meanwhile, most black musicians adhered to African musical traditions reinforced in black culture of New Orleans in the years prior to the end of slavery. During this time, slaves used to meet on Sundays at Congo Square (now known as Louis Armstrong Park) in New Orleans to play music and dance (Turley 113-119; Edmund Souchon 42-43). In staying with the African musical traditions, black musicians used the pentatonic scale “with a flatted fifth or ‘blue note’”

(Turley 119). In addition to using the blue note, black musicians often used a call and response form of musical performance, and they placed a lot of emphasis on the syncopated rhythms of the music that they played. According to Turley:

Black musicians provided the fire of improvisation, a tradition of ragging song melodies, and a long history of social and musical innovation in New Orleans. Creole musicians took the rough pre-jazz music and arranged it for the instruments in a small ensemble, introduced some of the musical training that they had had to black musicians, and often provided some social accessibility to better playing gigs through their slightly improved social position. (119)

As Jerah Johnson writes, “Jazz had its origins not in segregations, but in the assimilative tradition of easy interaction of peoples that prevailed in New Orleans .... Jazz is a music of urban civilization and complexity, not a music of cultural isolation or of racial singularity” (249).

## 2011

I have been reading the news and watching the weather forecasts with a wary eye. The Mississippi River is often on my mind. The rising waters remind me of one of my favorite poems. In “The Dry Salvages,” T.S. Eliot writes:

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god - sullen, untamed and intractable,  
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities - ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons, and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting. (35)

While this poem was not written about the Mississippi River, I think Eliot must have known the true power that exists in rivers like the Mighty Mississippi. His words, clearly written about a different river in a different time, have resonance for me right now as the waters of the

Mississippi River rise. The river is finished watching and waiting. The river is finished being forgotten.

### **Peter Bennett**

#### **I.**

He stood there on Decatur Street by the inlet of Jackson Square, his craggy face smiling in the dusk. His gray hair, like spun cotton candy, hung down to his shoulders and swayed slightly in the humid breeze. The torn white cotton of his rumpled t-shirt, which clung limply to his thin body, moved only as he did. Warm blue eyes looked on from beneath black wire-framed glasses. His eyes drifted in and out of focus, the pupils dilating, then shrinking, then dilating again as he remembered the music that his worn, crinkled hands played. Twenty-four water goblets sat in front of him upon a make-shift table that was covered with a thick black felt cover. Each goblet was a different shape and size: one small and globular, another slightly larger with a bell shaped lip. Each goblet held varying amounts of gleaming water. A small metal dish filled with cold water stood on the table to his right. He dipped his long index fingers into the water, and then quickly moved his hands back to the goblets, sliding his wet old-man fingers around their rims, setting them alight with vibrations. The intensity of the vibrations made the silvery water in each goblet ripple and jump as though by magic. It was as though the sound waves of this wonderful goblet music were a visible energy radiating from his old, knobby fingers. The soft light of dusk illuminated his liver-spotted skin, and as he concluded the song, the lines of his leathery face grew deeper and his mouth stretched into a tight smile. He slowly nodded his head.

#### **II.**

“Fur Elise” rose through the sticky dusk of New Orleans in June, sounding strange, somehow celestial and tinny at the same time. It was a slightly dissonant sound, but enchanting

all the same. I followed it down Decatur Street and found a street musician playing an “organ” comprised of water goblets. In the growing shadows of the evening, his music comforted me. As he ended the song I asked him about his curious instrument, and he told me that it took him over a dozen years to find the perfect goblets to create it. He also told me about music: harmonics, sharps and flats, scales, arpeggios, and arias, insisting that he could play any song that ever existed upon his watery instrument. I could not help but smile at the thought of this man playing music on water goblets, and I asked him if he would show me how to make the glasses sing. After dipping my finger into some cool water I slowly circled my index finger around the rim of the glass, feeling the tickling vibrations run up my hand and into my arm, making my funny bone sizzle in my elbow. Meanwhile, the glass sang as the street musician explained how each goblet represents a different note and how all he has to do is press his fingers to the lip of the glasses to make music. I pulled my hand away from his pretty goblets and asked him if he would play a song for me. He nodded his head and proceeded to play “Somewhere over the Rainbow” on his fragile instrument.

### **Ain’t Nothin’ Free**

Hands gliding,  
slipping, sliding skillfully  
to press old fingers  
upon fragile glass  
lips,  
buffered by water  
(that ebbs and flows  
with the tides and currents  
and lunar cycles)  
to breathe life into  
somewhere over the rainbow,  
created by water vapor  
tempering,  
reflecting, refracting light,  
tempering  
friction into music

somewhere  
over the rainbow

way up high

there’s a place  
that I’ve heard of

once in a lullaby (E.Y. Harburg n.p.)



My right hand dug through my purse, found a five-dollar bill, and deposited it in the street musician's tip jar as a token of my appreciation for his music. Then I walked away, feeling the vibrations of his music follow me down Decatur Street.

### **Banjo Annie**

A vibrant character in New Orleans's history, Banjo Annie, was well-known in the French Quarter prior to her death in 1951. Saxon writes, "Banjo Annie, who, dirty and ragged and drunken, in a costume that often [included] two torn dresses and a man's cap, [trailed] her way from bar to bar muttering to herself or shouting invectives at the bartenders who [would] have none of her playing and singing" (48). Despite being quite recognizable, little is known about Banjo Annie's personal history, and her persona remains shrouded in mystery and local legend. *Eccentric New Orleans* argues that the "'Queen of the Quarter' during the 1930s and '40s" was a local legend about whom many tales were told:

Banjo Annie was born in 1886. Her real name, it is believed, was Mrs. Barbara Lee, although many doubted this was her real name. The legend is that she came to New Orleans from Texas. Some say Oklahoma. It was rumored that she was married to a wealthy oil man. Other tales had her married to the mayor of Mobile, or [stated] that she was descended from an old New Orleans family. Some said she was either the wife or girlfriend of a wealthy lumberman during the World War I era. No one really knew for sure. (n.p.)

The stories about how Banjo Annie found her way to the streets of New Orleans vary greatly, though most legends surrounding her character suggest that she came from a wealthy, upper-class family. In addition to stories about Banjo Annie's past, there are also legends surrounding her character as a musician and as a drunk. Ellis's book, *Madame Vieux Carré: The French Quarter in the Twentieth Century*, notes that "she was reputed to be Burl Ives's original mentor of the banjo" (53). While *Eccentric New Orleans* suggests that Banjo Annie lived on the streets and was frequently arrested for public drunkenness. She was well known for singing ribald songs

often written about politicians and New Orleans socialites (Ellis 53; *Eccentric New Orleans* n.p.). In 1949, Banjo Annie received multiple serious unexplained injuries, and in 1950 she broke her leg (*Eccentric New Orleans* n.p.). Unfortunately, Banjo Annie never fully recovered despite a lengthy convalescence, and she passed away in September 1951. “Bar owners Pat O’Brien, Charlie Cantrell, and Gasper Gulotta agreed after the funeral that Banjo Annie was by all accounts the most famous drinker in modern Quarter history” (*Eccentric New Orleans* n.p.), and tales of her lewd songs and drunken antics persist even today.

**2005:  
Reflecting on Destruction and Unintentional Memorials Seven Years Later**

After I moved to Louisiana, years after Katrina had come through town, I drove around the Lower Ninth Ward. Curious to see remnants of the flood, I crept up to deserted houses, drove along empty streets, considered abandoned yards in their varying states of overgrowth, and attempted to avoid eye contact with the citizens who noticed me. I did not want to answer questions, nor did I want to ask questions of the people who remained here. I did not want them to think this was some kind of dark tourism. Rather than touring the area for entertainment, I was searching for shreds of information in order to help me better understand exactly what had happened here in August 2005, in order to help me process the magnitude of the destruction wrought by Katrina. After wandering around aimlessly, I saw a nice sized building on the right side of the road. I pulled over, parked my car, and ambled toward the abandoned home (Figure 1) and recording studio of Fatz Domino (Figure 2). I gazed with somberness and concern at the



Figure 1. Fatz Domino’s home in New Orleans



Figure 2. Fatz Domino’s studio in New Orleans

faded spray paint X codes marking the doors and exteriors of homes (Figure 3). The X denoted a



Figure 3. The X Code outside of a ruined home in the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans search of the home had been made and the search party had exited the domicile. The numbers above the X denoted the date and time the search took place. The markings to the left of the X stated the affiliation of the search party. The markings to the right of the X indicated hazards within the home. Finally, the markings below the X indicated the number of living and/or dead residents remaining within the structure (“National Urban Search & Rescue Response System 5-6). The X codes that remained on the outsides of these homes were unintended memorials, a narrative of the havoc and destruction wrought by Katrina told in the language of meaningful symbols.

I also drove to the long deserted Six Flags New Orleans Amusement Park (Figure 4), entering the parking lot, though afraid to proceed beyond the signs warning, “No Trespassing.” I marveled at the remaining structures seen beyond the front gates of the park, read the graffiti covering the exterior walls and gates, ruminated on the absolute silence and solitude of the park. The faded sign in front of the park retained the ominous words, “Closed For Storm” (Figure 5). Here was another unintended memorial of Katrina’s destruction.





Figure 4. The abandoned Six Flags Park in New Orleans



Figure 5. Six Flags park in New Orleans: “Closed For Storm”

Then I read *When the Water Came: Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina*. The interviews with survivors of the flood were formatted as poetry and accompanied by images. In it, Miriam Youngerman Miller’s account begins:

The story that hasn't been told  
is the destruction  
    of the middle class  
        of New Orleans

.....  
The middle class, the middle class  
residential neighborhoods all over the city –  
    Lakeview, Mid-city, Gentilly,  
        Tremé, New Orleans East –  
were completely destroyed because of  
the insurance situation. The cap on flood  
was \$250,000 and prices had gone  
well beyond that. (Cynthia Hough and Rebecca Ross 26)

I had heard the accounts of the poor and black communities, but this was the first time I had heard mention of the destruction of the middle class in New Orleans as a result of the hurricane. Miller's account took the insurance companies to task for their negligence and the resulting debt incurred by residents who lost everything.

### **Sampling Storyville**

After its inception in New Orleans, jazz music was played in brothels and bars in Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans, between the years of 1897 and 1917. There were a handful of musical legends that played in Storyville, including Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, Tony Jackson, Pops Foster, and Joe "King" Oliver. Patrons of Storyville enjoyed musical entertainment consisting mainly of jazz music and rags. Black and Creole musicians who regularly played in Storyville began leaving New Orleans due to an increased number of paying gigs in Chicago. While the closing of Storyville by the United States Navy in 1917 did not lead to the mass exodus of jazz musicians from New Orleans to Chicago, it certainly did not aid the city in retaining its jazz musicians (Richard Wang 101-112).

2011

I am in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It is 12:27 am on Wednesday, May 11, 2011, and according to the weather.com application on my iPhone:

The flood warning continues for the Mississippi River at Baton Rouge until further notice. At 9:00 pm Tuesday the stage was 42.2 feet. Major flooding is occurring and record flooding is forecast. Flood stage is 35.0 feet. Forecast: The river is expected to continue rising to a stage of 45.2 feet on Sunday morning May 15<sup>th</sup> and continue rising to a crest near 47.5 feet on Sunday evening May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Impact at 43.0 feet: Shipping and industrial activities are significantly affected. Unprotected low-lying areas will be flooded and agricultural operations will be impacted on the west side of the river. The city of Baton Rouge is protected by levees at this level. Impact at 40.0 feet: The grounds of the older part of Louisiana State University's campus becomes soggy. This includes the area around the veterinary medicine building, the veterinary medicine annex, the stadium and ball field. The city of Baton Rouge and the main LSU campus are protected by levees at this level. Forecast assumes the operation of Bonnet Carré [spillway], but not Morganza [spillway]. ("Flood Warning" n.p.)

Earlier today I overheard someone say that the flood waters might break the records set by the Great Flood of 1927. As noted by my weather.com iPhone application, the Bonnet Carré Spillway is open and sending water from the swollen Mississippi River into Lake Pontchartrain. This is only the tenth time that the Bonnet Carré Spillway has been opened since it was built in response to the catastrophic flood of 1927. Additionally, I read an online news article today that stated the Governor of Louisiana, Bobby Jindal, anticipates the opening of the Morganza Spillway within the next three days for the first time since 1973, which was the only time that the Morganza Spillway was ever opened (Ashley Hayes and Phil Gast n.p.). The opening of the Morganza Spillway would cause the loss of the homes, businesses, and farms that currently exist on the flood plains. I feel sadness for the people who will be affected. While the Mississippi River has ceased to watch and wait, I find myself doing just that: watching and waiting to see what will happen next.

## Buglin' Sam The Waffle Man

In the 1920s, a man who went by the name Buglin' Sam the Waffle Man, whose actual name is Matthew Desiré Antoine Dekemel, became one of the earliest street musicians to receive lasting documentation. Buglin' Sam was a town crier who was taught to play the bugle by his grandmother. For years, Buglin' Sam worked as a waffle maker in Storyville. He announced his arrival in the streets by playing his bugle. According to Al Rose's account:

A mule-drawn wagon kept a coal fire aboard, along with a huge cast-iron waffle maker. The tender, a man named Dekemel, would make the waffle on the spot, dust it with powdered sugar, and hand it over to the purchaser . . . . Last in the line of waffle men, [Buglin' Sam], actually gained considerable fame in later years by playing genuine jazz for stage, screen, radio, and television audiences. (58-59)

Buglin' Sam was a household name to the people who lived and worked in Storyville by the time he retired from the waffle making business.

## 2005: Contexting The Crescendo

I was not in Louisiana when Katrina came. In 2008, at the Region II American College Theatre Festival in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I saw a play called *Colorblind: The Katrina Monologues*. The show, a montage of monologues of survivors of Katrina, news photographers sent to document the aftermath, and empathetic television viewers who could not turn off the news coverage of the hurricane, the flood, and its effects, affected me in ways that I still cannot explain.

The wind, furious, howled  
At the rain-drenched Earth  
Demanding to be recognized.  
Demanding to be remembered.  
And certainly, her destruction  
Will not be soon forgotten.

“The waters unleashed by Katrina [continued to rise] for two days. By mid-week the governor of Louisiana had ordered the evacuation of the remaining people in New Orleans and the city's



mayor [said] that the Big Easy might be uninhabitable for three months” (“Hurricane Katrina: A City Silenced” n.p.). “The entire parish [is] without food, water and electricity. We are panicking” (“Stories From Hurricane Katrina” n.p.). “Rather than the usual upbeat pictures of smiling Americans helping each other board up houses, there were distressing images of looters ransacking shops” (“Hurricane Katrina: A City Silenced” n.p.). “Rescuers searched for survivors along the Gulf Coast as the damage from Hurricane Katrina continued to worsen a full day after the massive storm passed through the region” (“Hurricane Katrina: The Aftermath n.p.). “Indeed, the death toll in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama [...] could turn out to be 1,000 or more” (“Hurricane Katrina: A City Silenced” n.p.). “Crude oil soared to a record above \$70 a barrel in New York after Hurricane Katrina forced companies including Exxon Mobil Corp. and Chevron Corp. to evacuate rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, where 30 percent of U.S. oil is produced” (Gavin Evans and Will Kennedy n.p.).

### **Dates**

While the Mississippi River has brought physical and economic growth to the states it runs through, it has also threatened the security of such areas with floods. According to the Army Corps of Engineers, “Garcilaso de la Vega, in his history of the expedition begun by DeSoto, described the first recorded flood of the Mississippi as severe and of prolonged duration, beginning about March 10, 1543, and cresting about 40 days later. By the end of May the river had returned to its banks, having been in flood for about 80 days” (“The Mississippi River and Tributaries Project” n.p.). The river flooded again in 1849, 1850, 1882, 1912, 1913, and 1927 (“The Mississippi River and Tributaries Project” n.p.). While all of the Mississippi River valleys are at risk for flooding, the lower portions of the Mississippi River seem more susceptible to

overwhelming flooding due to the way that other rivers and tributaries run into the Mississippi River as it progresses.

### **In/Complete**

The street musicians of the Vieux Carré,  
Like the freed spirits of a haunted town,  
Play that improvised jazz music.  
*Ain't no such thing as jass down he'e, sugah.*  
Gone are the days of Storyville,  
Cheap rent and real absinthe,  
But the party rages on.  
*Laissez les bon temps rouler, mon chéri.*  
Release the spit valve of that scratchy trumpet,  
Getting ready for the next song.  
Make that trumpet growl.  
*Whatchoo wanna hea', dahlin'?*  
Tasseled umbrellas undulating in the second line parade,  
A world apart from the cardboard box homes by the river,  
Stepping past the soiled vagrants begging for food.  
*J'ai faim, l'amour. Pouvez-vous épargner quelque changement?*  
Throw a dollar in a hat and keep on moving,  
No more blue books to help you find your desires:  
Those coquettish flowers on the second floor.  
*Yallar girls fo' sale, mistah!*  
Onward toward Jackson Square,  
Counting pennies in the dirt encrusted cobblestone,  
Past the human statue swathed in gold paint.  
*Se taire, ma bella, se taire.*  
A jazz funeral wends its way down Decatur Street,  
As the ghosts with their vacant eyes  
Search for scraps of food and money.  
*'N' I jus' wanna be right he'e.*

### **When The Levee Breaks**

Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie recorded "When the Levee Breaks" in 1929.

Memphis Minnie wrote the lyrics to the song, which is about the flood of 1929. According to [songfacts.com](http://songfacts.com):

African-American plantation workers were forced to work on the levee at gunpoint, piling sandbags to save the neighboring towns .... After the levee breached, blacks were not allowed to leave the area, and were forced to work in the relief and cleanup effort,

living in camps with limited access to the supplies which were coming in. Many left at the first chance since there was no work in the Delta after the destruction of all of the plantations; hence the lyrics. (n.p.)

This song was made famous when it was recorded by Led Zeppelin. It has also been recorded by Judge, W.A.S.P., John Campbell, Kristen Hersh, Killdozer, Magic Slim, Great White, A Perfect Circle, Bob Dylan, Stream of Passion, and Buckwheat Zydeco. Additionally, it has been performed by Gov't Mule, Tori Amos, and Alison Krauss.

## 1927

From August 1926 until October 1926 the Midwest was inundated with rainstorms. These storms caused flooding in Illinois, Nebraska, South Dakota, Indiana, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas. The storms returned in December of 1926 and caused additional flooding in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Despite the record-breaking precipitation and the flooding of smaller rivers, the Army Corps of Engineers chief, General Edgar Jadwin, stated that the levees along the 1,100 miles of the lower Mississippi River “were finally in condition ‘to prevent the destructive effects of floods’” (Barry 175). This proved to be wishful thinking on Jadwin’s part.

According to Barry:

The chief, but by no means sole, determinant of how dangerous a flood will be is the height of its crest. This crest is not a wave but a gradual swelling; it is by definition simply the highest point to which a river rises. Flood height depends on several factors, with volume of water only the most obvious. Another is the speed with which a crest moves downriver. The slower it moves, the more dangerous it is: slower floods exert pressure on levees for a longer time, and slower floods carrying the same volume of water rise higher .... The most dangerous floods are those that contain several flood crests. The first crest fills the storage capacity of the river, causing later ones to rise higher than they otherwise would. Meanwhile, the river’s pressure on the levees intensifies. In 1927 the U.S. Weather Bureau station in Cairo, Illinois, noted ten distinct flood crests moving down the Mississippi. (176-178)

The rains continued to fall across the South, while snowstorms pelted the Midwest. The Mississippi River reached flood stage early and it remained there for 153 consecutive days

(Barry 181). Crests continued to travel down the Mississippi from flooded rivers like the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers.

Major John Lee had taken charge of the Vicksburg district. According to Barry, “His army numbered 1,500 full-time levee workers, including six levee contractors who each operated camps where one or two white men worked 100 to 200 black laborers” (183). In these camps, the men often lived on barges tied to the levees or in small tents. Many of them were plantation workers who were being forced to work on the levees where they filled and carried 100 pound sandbags (Barry 186). Barry writes of the camps, “These were isolated, violent, brutal places. (One camp operator named Charlie Silas may have been the original ‘Mr. Charlie,’ slang for a white boss in blues songs, who was reputed to routinely murder black workers and throw their bodies into the river)” (183-184). Ultimately, the camps were likened to concentration camps.

Despite the efforts of the workers to secure the levees against the Mississippi River, the river was not meant to be contained. On April 15, 1927, 15 inches of rain fell in 18 hours in New Orleans (Barry 189). Violent storms continued to tear through the Midwest and the South. As levees north of New Orleans broke, the people of New Orleans waited.

According to Barry, “the head of the Corps of Engineers had advised that New Orleans businessmen should . . . simply dynamite the [Caernarvon] levee in an emergency” (209). St. Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish were the two parishes at the mercy of the people controlling the Caernarvon levee that was just 13 miles outside of New Orleans. Both of these parishes were described as “country” and “lower class” in Barry’s book. At one point, St. Bernard Parish had even been considered by the Army Corps of Engineers as a location for a potential spillway (Barry 209).

As the waters continued to rise, armed guards were sent to patrol the levees, and residents began to pay close attention to the news. Unfortunately for the residents of St. Bernard Parish, “As the Mississippi grew more threatening, New Orleans papers gave it less space” (Barry 225). Worse still, James Thomson, one of the newspaper owners and editors, called a secret meeting in which he proposed that the levees should be dynamited. Barry writes, “No one had protested against the enormity of the act Thomson was suggesting. It was illegal, and it would destroy the livelihoods of thousands of people. Nor had anyone questioned the authority, right, or ability of those in the meeting to perform this illegal act” (227). While Thomson proposed destroying the levee downriver of New Orleans to relieve pressure on the levees in New Orleans, it was the bankers of New Orleans who took the necessary steps to accomplish this task, including persuading the governor of Louisiana that if the levee was not broken New Orleans faced imminent danger.

Governor Simpson, however, had a few demands of these men before he would allow them to dynamite the levee, thus destroying St. Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish. One of these demands was that all victims would be reimbursed for their losses. According to Barry, a fund of \$150,000 was created to reimburse the refugees. “The fund . . . guaranteed less than \$20 to each refugee for the destruction of his or her home, property, and livelihood” (247). The people of St. Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish put up a fight, but in the end they were unable to keep the Caernarvon levee from being destroyed.

On Wednesday, April 27, 1927, the residents of St. Bernard Parish and Plaquemines Parish were evacuated. On Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1927, “the levee at Caernarvon . . . succumbed to 39 tons of dynamite” and St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes were destroyed (“Another Flood

That Stunned America” n.p.). The people of New Orleans treated the destruction of the levee as a holiday. The well-to-do paid money for permits to watch the explosion happen. Barry writes:

The men who had decided to dynamite the levee controlled [the] permits. Residents of St. Bernard could not witness the destruction of the levee, and their parish. As New Orleans writer Lyle Saxon noted: “Only the privileged with their official permits could pass the National Guard .... They came in automobiles, boats, and aeroplanes, eager for the big show. (256)

However, it was determined on Saturday, April 30, 1927, that the destruction of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes was unnecessary. Levees upriver of New Orleans had burst, which had resulted in a drop in the river levels, thus alleviating the pressure against the levees in New Orleans and further to the south.

### **Musical Interlude II**

It’s just the two of them, the performer and his guitar. “[He] dreams in color, [he] dreams in red” (Pearl Jam n.p.). He dreams of the day when the world might understand and love his music in the same ways that he does. Oh, and “[he] heard there was a secret chord that David played and it pleased the Lord, but you don’t really care for music do you?” (Leonard Cohen n.p.). He sees you as he walks down Pirates Alley, heading for Jackson Square. Even though he doesn’t acknowledge your presence, he sees you stumble drunkenly, pull down your pants, and urinate against the William Faulkner house. “How could someone like you possibly care about music,” he asks himself. Yet, as he comes into the square he sees St. Louis Cathedral and he says to himself, “When I find myself in times of trouble Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be” (The Beatles n.p.). He continues to the far edge of St. Louis Cathedral and stakes out a space at the corner of the building. He pulls out his guitar, sits down, and begins to play.

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break.  
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break  
And the water gonna come in. Have no place to stay.

Well, all last night I sat on the levee and moan.  
Well, all last night I sat on the levee and moan,  
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home.

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break.  
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break.  
And all these people have no place to stay. (Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie  
n.p.)

### **Jazz Funerals and Brass Bands**

Jazz funerals and brass bands exist hand in hand in New Orleans history. In fact, New Orleans began to embrace both parades, being the predecessor of jazz funerals, and brass bands around the same time. According to Henry A. Kmen, while Louisiana was under Spanish Rule, “Governor Miro, in 1787, thought it proper to entertain thirty-six Choctaw and Chickasaw chiefs with a parade. From then on opportunities for a parade were readily found” (202). Kmen goes on to list specific events that occasioned parades before noting that “Mardi Gras, elections, weddings, and funerals all called for parades” (203). These parades were filled with a multitude of brass bands, many of them militia bands, excited to have a reason to assemble and play their instruments. In 1838, the *Picayune* wrote, “our numerous martial bands . . . are perhaps unrivaled on this side of the Atlantic” (n.p.). Arguably, at this point in time, both the parades and the bands that played in those parades became a cultural staple in New Orleans and a source of great pride. Moreover, while parades to honor the dead, funeral parades as they were called in the early 1800s, became increasingly common and were documented by the likes of the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Dr. John Sibley, they were still dissimilar from modern jazz funerals. Latrobe remarked in his writings that funeral parades were specific to New Orleans culture. In the late 1830s, funeral parades began to shift to include more upbeat music on the return march after the burial. In New Orleans, the spirit of life and celebration prevailed, and so

on their return march, bands played “cheerful music,” because “it is as good a way as any to honor the dead” (Kmen 208). As time progressed, though, the brass band jazz movement that was gaining momentum in the city co-opted funeral parades. Jack Buerkle and Danny Barker write:

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the jazz funeral was beginning to take on many of the facets we see in it today: It is usually organized at the deceased’s request through a fraternal society or lodge; it involves several days of “wakin’”; it employs a black brass band; a second line either develops spontaneously or is hired; and, most important, the funeral is seen as a major celebration by the participants. (188)

And so, by the end of the nineteenth century, the jazz funeral as it has become known to exist in modern New Orleans culture was born.

**Coda:  
Of Water, Life, Death, and Fiction**

Characters:  
John Burnett  
Peter Bennett  
Myself

PETER BENNETT

Dip your finger in the water. Yes, just like that. Then circle your hand around the rim of the glass. Do you feel that? Do you feel the energy of the water?

PETER BENNETT and MYSELF are circling their wet index fingers around the rims of the glasses that comprise his glass harmonica. JOHN BURNETT stands off to the side, watching PETER BENNETT and MYSELF as he takes notes.

MYSELF

I feel it! It’s running all the way up my arm to my elbow.

PETER BENNETT

And do you feel it in your heart?

MYSELF

In my heart?

PETER BENNETT

That is where the song begins.



JOHN BURNETT begins to sing, but PETER BENNETT ignores him. MYSELF looks at JOHN BURNETT and smiles.

JOHN BURNETT

(singing)

Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

JOHN BURNETT goes back to taking notes and MYSELF returns her attention to PETER BENNETT and his glass harmonica. PETER BENNETT begins to play "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." He plays a few lines of music and then he stops.

PETER BENNETT

All of it comes from the water. The water is the life-blood of my music. It's the life-blood of this city. It holds a special power here.

PETER BENNETT touches his chest to signify that the power of the water rests in his heart, and then he looks around him to signify the power of the water in the city.

MYSELF

Because it's a port city?

PETER BENNETT

Not only because it's a port city, no.

MYSELF

I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you mean.

PETER BENNETT

The great Mississippi River right over there, that's what I mean. That New Orleans is a port city is only part of it. That river, sure, it helped make New Orleans flourish and grow. It brought boats, and colonizers, and sailors, and settlers, and slaves, and industry, and art, and liquor, and gambling to the shores of New Orleans. But that river, it also brought life to the surrounding areas. It provided food. It provided much needed water for the farmlands on the outskirts of the city. And it was our connection to the rest of the country, and to the rest of the world, because it could spit us out in the Gulf of Mexico, and from there, you could go anywhere.

MYSELF

But the river, it also brings death.

PETER BENNETT

You can't appreciate life, child, without the prospect of death. If we lived forever, life would lose its meaning.

PETER BENNETT ignores JOHN BURNETT as he sings, though MYSELF pays attention.

JOHN BURNETT

(singing)

Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

MYSELF

I suppose that I understand your sentiments, Peter, but there are other kinds of water. Unhelpful water. Floods and hurricanes.

PETER BENNETT continues to ignore JOHN BURNETT.

JOHN BURNETT

(singing)

I looked over Jordan 'n' what did I see? Comin' for to carry me home? A band of angels coming after me, comin' for to carry me home.

JOHN BURNETT returns to taking his notes.

PETER BENNETT

Like I said, you can't appreciate life without death.

MYSELF

And what of the destruction and devastation?

PETER BENNETT

I assume that you're talking about Katrina?

MYSELF

I guess so. Is that okay?

PETER BENNETT

You can't go through life afraid of things that you have no control over. What kind of life would that be? You should celebrate life, not fear death.

MYSELF

But, I want to know about Katrina, not death. She was a category five hurricane, wasn't she?

PETER BENNETT

No, she was a category three the morning of August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005. That's when she made landfall in Southeastern Louisiana.

MYSELF

What happened with the levees? Why did they fail when Katrina came?

PETER BENNETT

(sternly)

Katrina brought death to New Orleans. That's all that you need to know.

MYSELF

So you celebrate the water for its life-giving properties, but you ignore its ability to bring death until it happens? And then what? Then what? You just pretend that it doesn't happen?

PETER BENNETT

The water brings me joy. It brings life to the city and it brings life to my music. You'll never understand because you are just a tourist and all you tourists seem to care about is hearing those old Katrina stories repeated all of the time. You want to see the Xs on the doors. You want to see the pictures of the flooded streets. You want to hear about the death and destruction that Katrina wrought on this city, but, this is New Orleans. This is the city of celebration, of rebirth and renewal. What survived the waters of Katrina was nourished by the waters of the Mississippi River in the months and years that followed.

MYSELF

I guess you're right, there's no way that I could ever understand. I wasn't here. Listening to the stories and looking at the images of the flooding is the closest that I've ever been to understanding how Katrina affected the Southern United States. I'm just trying to understand.

PETER BENNETT

There's nothing that I can tell you that will help you to understand it better.

MYSELF

Why not?

PETER BENNETT

(slightly annoyed)

Because I was not here when it happened, either. I was performing on the busker's circuit in New York City.

JOHN BURNETT sets down his notes. PETER BENNETT is now looking at him.

JOHN BURNETT

(singing)

Follow the drinking gourd. Follow the drinking gourd. For the ol' man's a-waitin' for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd.

PETER BENNETT glares at JOHN BURNETT.

PETER BENNETT

(to MYSELF)

You know, I have to compete with people like him for spare change. All of those blues men, folkies, jazz bands and human jukeboxes, are my daily competition. If you listen closely, you'll notice that all of them, all of us, well, we all have water in our music.

MYSELF

(pointing at JOHN BURNETT)

He's not a street performer.

PETER BENNETT

Then who is he?

JOHN BURNETT

(to the audience)

This is John Burnett with NPR's *All Things Considered*, the summer series of 2003, and that was the glass harpist, Peter Bennett. Thanks for joining us and enjoy the rest of your day.

### **Meta-Methodological Analysis**

Several tenets of performative writing as outlined by Della Pollock lend themselves to the methodology of genealogy, and in fact, support the work done within this genealogy.

Unsurprisingly, nervous writing fits most naturally with the method of genealogy. Pollock contends that “[nervous] performativity differs from intertextuality generally in its genealogical imperative” (91). This chapter contains no linear course. It is fractured, fragmented, and it frequently interrupts itself as it “crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice” (Pollock 90), characteristics of both genealogy and nervous writing. It calls attention to itself with its nervousness, with its discontinuities and disparities.

While nervous writing operates in much the same way as genealogy, other tenets of performative writing co-operate with genealogy. For example, the subjective nature of performative writing lends itself well this genealogy. It operates in explicit terms in the sections “Musical Interlude I,” “In/Complete,” “O Memory,” and “Coda.” Pollock argues, “One alternative is to engage dialogue as a drama or interaction among voices divided up into separate

characters or selves (88). These sections of this genealogy do just that, through the utilization of performative writing. In “Musical Interlude I” three characters dialogue with one another about the history of the song, “The Rising Sun Blues.” In “O Memory,” I place myself in dialogue with the performer I am observing. “In/Complete” sees a metonymic dialogue occurring between the past and the present, between in/visible and absent characters. This is made explicit through the introduction of italicized lines containing the French language, and a highly stylized American dialect. Finally, “Coda” is the section of this genealogy where the subjective nature of performative writing is most the most visible. This section is comprised of a fictionalized scene between NPR reporter, John Burnett, street musician, Peter Bennett, and Myself, which has been written as a performance text. While “Coda” seems relatively straightforward, it does critical work. The characters in “Coda” are fictionalized versions of actual people and this fictionalization points to the common fictionalization of cultural memories accounted for in the process of putting together histories. In this way, performative writing as subjective compliments and cooperates with genealogy.

The tenet of metonymy found within performative writing, also complimented the method of genealogy in this chapter. Explicit examples of metonymic writing can be found in “A Chronology of Absence,” “Cryin’ In The Streets,” and “In/Complete.” Pollock writes, “Metonymic writing invokes the presence of what it isn’t, ironically, by elaborating what it is” (85). In “A Chronology of Absence” I provide a list quality of the type of history of New Orleans that one might find in a book or on Wikipedia. It is certainly incomplete, and it calls attention to its holes, to the absence, to what it isn’t, by elaborating on basic geography, by providing a few well-known dates of important events, by moving rapidly from the past toward the present. Absent are the musicians, with the exception of “Jelly Roll” Morton. Absent is the city of New

Orleans beyond the French Quarter. Gaps of nearly one hundred years go unmentioned in this brief chronology, but these holes are notable for their lack. In “Cryin’ In The Streets” the metonymic writing is similar to “A Chronology of Absence.” This section highlights the absences of the overlapping voices of street vendors, the multitude of music of played by street musicians, and the informative calls of the town criers. The absence of such noises within a text that considers sound, noise, and music calls attention to its own lack. The inclusion of the voice of the watermelon vendor, the inclusion of specific town criers and musicians, the inclusion of silence and lack, make these absences visible. Finally, as noted in above, “In/Complete,” operates as a metonymic poem. “It dramatizes the limits of language” (Pollock 83). For example, the lines, “No more blue books to help you find your desires:/ Those coquettish flowers on the second floor/ *Yallar girls fo’ sale, mistah!*” point out the absence of the brothels of Storyville, while the lines in French highlight a limitation. I mark another absence for those without the ability to translate the French to English. These lines obscured to readers who do not speak French via the act of writing them in French. In these ways, metonymic writing cooperates with genealogy and works within the confines of genealogy to highlight absence and incompleteness.

Finally, citational writing is at work within this chapter. According to Pollock, “[Citational] writing tends toward what Fredric Jameson calls ‘pastiche’ – or parody without the punch, parody worn smooth by repetition” (92-93). The sections of this chapter that contain the most citational writing include, “2011,” “Musical Interlude II,” and “Coda.” “2011” offers up T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Dry Salvages,” in such a way that it “stages its own citationality, re-sighting citation, displaying it in an accumulation of quotations or self-quotation or quotation from beyond the borders of academic prose . . . with the primary effect of reclaiming citation for affiliation” (Pollock 94). Eliot’s poem sits amid concerns about the rising/flooding Mississippi

River of 2011. In the instance of this citation, Eliot's River and the Mississippi River converge. "Musical Interlude II," uses citational writing to drop different lyrics from songs by Pearl Jam, Leonard Cohen, the Beatles and Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, into a narrative about a street musician. The song lyrics are given new meanings as I embed them into the narrative. They remain song lyrics, but they also become descriptions of the actions undertaken by the musician. Finally, "Coda" contains a fairly large amount of citational writing. In Coda, I use citational writing by quoting traditional slave songs like, "Wade in the Water," "Follow the Drinking Gourd," and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," by quoting from NPR's *All Things Considered*, the summer series of 2003. The quoted texts are presented in new contexts and they wrap around each other in new and interesting ways, while retaining their history through repetition. In this way, citational writing also enhances the method of genealogy in this chapter.

Ultimately, several tenets of performative writing operate and cooperate with/in the method of genealogy in order to strengthen the work being done. These tenets include: nervous writing, subjective writing, metonymic writing, and citational writing. While evocative writing and consequential writing exist within genealogy, they do not lend great strength to the methodology of genealogy in this study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: CURRENT ACCOUNTS OF STREET MUSICIANS IN NEW ORLEANS**

I am enjoying a six piece jazz ensemble in the French Quarter of New Orleans on this sweltering Sunday afternoon. The musicians, all young men whose ages range from 25 to 35, sit under the white hot Louisiana sun playing their 1920s-style jazz from the center of Royal Street. The tall, marble Louisiana Supreme Court Building looms in front of them, standing like a mountain on top of short, wide steps. Their crowd, mostly camera-toting daiquiri-sipping tourists, sits on the steps enjoying the shade of the Court Building. As the musicians play for the tourists and the enormous bronze statue of Justice White, also on the steps of the building, I happily scribble into my journal fieldnotes about the various performances at work. Occasionally, I snap an inconspicuous picture of tourists who are taking very conspicuous pictures of the street musicians.

The men in the band move from song to song, but I can see that the sun is taking its toll on them. Even from my vantage point on the top step, farthest from the jazz ensemble, I am able to see sweat marks appear on their clothing. The trombone player, outfitted in a white undershirt, brown cotton pants, brown leather shoes, black suspenders, and a grey newsboy hat, looks especially worse for the wear as he walks around with his hat in his hand gathering donations from the crowd.

“Ten dollars for the CD,” he calls out.

The tourists are practically throwing their money at this man as he moves through the crowd. I wait patiently for him to approach me, as he has approached all of the tourists, but he never does. He sees my attention is turned toward my notebook, into which I am scribbling furiously, and he moves past me, not recognizing me as a tourist, nor even as a local who might



be interested in his ensemble and their music. I smile to myself as the crowd wanders away and the music stops.

The band leaves their instruments in the middle of Royal Street, and they climb to the top of the steps and sit down only five feet away from me. They begin conversing, and as they talk, I record their conversation in my journal.

The tired looking guitar player tries to smooth his slicked-back hair as he complains, “I’m hung over. I feel strung out, man. I’m sick of all this slow jazz. Let’s play something faster.”

The drummer looks up from his iPhone. He’s got a smirk on his face as he says solemnly, “You know we can’t, man,” then he returns to his iPhone.

“Yeah,” the trumpet player agrees.

“The crowds just want to sit down and, like, chill out. We’ve gotta play slower music. You know we make more money that way,” the drummer tells the guitar player as he continues to play on his iPhone.

The trombone player is reclined, stretched out on his back, propped up by his elbows and forearms, which are behind him. He glances at the stand-up bass player who is fidgeting with the laces of his black Chuck Taylor All-Star sneakers. They catch each other’s eyes and the trombone player says, “It’s hot today.”

“Yeah, that sun is makin’ it hard to play long sets,” the bass player answers.

The trumpet player looks out at the expanse of Royal Street stretched out before us and notices that the bottom steps no longer enjoy the luxury of the shade of the Court Building. “I think that we only have about another hour until this is all sun,” he says, gesturing at all of the steps, “Then the tourists won’t want to sit down. It’ll be too hot.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. We got about another hour here,” the trombone player agrees.

The drummer says, “Well, we gotta make sure we make enough money, man,” and the other men nod their heads. They sit in silence for few more seconds as I continue to spy on them. Finally, the trumpet player stands up.

“We should get back to it then. Another quick set?” he asks.

The six men drag themselves to their feet and begin ambling back toward their waiting instruments, lonely victims of the scorching sun. As the musicians take in the mid-afternoon scene of Royal Street and the tourists milling about, one of the men grumbles, “Fuckin’ tourists.”

### **Methods**

Over the last four years, I observed, conversed with, and formally interviewed street musicians in New Orleans. I limited my areas of observation to the pedestrian malls of Royal Street and Jackson Square in the French Quarter. Initially, I entered into the space as a music tourist. Then I came to the sites as an ethnographic researcher. For this study, I borrowed Michael Bowman’s concept of experiential ambiguity, which involves “sharing in the perceptions, sensations, emotions, and ideas generated in a given performance,” while also attempting “to fashion a position from which we can distance ourselves from those sensations so that we might speak as other-than-tourist” (Bowman 154-155). In the instance of this study, my goal was to move between my role as a tourist and my role as a researcher to better understand the relations between and the contestations of the narratives I encountered in the performances of street musicians in New Orleans.

As I made observations, I typically kept to the back of the crowd, but made sure that I had a clear view of the musicians in the street so that I could observe both the tourists and the musicians as they interacted with one another. Throughout the course of my research, I observed

16 groups of street musicians, which comprised 48 musicians and three dancers. In addition to observing the musicians and dancers, I observed hundreds of tourists during their brief interactions with the street musicians. I held conversations with several street musicians who did not consent to be formally interviewed, but who were willing to speak to me “off the record” provided that I did not identify them. I also conducted ten formal interviews with street musicians.

In the interviews I conducted early in the study, I asked questions like, “Would you say that your performance as a street musician is authentic, or is it a performance crafted for the tourist experience and why?” and “In what ways do you think that your performances have affected tourists visiting the French Quarter?” and “In what ways do tourists affect your performances?” However, I quickly found that unstructured interviews in the form of conversations worked better. Many of my informants seemed to dislike the academic language of the questions I had formulated for my formal interviews. As time went on, I slowly improved my interviewing techniques and found that having normal, unstructured, private conversations with my informants yielded far more information and was much more comfortable for both of us. By the end of my study, I had met a large number of street musicians and had learned a good deal about their careers as street musicians and their thoughts on tourists.

This chapter is stitched together using several different perspectives. First, it contains several elements of autoethnography, though I hesitate to call it a full-fledged autoethnography. Second, it aspires to represent the other like traditional ethnography. Third, I apply theories of tourism to understand my subject better, and fourth, I compose this study with a bias toward its aesthetics, hoping that the style of the essay might draw attention to its competing purposes. Performative writing provides me a way to incorporate these aims into my study. In

understanding ethnography as storytelling, and in acknowledging Bruner's assertion that all stories are incomplete (153), I understand this ethnographic study is partial. The lack, or absence, in this ethnographic study is just as important as what is present in it. In order to call attention to both absence and presence in this study, I use performative writing. That performative writing is both metonymic and nervous allows me to highlight the absences in the ethnographic text I compose, while also allowing the text to disrupt itself, thereby pointing out the discontinuities and incompleteness that exist in this work. I also understand that my own biases and privilege mark this study, and as a result I must maintain a level of reflexivity in my work. The subjective nature of performative writing aids me in my quest to add a certain amount of reflexivity to this study. Finally, I understand that stories are aesthetic texts often told and re-told within a culture. The citationality of performative writing enables me to quote these stories, which are already in the throes of repetition and reproduction, while engaging with them on a deeper level. The combination of this desire for reflexivity, my bias toward composing aesthetic texts, and my understanding of ethnography as a method for recording and telling stories create the perfect entry point for performative writing within reflexive ethnography.

### **Ground Zero**

Peter Bennett was the first street musician from New Orleans to fascinate me. He was my ground zero.<sup>4</sup> Actually, that might not be entirely true. Two street musicians from New Orleans fascinated me within minutes of each other, two possible ground zero points. The other musician was a young man who looked vaguely familiar to me, as though he might have been an ex-

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<sup>4</sup> In consideration of how we, the performers, the historians, the writers, become subjects to our subjects Gregory Ulmer posits that "there will be . . . a specific and actual moment that may be recalled as the 'ground zero' of the imagination" in which the writer will be interpellated by the subject (198). Ultimately, this is the explanation of why we write what we write. This double interpellation turns us into the subjects of those who hailed us and vice versa. The site of interpellation is the very foundation upon which the inter-subject exchange happens.

boyfriend from a decade ago. He was sitting on the front stoop of a building on Frenchman Street playing a guitar with drumsticks, thrumming a melodic rhythm by hitting different strings at different frets with his sticks. His brown hair, dreadlocked into skinny locks, hung around his thin face, which was etched with an intense concentration. He was the very first street musician I saw in New Orleans. However, unlike Bennett, whom I met only minutes later, I did not speak with this man. I never knew his name, nor anything else about him. Sometimes I think that perhaps I will see him again as I walk through the French Quarter, but I never do. It is amusing to consider that in all of the time I have spent with street musicians in New Orleans, I have not been able to find the guitar-drummer, nor Bennett again, though I have only actively searched for Bennett.

The first time I saw Bennett was on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009 in Jackson Square when I was a tourist on my first trip to the Crescent City. He was playing what is known as a glass harmonica. Ultimately, the glass harmonica is a set of differently sized water glasses and goblets that have differing amounts of water in them. They are played by pushing the tip of one's wet fingertip around the rim of the glass to cause vibrations. The vibrations of each water glass or goblet create a corresponding music note.

Bennett, an old man with a long white beard and wire-framed glasses, played "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" on the glass harmonica without even looking at his hands. He reached out knowing that the glasses he wanted to touch with his wet, gnarled fingers would be there. As "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" ended he began to play "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," and that is when I realized that I was interested in the street musicians in New Orleans. It would be almost a year before I moved to Louisiana, and it would be another six months after that before I decided to research street musicians in New Orleans for the first time. While I had hoped to find Bennett at some point during the time that I spent with the street musicians in New Orleans, I

always knew that my interest stretched beyond him to all of the street musicians, and while this project may have begun as a strange search for him, it has become so much more than that. I still look for him sometimes, but after conducting this study, finding him does not seem as important as it once did. Now I have ties to the community of street musicians in New Orleans that stretch far beyond my ground zero.

### **Percussive Performance: July 2012**

The sun scorched the city  
Reflecting off of sweaty black bodies  
Browbeaten  
Beat-boxin'

The percussion players  
Lined up in narrow arcs  
Paradiddle  
Parataxis

A crowd gathered on Royal St.  
Taking in the rhythm  
Listless  
Listening

Seven drummers beating on  
Trash cans, Bongos, Toms  
Rhythm  
Rhyme

I stood watching them  
Nodding my head to the beat  
Communing  
Communicating

Ways of Counting  
Ways of Being in the World  
Walking  
Working

Sounds of the rhythm section  
Reverberating off of buildings  
Dispensed  
Dispersed

### **Small Talk, Big Meanings: A Fieldnote**

It was another scorching hot Sunday in the French Quarter as the sun mercilessly beat down a steady stream of light and heat. I could not find any of the street musicians I had been observing. I guessed that they chose not to expose themselves to the mid-day sun, but perhaps I was wrong. In search of a musician to observe, I wandered away from Royal Street toward Jackson Square. As I walked down Toulouse Street, I could hear faint guitar music in the distance, and by the time I reached the intersection of Toulouse and Chartres, I was able to properly hear the song, which was a country style mash-up of the Beatles' "Let it Be" and Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water." The man playing the song was older than most other musicians I had observed and seated on a bench in Jackson Square. He had a white beard and mustache and white hair that fell to his shoulders. He was wearing a beige cowboy hat and something about him reminded me of Kenny Rogers. Perhaps it was his smile? His off-white t-shirt was tucked into blue jeans, and a pack of cigarettes sat beside him. Hunched over his guitar, he finished playing the song and moved on to another song that I was unable to recognize. He was a country musician with a soulful voice. I took a seat at the opposite side of his bench and waited for him to stop playing. Sweat was pouring off both of us, and he looked exhausted. I smiled at him and told him that I liked his music. He smiled back and asked me where I was from. I was confronted by the idea that I could tell him that I was from Pennsylvania, which is a truthful statement, but I knew that I would immediately become a tourist to this man, so instead, I gave him a different truth.

"I'm from Baton Rouge," I told him, "I'm a grad student at LSU and I am studying street musicians."

"Really?" he asked me with a sideways glance.

“Really,” I said.

He held out his hand and said, “Well, in that case, it’s nice to meet you. My name is Will.”

We exchanged small talk for a while. We talked about the heat of the day and about the Saints game happening in the Superdome. We talked about where to get the best gumbo in town. And then I could not help but ask Will how long he had been playing his guitar on the streets of the French Quarter. He smiled, opened his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out. Once it was lit, he inhaled deeply and as he exhaled he said, “Well, I’ve been playing the Square for a long time.”

“How long?”

“Long enough to have seen things change,” he puffed on his cigarette with a far-off look in his eyes. Minutes passed by in silence, “I miss them days when you could play in the Square. I mean really in it. Those were the days. My first time playing Jackson Square I played in the park on one of them benches by the fountain with a whole bunch of hippies, but that was a long, long time ago. Everyone used to go in there to hear us play back then.”

“With the hippies?” I asked.

“Yeah, with a whole lotta hippies,” he said before he flicked his cigarette, “That was the 1960s. I was just out to have some fun and I fell in love and I’ve been doin’ this ever since. I’m blessed, ya know.”

I was slightly confused by his final statement, “Blessed?”

“Yeah, blessed. I was blessed to have found what I loved to do so early in my life. Back then you didn’t need no amplification system to play to 80 people. If you were loud enough you could play without an amp. And then things started changing. I mean, man, I miss the days when



you only needed a small amp, something to play to a crowd of 30 or 35, but we're about to go back to that."

"You are?" I asked, confused by the contradictions and mysteries in his statement.

He cocked his head to the side and looked at me long and hard, "Child, you sure you writing about the street musicians in Nawlins? You even know anything about us?"

I was taken aback by his questions and I felt as though I had accidentally crossed a line, but I forced myself to answer him as though I was certain of myself, "Of course I'm sure that I'm writing about the street musicians in New Orleans."

Will and I continued talking. We had many conversations after this first one, and in fact, Will gave me some of the most interesting information regarding the relationship between the street performers in New Orleans and music tourism. Will never forgot that I was an outsider though and he reminded me often of his position of authority by consistently referring to me as "Child." To Will, I was not a street musician, nor was I a tourist. I was a researcher, which is a position of authority; however, Will asserted that my youthfulness made me his subordinate when he decided to refer to me not by my name, but instead as "Child" during all of our encounters. Most of the other street musicians I spoke to employed similar methods of reminding me that I was their subordinate and that I was only going to gain access to their community if they chose to extend that access to me as a privilege. As Bruner notes, "Narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well" (144). Many of my informants who agreed to be interviewed were very clear regarding what things they would discuss with me (their music choices, their performance venues, their personal histories as street musicians, their interactions with tourists) and what things were off-limits in our discussions (income, the social hierarchy that exists within their community, power dynamics between city officials and street musicians).

They were very careful with the narratives they crafted for me, thereby retaining their positions of power in our relationship.

### **Dancing the Charleston: October 2011**

The two dancers whirled about as the eight piece jazz band played “The Charleston” on Royal Street. The woman, a skinny brunette in a blue dress reminiscent of the 1940s, kept perfect time with her partner, a tallish man in a grey button down shirt, black trousers, and a black bowler hat. Behind them sat two saxophone players, a trumpeter, a trombone player, a bass player, a guitarist, and a percussionist, all white men in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties and all flanked by the singer. The clothing of each of the musicians indicated a different, older era, perhaps the 1920s or the 1930s, though their clothing also marked them as working class. She bounced around to the beat of the music, singing with her soulful, scratchy voice, “Charleston, Charleston/ Made in Carolina/ Some dance, some prance/ I’ll say there’s nothing finer” (Cecil Mack and James Johnson n.p.). Her brown, curly hair shining in the October sunshine, the singer never fully took “center stage,” instead preferring to allow the dancers the majority of the attention. Beside her the band members played their instruments. One of the saxophone players closed his eyes and leaned back, allowing his soprano saxophone a shrilly sigh. The bass player slapping the strings of his upright bass, his forehead beaded with perspiration despite the breeze that was blowing through the city, squinted through the sunlight in my direction. Tall shadows, cast by the colorful buildings surrounded in iron-work balconies that line both sides of the street as far as one block away, crept toward one another in a long and arduous march to nowhere. As the song continued on at its brisk, syncopated pace, a crowd of pedestrians gathered at the base of the steps of the Louisiana Supreme Court Building. I had been lounging in the shadows of the courthouse watching the band play for close to twenty minutes before they performed “The

Charleston,” and it was only with the performance of this well-known song that crowds of people seemed to swarm the stairs on which I sat. The previously played songs only brought in wanderers that observed the performance for a short while before moving on. “The Charleston,” by contrast, drew an influx of people all wanting to stake a place on the staircase, enabling them to view the performance easily. Some of the people watching the performance began to dance as well, though they kept a safe distance from the band. Perhaps this song’s place in our culture, its iconicity, its upbeat energy, is what made it such a crowd pleaser. This song exists in our cultural memories, often working as a metonym for the 1920s in the U.S., often working as a metonym for pleasure and excess. More to the point, in a city advertised as a pleasure center where excess exists almost everywhere, where excess is, in fact, celebrated, “The Charleston” is a perfect fit. And so as the crowd grew, so too did the energy, an energy that was taken in by the performers, and then returned to the audience through the musical performance. The relationship between the performers and the audience was reciprocal, was symbiotic. The pleasure that I derived from the performance was put into my body by the music, by the performers bodies in relation to mine, and that pleasure escaped my body through my enthusiastic and energetic response to the performance, which was absorbed by the bodies of the performers. As the music drew to a close and the song’s last notes were played, a momentary stillness washed over the performers and the crowd, and then applause erupted from the audience, monetary “donations” were thrown into a bucket that sat on the street in front of the performers, and CDs were bought and sold. Realizing that the performers were taking a break, I stood up and began to wander down Royal Street.

### **Street Musicians and Music Tourism**

The street musicians in New Orleans set up folding chairs in their designated spots along Royal Street and in Jackson Square. They have determined amongst themselves who will get to

play in which spot and at which times. Michael Magro, a clarinetist, says, “If you want to play on the street you have to get up early and go out and claim your spot. It may be an hour or two before anyone else in the band even shows up, but the good thing about it is that you get to take in the pace of the day.” Jazz musician, Christopher Johnson, acknowledges the importance of checking the weather before going out to play. “If they are calling for rain around three in the afternoon, you go out to play between eleven and two,” he smiles. My informant, KD, tells me that the most senior of the street musicians get the “best spots at the best times of the day.” She is the only musician who is willing to talk to me about how territory is claimed, though she is cautious to do so and often does so “off-the-record.” She tells me that in Jackson Square “it’s kind of the same thing as Royal Street. There are some people who’ve been playin’ there for a long time and so they have their spots, too. But it’s not, you know, it’s not like Royal Street exactly.”

As a pedestrian mall during the day, Royal Street is among the most coveted places to play music in the French Quarter. Street musicians spread out along Royal Street, placing roughly one city block between themselves and the next street musician, so as not interfere with each other’s musical performances. On any given Sunday afternoon someone walking down Royal Street will encounter a jazz band, followed by a single guitar player/singer, followed by a duo playing the violin and the guitar, followed by another jazz band.

The audience is one of the most important elements that musicians consider when laying claim to a space. PJ, a street musician in New Orleans, told me that performers “need to get a well-trafficked spot, or it’s just not worth it to play on the street. You [they] need to be seen and heard if you [they] want to make that money.” Some musicians look for buildings with awnings or balconies that will provide shade for passersby to entice them to stay and listen for a while.

Other musicians play in front of the Louisiana Supreme Court building so that their audience members can sit on the steps and rest while they listen to the music. Most of the audiences of the street musicians are tourists. Three major criteria make a space “a hot spot.” The space claimed should have a high volume of foot traffic, should have areas which are significantly shaded, and should be at or near an intersection or a significant tourist attraction, such as St. Louis Cathedral. High volumes of foot traffic mean that the street musicians will have more opportunities to build larger audiences. Generally, the musician playing in an area with a high volume of foot traffic will make more money than a street musician who plays in an area with light foot traffic. Further, areas that are significantly shaded often entice tourists and other passersby to stop and enjoy the music in the shade. This is especially important given New Orleans’s tropical climate. Street musicians have a better chance of gathering and maintaining an audience if they can provide shade from the sun and heat. Additionally, street musicians who play at or near an intersection or a tourist attraction have a chance to draw a larger audience than street musicians who play in the middle of the block. As tourists wind their way down the streets that intersect with Royal Street they are more inclined to stop and listen to a musician who is relatively close to or on the same path they are traveling. Tourists tend to gather at popular tourist attractions such as St. Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square, Café Du Monde across the street from Jackson Square, and Brennan’s Restaurant on Royal Street, which means that street musicians who are playing near these tourist attractions have a greater opportunity to build an audience than other street musicians. Additionally, spaces that have features such as staircases and benches also help street musicians draw larger audiences because they offer the audience a place to sit down and rest while they are enjoying the performances.

Once a street musician claims a space that meets these three criteria, they set up their equipment in that space. In their performances, the street musicians often take into consideration what music their audience wants to hear in the hopes of building a large audience and making a considerable amount of money. KD says, “I watch people. If they’re nodding their heads, or smiling, or tapping their feet I know we got it right. If they don’t look happy or they’re moving on quickly, I try something different.” Another one of my informants, Chris says, “I like it when we play slower songs. And if we play faster ones it’s because they’re recognizable to the audience, like ‘The Charleston,’ but we usually play slower songs, so that the audience feels more relaxed.” Meanwhile, some musicians such as JR encourage song requests from the audience. “When they request the song, they usually stay to hear the whole thing, instead of moving on right away,” JR says with his thick Jamaican accent. Christopher Johnson regales me with a story about the club, Preservation Hall. He says, “There was a sign hanging up that said, ‘One dollar for requests, two dollars for Saints [When The Saints Go Marching In],’ and that was in the 1950s. Now the sign says ‘two dollars for requests and five dollars for Saints.’ Clearly this is a product of inflation.” He laughs before continuing, “But everyone wants to hear ‘When the Saints Go Marching In,’ especially on game days when the Saints are playing in the Dome. I don’t charge for requests, but I guess it’s smart if you can make a little extra money in that way.” Given these sentiments, it becomes clear that many New Orleans street musicians cater to their audiences with their musical performances by accepting requests for songs.

Due to the fact that New Orleans is a music tourism destination, many tourists are happy to be the captive audience of street musicians. For music tourists who travel to the city to enjoy the music of New Orleans, experiencing the musical performances of street musicians are among the activities they seek. Many street musicians understand that there are music tourists in their

city and that such people are easily made into audience members. According to Will, “Some of ’em [tourists] are just more interested in stopping for the music than others. It’s like the music is, uh, is like a magnet or something. It just pulls ’em in.” He considers the relationship between himself and music tourists to be symbiotic. In essence, the music tourists need his music for as long as they are listening to it in order to have the experience they are seeking, and he needs the revenue that he earns from playing his music for the tourists. For Will and other street musicians who share these sentiments, the relationship between street musicians and music tourists is convenient and necessary.

However, not all street musicians look so favorably upon music tourists. KD said, “Playing what they [tourists] want all the time isn’t as fun as playing what I want, but I got to keep the crowd happy. They want to hear what they want to hear.” While she states that playing music that caters to the crowd is not fun, the subtext of her statement is that the tourists, music tourists included, do not share her refined taste in music. The music tourists’ lack of appreciation for KD’s preferred type of music in conjunction with KD’s acknowledgement that she plays to the crowd demonstrates a strange power dynamic. On one hand, KD feels obligated to play to the crowd because she wants to earn money for her performance. The crowd is the consumer, while she is the producer. In this producer-consumer relationship, KD understands that the crowd has power over her and her performance because she is in a position of financial subordination to them. However, at the same time, KD acknowledges that she has a much more refined appreciation for and knowledge of music than her crowd, which gives her a certain intellectual/musical authority over her audience, music tourists included. At times KD struggles with her position of power in relation to the crowd she attracts. While she understands and asserts her authority and power as a street musician, she simultaneously finds herself in a

situation where she yields power to her audience. For KD and other street musicians like her, the relationship between street musicians in New Orleans and music tourists is tenuous.

Despite the tensions of being caught between a position of authority and a position of subordination that some street musicians feel, nearly every musician whom I interviewed formally mentioned experiencing what Victor Turner calls “communitas” during their performances. According to Turner, communitas represents “the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person, a relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness” (247). Turner’s concept can be advanced when considered in conjunction with Small’s assertion that the act of musicking “is to take part, in any capacity in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing materials for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (9). For Small no difference exists between the role of listener, performer, or composer within the act of musicking (8-11), thus collapsing what Turner refers to as the “[structures], or all that which holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions” (247). Therefore, by its very nature, the act of musicking brings about the proper conditions for the experience of communitas to occur. Chris provides an example of this when he says, “Sometimes when I’m playing I just get lost in the music and I feel so, just so overjoyed, and I’m not alone with that feeling. I can see it on the faces of my bandmates and sometimes I can see it on the faces of the people in the audience. It’s like the music brings us together and it’s a beautiful thing.” The experience of communitas by performers and tourists alike illustrates the importance of the experience of the musical performances to both the street musicians and their audiences. In some cases, the music itself



becomes the vehicle for transcendence into the state of *communitas* for the street musicians and the tourists.

Finally, musical performances on the streets of New Orleans act as an illustration of identity for street musicians and a vehicle for the negotiation of identity for music tourists. Many street musicians cling to their identities as musicians. JR says, “I ain’t nothing if I ain’t a musician,” and Chris explains, “I’ve been doing this since I was a kid. I can’t imagine doing anything else with my life.” The act of playing music is the representation of the identities of the street musicians. In fact, Small discusses musical performance as a form of self-definition when he writes, “Those taking part in a musical performance are in effect saying – to themselves, to one another, and to anyone else who may be watching or listening – *This is who we are*” (134). The genre of music that a musician decides to play is demonstrative of his or her personal identity. Whether or not a musician takes audience requests also makes a statement about his or her personal identity. Many features of the street musicians’ performance work to represent their personal identities. However, the act of playing music on the streets in New Orleans is also a representation of a cultural identity. Small writes, “Each musical performance articulates the values of a specific social group, large or small, powerful or powerless, rich or poor, at a specific point in its history, and no kind of performance is any more universal or absolute than any other” (133). And while the street musicians are expressing their personal and collective cultural identities through their musical performances, they also create a space for music tourists to negotiate their own identities. After being separated from their home and normative identity, music tourists come to New Orleans in search of music. They are a part of a transient and liminal population. In their liminality, these music tourists may reshape their identities if they so choose, and often the music of the street musicians provides the tourists a vehicle for such a change.

After all, the tourists are willing participants in these musical performances, and as Small notes, “[something changes] between the participants through the fact of having undergone the performance together. Who [they] are has changed” (140). Music tourists may adopt elements of the identities that they believe are being presented by the street musicians through the musical performances they are witnessing in an attempt to get closer to the music culture of New Orleans, or to appear as though they are a local.

**Grit ‘N’ Gravel: June 2013**

**I.**

She held the notes

L                    W  
       O  
 S                    G  
       L            N  
           U

An extension of her body  
 Birthed that blue note  
 Scratching soul into every pitch

Like scars

Like memories

Like someone who was

A    L    I    V    E  
 I mean, really alive

My ears breathed her in  
 The grit and gravel of her voice  
 Was more intoxicating

Than the

B  
 O  
   O  
    Z  
   E  
   on my lips

The hardness of diamonds  
Cut through her croon  
And split her voice wide

Like thunder rolling between canyons

And the softest sigh

R E M N A N T S

OF

H U M A N I T Y  
Clung to each note

Warped, and unique

Like a record skipping  
Magnified through the mouth  
Of a medium  
Who sang with the voices of

O O  
H S G D  
G T S & S

## II.

He said, “I like that,” before taking a swig of his Highlife.

“What?” I asked, only just barely hearing him.

“Grit and gravel... You said she sang with grit and gravel and I like that.”

I glanced away from the buxom blonde singing soulfully in front of us on this sweltering summer night and I pondered his words for a minute. I couldn't think of any other words more fitting and I told him so. I rarely choose my words carefully when I speak, but somehow the perfect words usually find me. He smiled shyly at me, then glanced at his feet.

“Sometimes she does this Beyoncé thing with her voice. I hate when she does that. I hate flashy musicians, you know?” he said it just loudly enough for me to hear him. He has always been so critical of other musicians, believing that the music should stand for itself, free of the pretenses that often accompany performance. I understand what he means, though I appreciate the spectacle as much as the music in most cases. He's a traditionalist though, and a bit of a snob, but I suppose being an accomplished New Orleans street musician who gets paying gigs in clubs

on the side affords him the luxury of snobbery, so I don't say anything. Instead, I just smile and turn back to the blonde singing her soul into the night air.

### **Innovation and Tradition**

Many different types of music can be heard on the streets of the French Quarter. One might encounter jazz bands, brass bands, lone guitarists, drummers, glass harmonica players, blues musicians, and more. The variety of the music played by street musicians is testament to the diversity that defines this city. Michael Magro tells me that there was less diversity in the music played in the French Quarter before Hurricane Katrina. He says, "Before Katrina it was a lot of older people who played the same music over and over and over again. Since Katrina, a lot of the older people left and the music has become more innovative. You see a lot of people coming in and doing new things, trying new things, and it's not just this mass produced music anymore." KD also mentions a staleness that existed in the music before Hurricane Katrina changed things: "It used to be the same thing everywhere you went. The same songs. The same type of music. Kinda made you feel like you were choking to death on the same thing all the time." However, according to many of my informants, after Hurricane Katrina, the city saw an influx of new blood. A lot of transplants came to town and decided to stay. New types of music found their way to the streets of the French Quarter. JR says, "I used to always play trumpet in the brass band, but sometimes I play different music now. Sometimes they let me sit in with them and I play that jazz," he gestures to a band just up the street, "Keeps it interesting."

While some musicians stick to a certain genre of music, many of them discuss the importance of versatility. Christopher Johnson notes that he came to New Orleans "to study the early jazz tradition," but, "a lot of people come here with different motivations. Some people enjoy different types of music. Some of the musicians bounce in and out of the different scenes.

Some just come to absorb what they can.” While Christopher sticks with jazz music for the most part, he acknowledges the need to be innovative. He says, “Just by the nature of the music, um, you’re always doing something to keep it fresh. You’re trying not to say the same thing every time you play. There’s a melody and a hook, but everything else is created mostly spontaneously.” The spontaneity of the music allows Christopher to play the same type of music each day without growing bored with it. Michael echoes this sentiment when he tells me, “I’m always seeking out the individuals, the ones who are innovative and willing to try new things in new ways.” The vast majority of musicians I interview see the importance of innovation and spontaneity in music. Michael’s assertion that a lot of musicians are afraid to work for change is telling of his attitudes toward tradition and repetition. He elaborates by arguing that “They’re afraid to try different things. There are so many musicians in the city and it makes them feel vulnerable because they can easily be replaced, but there are some musicians who will advocate for change and it makes them versatile. I wish there were more musicians willing to try new things.”

While musicians like JR, Christopher, and Michael are in favor of keeping the music fresh, advocating for and embracing change and innovation, musicians like WL and Chris are in favor of keeping the traditions going in New Orleans street music. WL smiles kindly as she tells me that she enjoys the traditional jazz music, and she doesn’t mind playing the same thing again and again. “There’s something comfortable about knowing exactly how it’s gonna sound each time,” she draws, “It takes the guesswork out of it. There’s nothing wrong with repeating and replicating the music you know and love. Besides, it’s the old standbys that keep the tourists coming back.” Chris agrees with WL’s sentiments. He enjoys playing highly recognizable songs that don’t include any type of improvisation. “You expect it to sound a certain way, you know?”

You want it to be something the tourists recognize, not some chance improvisation of the song that sounds vaguely familiar to them,” he says. For Chris, a lot of the consistency he expects is a result of his desire to please tourists with songs they’ll recognize. He’s in it for the money, something he freely admits. “I love the music, but the music won’t pay my bills,” he grins, “I cater to the tourists. They love the traditional stuff, and I do too.” His admission of prioritizing income over the music catches me off guard, as this is not a statement any one of my other informants has made. In fact, most of my other informants either avoid the subject of income and earnings altogether, or they condemn the musicians who prioritize income over a love of the music. This dichotomization of street musicians, with one group performing music as a labor of love and the other group performing music for money, is fascinating. While musicians recognize each other as either innovative or traditional, and as either performing music for the love of the music or performing music for the love of the money within their own community, few musicians are willing to speak candidly to me about this subject. Those who do discuss the camps to which they belong do so carefully, and are uncharacteristically diplomatic with their speech, not wanting to offend other members of their community.

### **Displaced Bluegrass Melodies: November 2011**

#### **I.**

“shoo – uka – shoo –uka”  
the folds of the washboard  
glint, reflect the sunlight  
extended fingers trace  
linear arcs of rhythm  
steadfast  
a breastplate of beats  
hangs from his neck  
    press bow to strings  
    an eruption of vibrations  
    calloused fingers scream  
    across the fingerboard,

a tendril of horsehair snaps  
from the friction  
her fiddling as fiery as  
her red hair

the twang in his voice  
matches the snap of  
his banjo, familiar friends  
“twenty one years  
on a Rocky Mountain line”  
all tinny and ringing  
harken to a memory  
of another place and time

silver glimmer, a ring pick  
caught in a casual strum  
he trills out of the side  
of his mouth  
his head droops, eyes shaded  
beneath a dusty fedora  
everything about him  
seems easy

“it takes a worried man  
to sing a worry song”  
no worry on their faces  
this foursome’s sound  
suggests bluegrass roots  
displaced and divorced  
from its native tongue  
presented to strangers

## II.

The four-piece bluegrass band clusters into a doorway on Decatur Street. The guitar player sits on the doorstep strumming the strings of his instrument casually, trading verses of a song back and forth with the banjo player. The shadow of his fedora hides much of his face and he adjusts his tie and his waistcoat between. To the guitar player’s left stands the washboard player, wearing suspenders and a newsboy cap. He keeps the rhythm of the group easily, his hands moving up and down in practiced movements. In front of the washboard player, the banjo player sits on a white bucket. The unevenly rolled pant legs of his gray trousers expose his brown leather shoes tapping in time. Every time it is his turn to sing a verse he closes his eyes. To his

right, the fiddler, a woman with bright red hair and a khaki scarf, leans against the building playing her violin. She saws the bow across the strings so quickly and with so much force that several horsehairs snap amid a flurry of rosin dust during a single song. There is familiarity here. The proximity of their bodies, their ability to keep such perfect time with each other suggests a lengthy relationship as a band. Their sound is old, perfect bluegrass. Their twangy music sounds lonesome and slightly apathetic. They sing of hardscrabble lives in the Rocky Mountains and in Appalachia, and I think of the geographic distance separating New Orleans from these mountainous locations. This music is hundreds of miles from its homeland, and yet, it is just as at home on the streets of New Orleans as any other music found here.

### **Race on the Streets**

Christopher Johnson, a jazz musician who plays saxophone and clarinet, explained how a musician new to playing on the street becomes acquainted with this tradition. “The music scene itself is pretty . . . they’re good people, and they are welcoming to outsiders coming in to play. At least, initially.” He says, “There is like a code with bands. Usually a band will let you sit in with them, but there’s, like, a protocol. If somebody is sitting in with the band and they know what they’re doing, they’ll ask and when they’re invited up they’ll play a song. Then they’ll look at the captain or the singer and kinda halfway get up and be like, ‘Do you want me to play another song?’ and they’ll either be like, ‘Yeah, play another song,’ or, ‘Peace out.’ And then you play a couple of songs and get out of their way. I mean, sometimes people will sit there the whole set if you let them and sometimes we don’t mind ‘cause they’re really good. Generally, you sit in a couple of songs and then get out of the way and maybe talk to them after. People are pretty open to that. That’s pretty much a tradition with bands here. And it’s a good way to get noticed right away. Most people with any sense here, most of the musicians with any sense here that I’ve met,



realize that being good in New Orleans is a lot different than being great in New Orleans. ‘Cause people that are great from all over come here, like New York and some other places. And when they get here they are pretty good, but they’re not great yet. It’s a big difference. Most of the musicians are relatively humble, even the great ones.”

The nuanced differences between what makes a musician good versus what makes a musician great in the Crescent City fascinate me. Christopher graciously praises other musicians within his community and he discusses the closeness of the community, noting that the majority of his friends are musicians and dancers that he has met since moving to New Orleans. As he reminisces about his first time playing on the street he smiles bashfully, “I remember the first time being in Jackson Square. It would have been early evening cause the brass bands would have been done. I remember feeling a little nervous and not knowing what I was doing. I was playing some weird music, some non-New Orleans jazz . . . . Then I started sitting in with bands in the street once I felt like I had listened to them enough to have a conversation with them. I started sitting in with them and people started being accepting [of me]. I played with the brass band mostly at first in Jackson Square. That was pretty intense. You don’t see, like, a whole lot of, uh, mixed bands in this city even still. But, uh, I was playing with mostly guys from here, black guys, you know? But it was pretty intense, cause they were really accepting of me. Well, I put together a quartet eventually, after a few months, and I started coming out and busking on Royal Street and I would sing and play some melodies. I was working with the trumpet player to help him learn more melodies. Uh, Trombone Shorty’s saxophone player was my tuba player at the time. And I remember Troy seeing a shot of us on the news playing on the street, and him asking Diesel Dan, my friend, ‘Why are you playing with those white boys?’ And he was like, ‘Cause you don’t pay me enough, Troy.’ And Troy gave him a raise after that, you know?”

At this point in our conversation Christopher starts to consider the problematic aspects of race relations in New Orleans. He becomes uncomfortable, shifting around nervously in his seat. He tells me that this isn't something that he really likes to talk about because it confuses him a bit. He pets his dog's head thoughtfully before beginning to speak again: "It's a really tragically beautiful city. There's so much that is really beautiful and there's so much that's really dark and not talked about too. And I think, like, race relations is one of those that people don't really understand and they just want to ignore it and pretend like it's not there. But there are weird race things. I don't know if it would be xenophobic, but, like, people that are from New Orleans and their attitudes toward carpet baggers or whatever. I think a lot of those people are kind of crazy or have skewed perspectives, you know? It's kinda sad. It limits them and the world around them. And the ones who have figured it out and realize it's like a brave new world don't really even want to acknowledge those things," he pauses, "I was told in Jackson Square by one saxophone player, who just happened to be playing alto saxophone too, alto player, works at Preservation Hall and is actually in the exhibit over there, an older guy, and he pretty much told me when he showed up that he didn't like playing with other saxophone players, especially alto players, and that I needed to go over there and play with the white kids on Royal Street. And I mean, I had to bite my tongue. He, uh, was a real ass though and I was really pissed. The singer, Sarah Quintana, happened to be out in the Square that day. She gave me my first gig in town when I moved here. She saw that and at a gig a couple days later she was like, 'I need another horn player anyway. Just come play with me.' That was a weird moment to have that thrown in my face, you know. I mean, I can't control what I look like."

Christopher pets his dog some more in silence. We talk a bit about the layout of the French Quarter and where musicians prefer to play before he tells me that Royal Street is white

and Jackson Square is not white, but he's "not entirely sure why that is. 'Cause all the people who are playing don't feel like that. Somehow or other that's the way that is. Brass bands in front of the Cabildo are almost entirely black guys, Doreen's band behind them in front of Rouse's almost all black guys except this guitar player, Paul, and all the other bands are pretty much white kids."

He frowns and hurriedly moves the conversation in a different direction, talking about his idols in the community and how lucky he has been to be able to make a living doing what he loves in New Orleans.

### **The Serendipitous Meeting**

Christopher Johnson ends our interview by walking me to Frenchman Street and introducing me to clarinetist Michael Magro, a transient street musician who splits his time between Philadelphia and New Orleans. Christopher mentioned Michael several times during our interview, but it is a matter of pure luck that Michael appears on Frenchman Street at just the same moment as Christopher and me. Michael agrees to be interviewed by me, and so, on a hot day in June, we stand together talking outside of an art gallery on Royal Street. Michael is originally from Philadelphia, though in 1998 he was living in Providence, Rhode Island, working as a nude model at the School of Graphic Design. It was there that he began playing the clarinet. Applying the techniques practiced by the artists at the school to improve their talents to his own music practice, Michael saw his abilities flourish. Even now he makes connections between his music and lessons he learned about art and anatomy.

After a three-day visit to New Orleans in 2005, Michael decided to move to the city. He lived in the Crescent City for five months in 2005, working as a graphic novelist during that time. Michael left for Philadelphia as Hurricane Katrina approached the gulf coast. Eventually,

though, he found his way back to New Orleans where he began playing the clarinet on the street with other musicians. Michael said, “I don’t play with any one group. I sit in with lots of groups. I like to keep a rotation of who I play with to keep the music from getting stale.” He lists off the names of musicians whose company he keeps in rapid succession.

He talks at great length about his understanding of music as more than an art form. Michael argues, “Music is a form of communication where you are sharing. There’s listening and talking like a conversation. You do one thing and if the other musicians are listening they answer back in a certain way. It keeps things fresh in that way because you’re having a conversation that is new each time.” He acknowledges that everything the musicians do is built off of the people who came before them, but he is steadfast in his belief that musicians should not copy each other. “It’s one thing to let your style be influenced by another musician,” he says, “but it’s another thing entirely to copy a musician. It’s better to make something new out of something old, rather than just copying the old thing.” For this reason, Michael dislikes showmen. He tells me, “Showmen don’t listen to other musicians. They just play really loudly. Either you go along with what they are doing or you don’t play with them. I personally don’t want to play with them. Besides, showmen usually just care about the money. The journey of the music, of playing music, should be more important than making money. Too many people play to make money and that’s not what it’s supposed to be about.”

Our conversation veers off on a tangent about *The Twilight Zone* television show before returning to the topic of New Orleans. Michael frowns as he watches a passerby drop a plastic cup into the street. He talks about tourism in New Orleans and what he calls a culture of excess. “I don’t like this attitude of excess. People just litter, throw things away, and people just buy things that they don’t need or want, just to show they own something. It’s like the city just sells

its soul for a dollar. And people will buy anything for a dollar. It's sad, but sometimes I think New Orleans is predicated on this idea of tourism where everything has a price, so there's this element of exploitation, or whatever, that exists here."

Michael and I go on talking for another hour before I leave thinking that this will likely be our final conversation. However, in the truly serendipitous fashion that surrounds my interactions with Michael, I find myself seated next to him on a flight from New Orleans to Trenton, New Jersey, a year and a month later. We share some wine and small talk on our flight and bid each other farewell in New Jersey. Again, I think this will be my last interaction with him. Another year passes and I receive a text message from him letting me know that he is back in New Orleans for the season to play music. I wonder if our paths will cross again in the future.

#### **From Tourist to Tourist Attraction: A Fieldnote**

"So, um, are there different types of tourists, then?" I asked Will.

He is irritated that I am asking him such an asinine question. "'Course there are," he scowls, "They aren't all cookie-cutter cutouts of each other."

"Oh, no. I know that. I'm sorry. I guess I didn't ask what I meant to ask. I, um, I guess what I was trying to ask is what types of tourists you see here. Like, um, how would you classify them?" I hastily correct myself.

Will's expression softens as he lights a Marlboro Red and takes a long drag on it. Even when he is not scowling, the lines on his face are deep, which gives him a wizened appearance. Perhaps he has reminded himself that I am still young, and it is likely my youthfulness that has led me to ask such ignorant questions. Perhaps he likes that I am quick to amend my statements and explain what I really meant to ask. I am not sure.

"Well, you already know I was a tourist. I already told you that, right?" he smiles.

I nod my head, "Yeah, you mentioned it a few minutes ago."

"Right, so, uh, I ain't gonna look at tourists the way some of them musicians who were born here might. You know, 'cause well, if I wasn't a tourist, I mighta never ended up here. I mean, uh, I mean ... Well, I mean, I might not've been born here, but I've spent most of my life here, which makes me a local, you know."

"So you look at the tourists differently than the other musicians do?"

His face twists back into a scowl, "Well, now, I didn't say that. I don't really want to speak for them [the other musicians]."

"No, I understand that completely. You're just speaking for you."

There is an awkward, pregnant pause. Will puffs on his cigarette and looks at the ground as I begin to wonder if this interview is over. Finally, he looks back up at me, his eyes hidden in the shadow of the brim of his cowboy hat.

"So, what I was saying is that I get it. I understand the tourists, you know. Maybe they're just passing through enjoying themselves and then they discover the thing they love here and they never leave. I mean, that's, uh, that's what happened to me. I was just passing through when I played on them benches up there in the Square and I never left."

"Do you think that happens often? People just passing through and then staying?" I ask.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"So when you play, do you play for them? Or are you playing for you?"

Will gives me a sidelong glance before he says, "I play because I love it [to play]," then he takes another long drag on his cigarette, "I mean, I wouldn't play if I, uh, didn't love it. Guess that means that I do it for me. But, well, you know, I gotta pay my bills too, so some days I do it for them [the tourists], too."

“But how do your performances change when they are for the tourists rather than for you?” I ask him. My question unwittingly turns our conversation into an interview, which creates a power structure that Will does not appreciate.

“No, you don’t get it. Child, I always perform for me. Just sometimes for them, too,” he snaps, asserting his authority and reminding me that he does not like interviews without saying as much.

I immediately understand my misstep and understand that he wants an apology. “Right, I’m sorry,” I tell him, “I meant when you’re performing for them and you at the same time. How does your performance change?”

“Well, uh, well I try to play to my audience. You know, if it’s a Sunday I might play more country songs with God in ’em, ’cause the church’s [St. Louis Cathedral] just over there and people like to be religious on Sundays. I make more money that way sometimes. Like when I played that Garth Brooks song earlier today. Them people leaving the church stopped to listen and some of ’em gave me money.”

“So the tourists influence the type of music you play? Like the content of the songs? Like if it’s got God in it?”

“Sometimes, but not always. I mean, I, uh, don’t always play songs with God in ’em on Sundays. Just sometimes,” Will says as he fidgets with his cigarette, which is nearly all gone.

“Oh, okay. But if you’re playing for the tourists you might be more inclined to play songs with God in them?”

Will flicks his cigarette to the ground, “Not always. Mostly, well, only on Sundays.”

“But you also said you might play country songs, but most of your songs are country songs, right?” I inquire, pressing him for a more in-depth answer than the ones that he seems willing to provide.

Will looks at his feet for a second before he answers me without looking up. “Well, I mean, I play songs from the Beatles and stuff, but I make them my own. So, I guess even if the songs aren’t all country songs, they still, uh, they still sound country when I do them.”

“So you’d play country songs with or without the tourists?”

“Sure,” he scowls, clearly annoyed with me.

The sun is beating down on us, and we are both sweating. I wipe the sweat off of my forehead before I ask, “So do the tourists really influence you, then? Do they really affect your performances?”

In an exasperated voice, Will answers, “I dunno. Guess, I never really thought about it the way you’re talking about it.”

“Well, that seems normal,” I say flatly. My own questions seem silly to me now, “I mean, why would you think about this stuff?”

Will indulges me, “I guess, well, uh, I guess they do [affect the performances].”

“How so?” I ask cautiously.

“Well, I mean, I need them to pay me so I can pay my bills. Need to entertain them otherwise they won’t give me money. So, I mean, well, uh, I mean, financially they affect me.”

“So would you say that you have a producer-consumer relationship with tourists?” I question him, knowing instantly that I have just switched back into academic speak and that Will will not take kindly to this.



“I dunno. I guess so. Maybe it’s, uh, more complicated than that. But why do you even care about that stuff?” he snaps as he pulls his hat down further over his forehead, shielding his face in the shadows it casts.

### **Musing about Musicking in New Orleans**

The street musicians of New Orleans maintain an interesting relationship to the act of musicking and to music tourism. While music tourists and street musicians appear to have a symbiotic relationship, the relationship is riddled with complexity. The power structure built into the musician-tourist relationship is complex enough on its own. However, when coupled with the concept of the act of musicking as a vehicle for coming to know our experiential world, our relationships, ourselves, and our identities, the musician-tourist relationship becomes even more layered. Finally, when compounded with the concept of the act of musical performance as a representation of identity on the part of the musician, the complexity of this musician-tourist relationship peaks. In catering to music tourists, musical performances do not always reflect the identities of the street musicians, but can instead reflect the musical tastes, and, to some degree, the identities of the music tourists. However, as Small notes “the relationships between the participants will be different with each performance, with each different set of participants, each different setting, each different set of expectations that the participants may have of the performance” (139). Each musical performance is different as a result of the ephemeral nature of performance. Moreover, due to the fact that each act of musicking can include a different set of participants than the act of musicking that directly preceded it, the identities found within each act of musicking and, by extension, each musical performance will be different. Acknowledging the variations in each performance accounts for differences in the navigation of identities through the act of musicking, as well as accounting for the ways in which identities can be

changed through the act of musicking. “Who we are is how we relate, and the relationships articulated by a musical performance are not so much those that actually exist as they are the relationships that those taking part desire to exist” (134). In fact, none of the performances, relationships, or identities discussed in this study are static.

For the vast majority of street musicians with whom I spoke, their musical performances, while necessary to earn a profitable income, are about more than simply earning a paycheck. These musical performances are a representation of the personal identities of the musicians and a representation of the collective identity of New Orleans street musicians. Further, these musical performances create an atmosphere that encourages the navigation of identity among music tourists through the act of musicking and the experience of *communitas*. While music tourism can be problematic at times, the unique relationship that has been forged between street musicians in New Orleans and music tourists highlights the sustainability of musical performances in the city for years to come.

In addition to considering the relationships between musicians and tourists, one must note the varied relationships between performers within this community. While most of my informants mentioned that the community is welcoming to new members and very inclusive, musicians have also mentioned areas of the French Quarter that are generally segregated by race. Musicians have also noted much less visible segregation within their community in terms of genre of music (e.g., jazz, brass band, etc.), styles of music (e.g., innovative versus traditional), types of performers (e.g., showmen versus musicians), and reasons for performing on the street in New Orleans (e.g., for the love of the music versus to turn a profit). These dissections of the community, regardless of how major or minor they may be, make up an important element in the social strata of the community of New Orleans street musicians, and translate into the identities

that are presented to the public through their musical performances. As a result, these dissections bear consideration and discussion within a study of the culture of New Orleans street musicians and their performances. After all, the identity of the performers are bound up in their relationships with the music they are playing, in their relationships with the Crescent City, and in their relationships with those around them who are also actively engaged in the act of musicking.

### **Meta-Methodological Analysis**

Several tenets of performative writing operate within and enhance this reflexive ethnography. Subjective writing, citational writing, and nervous writing exist within this chapter. Evocative writing, metonymic writing, and consequential writing also exist within this ethnographic study, however, the latter types of writing and the work that they do is much more subtle than the former. For the purpose of this analysis, I consider some of the subjective writing, citational writing, and consequential writing within this reflexive ethnography and the ways they operate.

Three sections of this reflexive ethnography that contain a large amount of subjective writing: the opening text of this chapter, “Ground Zero,” and “Grit ‘N’ Gravel.” While the opening text of this chapter certainly works to evoke the performance about which it was written, it also gives consideration to the relation between my subjects and me. I acknowledge my position as a researcher when I write, “I happily scribble into my journal fieldnotes about the various performances at work.” I consider the way the musician “moves past me, not recognizing me as a tourist, nor even a local who might be interested in his ensemble and their music.” And I note that I am eavesdropping on these musicians: “they . . . sit down only five feet away from me. They begin conversing, and as they talk, I record their conversation in my journal.” This section in particular pays great attention to the relationship between me and my subjects, noting

that my subjects are unaware that they are subjects in this moment, questioning my own role as a researcher and the ethics of my eavesdropping.

“Ground Zero” also concerns itself with the relationship between my subjects and me. I consider a musician who reminds me of an ex-boyfriend and I debate whether it is he, or Peter Bennett, who act as my ground zero point. My ground zero point is particularly important in terms of reflexivity, because it is the moment in which the writer is interpellated by the subject (Ulmer 198). In other words, at the ground zero point, I become the subject of my subject, I become a subject-self, and it is precisely this becoming of subject, and this potential subject-subject relationship between myself and Peter Bennett in “Ground Zero.”

Within “Grit ‘N’ Gravel,” I oscillate between a telling of a performance and my experience of the performance. Arguably, with regard to the act of musicking, the performance and my experience of it are bound up together, are inseparable. However, moments exist where my experience gives consideration to the relationship between the musician and me, while also placing emphasis on the friction between myself-as-researcher and myself-as-music-tourist. I write:

My ears breathed her in  
The grit and gravel of her voice  
Was more intoxicating

Than the

B  
O  
O  
Z  
E

on my lips

There is closeness here; not just in physical proximity, but for me there is also a closeness to the past. Her performance recalls memories, histories, and ghosts that knit the present to the past.

This performance also becomes personal for me, a fact I allude to by referencing my

internalization of her music. Finally, in noting booze on my lips, I suggest that my role in this observation is one of music tourist, however, a friction exists when considering that I have decided to write about this musical performance as a researcher.

This reflexive ethnography finds citational writing at the heart of the sections titled, “Small Talk Big Meaning: A Fieldnote,” and “From Tourist to Tourist Attraction: A Fieldnote.” Pollock notes that citational writing is “the site of (re)turn” (93). In these sections, I return to fieldnotes about an encounter that I had with a musician named Will. Not only do I quote Will, but I also pay special attention to Will’s (re)turn to the past. He talks about when he first started playing music on the streets of New Orleans “with a whole bunch of hippies . . . a long, long time ago . . . Back then you didn’t need no amplification system to play to 80 people.” He regularly compares the past with the present. He talks about how he came to New Orleans when he says, “if I wasn’t a tourist, I mighta never ended up here,” this, again, is a (re)turn in which he acknowledges that while he was not born in New Orleans, he considers himself a local. He melds the past and the present with each other as he tells me his stories. Moreover, the music that he plays is citational as well. He mentions playing songs by Garth Brooks and the Beatles, and while I include no lyrics here, it does not make his performances any less citational.

Finally, this reflexive ethnography makes ample use of performative writing that is nervous. Not only is the structure of this reflexive ethnography non-linear, interrupted, and interrupting, but I include sections within this study that exhibit these same traits. Particularly worth noting are the sections, “Percussive Performance,” “Grit ‘N’ Gravel,” and “Displaced Bluegrass Melodies.” Nervous writing permeates these sections in an effort to cooperate with the overarching structure of this reflexive ethnography.

“Percussive Performance” is comprised of a poetic text meant to evoke a performance given by a group of percussionists on Royal Street. The rhythms of this poem interrupt each other with the first two lines of each stanza being longer, while the second two lines are comprised of single words with alliteration occurring in the third and fourth lines of every stanza. While this poem describes the performance, it does so in a non-linear structure. Finally, the simplicity of the telling of the performance is interrupted by the line, “Ways of Being in the World,” which alludes to ontological considerations of the performance, without elaborating on such considerations. This single line disrupts the rest of the poetic text in a major way.

Another example of nervous writing can be found in “Grit ‘N’ Gravel.” The typographical play on the page is indicative of the nervousness of this piece of writing, the layout on the page interrupting the clean lines expected of more traditionally academic texts. The writing moving from a description of the performance and to the intoxication of the researcher before describing the sound of the performer’s singing. These interruptions, while minor, do further work to disrupt the text. The poetic text is then disrupted by a prosaic text, which offers an evaluation of the performance by another musician. While the poem describes the performance in a positive light, the musician providing his opinions of the performance suggests that the singer is too flashy, which adds yet another layer of disruption to the text, by offering two opposite opinions on the performance.

Finally, nervous writing can be found in “Displaced Bluegrass Melodies.” This section opens with a quotation of the sound made by a washboard being played, but the following line does not explain the sound quote preceding it, nor does it offer any clues as to what the initial quotation means. This poetic text jumps from evoking the performance of one band member to evoking the performance of the next band member without transition. It does not create full

descriptions, or mention beginnings, middles, or ends. It is non-linear, and it contains no specific sequence, except that each stanza is about only one of the band members, with the final stanza being about the band as a whole. Moreover, this poetic text lacks transitions between thoughts, descriptions, and quotations, bouncing between sensory descriptions of sight and sound, quotations of lyrics and sounds, and concerns about the displacement of bluegrass music from the location of its birth, Appalachia, and its presentation on the streets of New Orleans.

Ultimately, performative writing is a significant part of this reflexive ethnography. Subjective writing, citational writing, and nervous writing operate and cooperate with/in the foundation of this reflexive ethnographic study. Performative writing operates in important ways, adding artistry and reflexivity to this text.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

### **A Review of the Basic Information**

This study is two-fold. The overarching aim of this study is to approach the question, “How do we write about music?” from a fresh angle. This question arises from Roland Barthes’s assertions that music cannot be translated into language. While Barthes argues that it is better “to change the musical object itself” (180-181), I suggest that we should instead allow the musical object to dictate the form with which we write about it. Using Michael Bowman’s argument, “performing *difference* must carry with it a willingness to perform *differently*” (14), I argue that we must consider writing differently when we are writing about music. We must allow the music to permeate the language thoroughly. We must use language in such a way that it articulates the musicality of the music and musical performances about which we are writing. We must create a language that evokes elements of the music such as rhythm, tone, pitch, etc. In order to be successful in this venture, this study acknowledges that the language must become an extension of the music or of the musical performance.

In order to accomplish this difficult task, I argue that we should use performative writing when we write about musical performances and music. Performative writing, as noted by Pollock, is: (1) evocative; (2) metonymic; (3) subjective; (4) nervous; (5) citational; and (6) consequential (80-94). These qualities aid the writer in evoking the music about which they are writing. Additionally, because performative writing is not as rigidly formulaic as most other types of academic writing, the subject of performative writing often dictates the form of composition. Performative writing also provides a place to investigate and explore the emotions found within music and musical performances. It offers a method of writing that is fluid and adaptable, a place where the music can be evoked by the writing, a way of writing about the



relationships that exist between the music, the performer, and those who are engaged in the act of musicking.

In order to understand the importance of using performative writing for writing about music, this study undertakes a sub-study, wherein I examine the history of street musicians in New Orleans and the present-day culture of street musicians in New Orleans through the use of genealogy and reflexive ethnography. My work is aided by Small's notion of musicking: "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance ... or by dancing" (9). In physically going to the French Quarter in New Orleans as an observer, or a listener, I was actively engaged in the act of musicking with the street musicians I was observing. And given Small's suggestion that, "if we think of music primarily as action rather than as thing and about the action as concerned with relationships, then we see that whatever meaning a musical work has lies in the relationships that are brought into existence when the piece is performed" (138), the significance of relationships comes to the forefront of the act of musicking. Small suggests that the act of musicking "can be thought of as a process of storytelling in which we tell ourselves a story about our relationships" (139). As a result of this link between the act of musicking and storytelling, I am able to tie Small's concept of musicking to Bruner's suggestion that ethnography is "a genre of storytelling" (139). Ultimately, I concern myself with the narratives of the street musicians, both the historical narratives and the present narratives. I consider their discontinuities, their hegemonic structures, and their fiction. Bruner notes that "narratives are not only structures of meaning but structures of power as well" (144) and that the ethnographer is "a material body through whom a narrative structure unfolds" (150). In this way,

I understand myself to be intrinsically bound up in the research that I am undertaking both through the act of musicking and through the act of conducting ethnographic research.

For the genealogical approach to the history of New Orleans street musicians, I turn to the work of Joseph Roach who notes that

genealogies of performance document – and suspect – the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations . . . . Genealogies of performance also attend to “counter-memories,” or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences. (25-26)

My genealogy operates in much the same way, documenting the history of street musicians and their music in New Orleans. Both Roach in his approach to genealogy and Bruner in his approach to ethnography give credence to Foucault’s notions of power and strata where history and narratives are concerned. Bruner writes, “From the perspective of the present we construct a continuous story, stressing the continuity of resistance, whereas actually there was a marked discontinuity from the diminution of one narrative to the rise of another” (143). Meanwhile,

Roach notes:

Genealogies of performance take from [Foucault] . . . the assurance that discontinuities rudely interrupt the succession of surrogates, who are themselves the scions of a dubious bloodline that leads the genealogist back to . . . “the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms . . . . What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 142). (25)

Both Bruner and Roach consider the discontinuities of the narratives that are presented as histories and as characterizations of the present cultures using Foucault’s ideas. Both Bruner and Roach see these narratives engaged in the power struggle that Foucault considers when he writes, “Genealogy . . . seeks to reestablish the various systems of subjection: not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations” (148). The work of Foucault, Roach, and

Bruner guides my genealogy and reflexive ethnographic study of New Orleans street musicians. Further, in utilizing performative writing within this study, I am able to consider the ways in which the musical performances I am studying are evoked via written language.

### **Past, Present, and Future of New Orleans Street Musicians**

Chapter Three of this study, the genealogical approach to the history of New Orleans street musicians, makes clear that the history provided is incomplete, going so far as to call attention to its incompleteness. The chapter provides glimpses into the lives of street musicians today as well as those who performed in the past. It offers a non-linear version of history that constantly disrupts itself. Because I understand myself as thoroughly entangled in this research process, many of the narratives provided include samples of my own experiences, my own biases, and my own relationships with these musicians.

This genealogy promotes the knowledge that music has been occurring in the streets of New Orleans for centuries, though the music has not always been a form of entertainment. I offer documentation of a trumpeter summoning New Orleans citizens to hear the town crier deliver religious news on July 17, 1763. In 1787, a military parade entertained Choctaw and Chickasaw chiefs. Much documentation exists of street vendors performing ditties in the street to sell their wares in the 1800s. Around that same time, singing and dancing among slaves happened in Congo Square on Sundays as well. Military bands and funeral parades, the earliest predecessor of modern jazz funerals, became popular in the early 1800s, while spasm bands gained traction in the late 1800s. Jazz music found its way to the streets, bars, and brothels in the 1890s. Then in the 1920s, Buglin' Sam The Waffle Man played his bugle in the streets to let people know that he was nearby making waffles. And by the 1950s and 1960s, the modern iteration of New Orleans street musicians had arrived.

In addition to providing a fragmented history of the street musicians in New Orleans, this genealogy also gives consideration to the ways water works both for and against these musicians, and the city in general. While certain segments of this genealogy offer up accounts of the Mississippi River as a source of life, as a feature integral to transportation, immigration, agriculture, tourism, and trade in New Orleans, it also provides narratives about the Flood of 1927, the Flood of 2011, and Hurricane Katrina. The Mississippi River sustains life in modern New Orleans; however, it has also proven to be the harbinger of death and destruction in recent history. To further integrate the narratives of the street musicians with the accounts of water, this genealogy gives special attention to the musician Peter Bennett, who plays the glass harmonica. I also call attention to more subtle features of water such as the emptying of a spit valve of a trumpet, the perspiration of musicians while laboring under the hot sun, and the lyrics of Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie's song, "When The Levee Breaks."

Chapter Four's reflexive ethnographic research continues the stylistic patterns set forth in Chapter Three, including fragmented, disrupted, and disrupting narratives about street musicians, inclusion of my personal experiences, and performative writing. However, rather than concerning itself with the history of New Orleans street musicians, this chapter focuses on the present culture of street musicians who perform in the French Quarter.<sup>5</sup> In particular, this segment of my study takes into consideration the relationships between street musicians and tourists, especially in light of Small's suggestion that musicking involves the listener to the same degree that it involves the performer of the music within the performance. During interviews with street musicians, I was provided information about different types of musicians, about

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps I should distinguish between New Orleans street musicians and musicians who perform on the streets of New Orleans. According to an informant, a difference exists. While "New Orleans street musicians" enjoy an established, long-time residency in the city of New Orleans, transient musicians and musicians new to the city are neither citizens, nor should they be considered "New Orleans street musicians." Instead, my informant categorizes these musicians as performers who play music on the streets of New Orleans. I find the distinction difficult to parse.

certain tensions in the community of street musicians (racial tensions, financial tensions, and musical tensions), and about changes that the community has seen since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. After sorting through the data gleaned from these interviews, I found narratives, histories, and tensions that were common to several musicians. These narratives received the most space within the pages of this study. Through informal observations, I learned about some of the interpersonal dynamics that exist within groups of musicians who play together on the street. A few of these dynamics can be understood through the prose narratives provided about the specific events being observed and considered. Finally, through the act of musicking, I was able to explore my relationships to the music, the street musicians, and New Orleans. In this way, I was both an observer of and an active participant in the musical performances about which I have written.

Ultimately, through the use of a reflexive ethnographic approach, I describe the community of street musicians in New Orleans as close knit, though diverse in terms of age, race, musical skill, and genre preference. These musicians carry a tremendous amount of respect for one another and speak with a great amount of diplomacy and caution when conversations move away from personal experiences to include other members of the community. They are aware of their lengthy history within the city and pay respect to the musicians who came before them. In addition to acknowledging the musical traditions of their past, these musicians maintain a complex relationship with the tourists who permeate their city. Most of all, though, the vast majority of these musicians consider themselves lucky to be able to make a living following their passion for music.

Considering the status given to street musicians in New Orleans as a tourist draw, and their lengthy history as a part of the vibrant culture in the city, it seems likely that the tradition of

musicians playing music on the streets of the French Quarter will continue well into the future. The fact of the matter is that for many tourists, the French Quarter functions as a metonym for the whole of New Orleans. This is due in part to the marketing of the French Quarter to tourists as New Orleans, which elevates the visibility of the French Quarter over other areas in the city. Moreover, the French Quarter functions as a microcosm of the larger culture of New Orleans. Given the visibility of the French Quarter, the way that street musicians and their music is easily recognizable to locals and tourists alike, and the marketing of the culture of New Orleans to tourists, one can hardly separate the street musicians out of the booming tourist trade in New Orleans, and specifically within the French Quarter.

### **Performative Writing as a Methodology for Writing About Music**

Throughout, I weaved performative writing in and out of interviews and more academically rigid sections of this study. Within Chapter Three, a significant amount of performative writing exists, beginning with the first section “O Memory,” which provides a personal narrative regarding my first encounter with a street musician in 2009. It occurs again in the second section of “O Memory,” and again in “Musical Interlude I,” which weaves a prose narrative with the lyrics of “The Rising Sun Blues” to evoke a performance I witnessed, while simultaneously addressing the history of a song tied to New Orleans culture. Rather than accounting for the history of “The Rising Sun Blues” in a purely academic fashion, this section functions as a form of storytelling that evokes the musicality of the song. As noted in Chapter Two, the sections titled, “Peter Bennett I,” “Peter Bennett II,” and “Ain’t Nothin’ Free,” freely employ the use of performative writing in order to privilege the senses of sight and touch, while evoking the music he played through poetry. Another section in the genealogy, “In/Complete,” plays with metonym, citation, and it is evocative and nervous. Several voices exist within this

poem, which considers jazz music in the French Quarter, the loss of Storyville, a trumpet player, a second line parade, the homeless population and beggars in New Orleans, tourism, the prostitution that used to exist in Storyville, the statue performer, a jazz funeral, and presence within its 28 lines. The final section in Chapter Three, “Coda,” is unabashedly performative in nature. The performance script provides a fictionalized account of an interview between John Burnett and Peter Bennett from the NPR *All Things Considered* series from 2003. I took the interview published by NPR, rewrote it as a performance script, injected myself into the piece as the interviewer, while turning John Burnett into a singing street musician. This particular section calls attention to the fictionalized narratives that comprise histories, and the ease at which a narrative can be fictionalized either intentionally or unintentionally. Additionally, this section takes into consideration the representational violence about which Foucault writes, and which exists in all genealogies. In rewriting the NPR interview in such a way that calls attention to its fictionalization and privileging of the fictional narrative over the account provided by NPR, I am emphasizing the violence done to this interview, and the subversion of the original account through the creation of the fictionalized account.

Performative writing continues to be used within Chapter Four. The section titled, “Percussive Performance,” is a poetic account of a percussion performance I observed on Royal Street in July 2012. The rhythm of this piece is evocative of the rhythm in the performance. This poem relies on metonymy in order to depict the performance about which it was written.

“Dancing the Charleston,” is also an example of performative writing being used to attend to a musical performance. This section takes the form of a prose narrative, while the section titled, “Grit ‘N’ Gravel,” uses both poetry and prose to address a specific performance.

Chapter Four is more conservative with its use of performative writing than Chapter Three; however, the performative writing in both chapters does a tremendous amount of work to evoke the music about which it is written. While segments of this study read as academic in nature, and segments contain personal narratives and fieldnotes, the sections that contain examples of performative writing are the most versatile. At its most basic level, performative writing, an embodied practice, allows me to evoke and embody through language ephemeral musical performances. While more rigid, formulaic styles of writing would diminish the music to an adjective, as noted by Barthes, performative writing allows the art and the music to breathe and have life. Performative writing allows the music to embed itself in the language. Performative writing evokes the music in ways that academic writing does not.

### **Conclusion**

Using performative writing to attend to the musical performances of the street musicians in New Orleans provides this study with language that does not destroy music. In noting music's resistance to translation into language, I hoped to find a way to allow language to become an extension of the music, to allow it to be evocative of the music and the emotions that exist within the music. In order to do this, I used performative writing when writing about musical performances of the street musicians in New Orleans. The sections of this study containing performative writing accounts of the performances of New Orleans street musicians are versatile, and deliver their information with an attention to artistry that allows the music to be evoked through the writing. The writing in these sections, guided by the music about which these sections are written, becomes extensions of the music of the New Orleans street musicians. In this way, these sections of performative writing also function as a form of storytelling, serve as a form of ekphrasis, provide longevity to an ephemeral performance through evocation, create and



acknowledge connections between the histories of New Orleans street musicians, and consider the relationships of this listener to the musicians and the music they are playing in New Orleans.

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## APPENDIX: IRB APPROVAL

### Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

- Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
  - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
  - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
  - (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
    - \*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
  - (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
  - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php>)
  - (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)



Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair  
131 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.6792  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu)  
[lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

1) Principal Investigator:  Rank:   
 Dept:  Ph:  E-mail:

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

IRB# _____	LSU Proposal # _____
<input type="radio"/>	Complete Application
<input type="radio"/>	Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title:

4) Proposal? (yes or no)  If Yes, LSU Proposal Number   
 Also, if YES, either  This application **completely** matches the scope of work in the grant  
 OR  More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students)   
 \*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature  Date  (no per signatures)

**\*\* I certify my responses are accurate and complete.** If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted  Not Exempted  Category/Paragraph \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewer  Signature  Date

## VITA

Savannah Cadi Rose Ganster, originally from Mohnton, Pennsylvania, completed her undergraduate education at Pennsylvania State University in 2010. She earned a bachelor's degree in Professional Writing and a bachelor's degree in Communication Arts and Sciences with a minor in Global Studies. In 2012, she obtained her master's degree in Communication Studies from Louisiana State University. She received the Spring 2015 Dissertation Year Fellowship at Louisiana State University and she expects to receive her Doctor of Philosophy in Communication Studies with a minor in Creative Writing in May 2015.