Power Lines: New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Club Second Lines
Schoux Casey, Christina

Published in:
Proceedings of the IRGIC Seminar 2016: Lines

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Power Lines: New Orleans Social Aid & Pleasure Club Second Lines
Christina Schoux Casey

The anthropologist Tim Ingold contends that all cultures exist through movement along lines and paths that create communities; that all life is lived in dynamic linearity, rather than fixedly in static locations. Using this idea of the universality of linearity, Ingold suggests that colonialism is the forced imposition of one cultural line over another, proceeding “first by converting paths along which life is lived into boundaries in which it is contained, and then by joining up these now enclosed communities, each confined to one spot, into vertically integrated assemblies” (Ingold 2007: 2-3). The colonial project deforms local cultural pathways and self-understandings into spatial, political, and even ontological formations that conform to the needs and desires of the colonizer (Maldonado-Torres 2007). In this chapter, I use Ingold’s concept of the cultural line, together with an account of local resistance to it, to explore an African diasporic line tradition in New Orleans, Louisiana—the second line parades held by Social Aid & Pleasure (SAP) clubs. New Orleans SAP second lines de-colonize hegemonic linear impositions and assert epistemologies that defeat colonial lines which seek to govern geographic and social divisions. They do this by disrupting the imposition of cultural lines that define neighborhoods as wealthy or poor, Black or White, and events and spaces as sacred or profane, private or public, individual or collective. To illustrate this, I outline a brief history of second lines, consider how they resist oppression by inscribing new cultural lines that open colonially enclosed spaces, and finally address the relationship between second lines and commodification.

History and Contemporary Practice
In New Orleans, people of African descent have always been colonized by dominant European cultures, from French and Spanish colonial rule in the Eighteenth century to White American control since 1803. Prior to the arrival of the French in 1718, New Orleans had been used as a Native American trading post due to its central location at the mouth of the Mississippi River delta. During the colonial period, French settlers enslaved
Native Americans and claimed land for themselves, changing the Native cultural pathways that had existed prior to colonization. The French also brought enslaved Africans to New Orleans, so that Creole, and later African American, culture, did not develop independently but were created under and against the control of the colonists.1

In the 1740s, under French rule, slaves and free people of color, including Creoles, were permitted to congregate just outside the old city, what is now the French Quarter neighborhood, at the Place des Negres (Johnson 1991). There were weekly musical processions to and from the Place, and drum performances in the square every Sunday. The African Americanist Richard Brent Turner notes that the Place was “the only public space in the antebellum United States where African drumming and dancing was performed” (Turner 2014: 70). After the French sold the colony as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, African American public activities were increasingly restricted, although “renegade” dances and parades were never successfully eradicated (Smith 1994: 46-47). Towards the end of the Eighteenth century, people of color, both free and enslaved, began forming mutual aid societies to help pay for medical care, funerals, and other expenses. Second line parades grew out of funeral processions paid for by these societies, which included bands accompanying mourners to and from the cemetery.

Second lines began as part of both funerary and pre-Lenten Carnival culture. For funerals, mourners and a band would accompany the casket to the grave, playing solemn hymns and other sacred music. After the burial, when the soul of the dead had been ‘cut loose’ and gone to heaven, the band would play lively tunes to celebrate the life and memory of the deceased. The mourners and band formed the first line, called the main line, and bystanders who joined the funeral, dancing behind or alongside the first line, were called the second line (Russell & Smith 1939; Turner 2014).

Creoles and African Americans were often barred by both law and business practice from holding bank accounts or buying life insurance, and their economic security was always tenuous. Large expenditures, like funerals and health care costs, were impossible for many Creoles and African Americans to afford. To answer this, mutual aid societies, called Social Aid & Pleasure (SAP) clubs, were formed in New Orleans (as well as elsewhere in the U.S.), as collectives to which members paid dues and fund-raised for throughout the year with dances, raffles, and other activities. These social clubs funded
many funerals, so that fellow club members of the deceased would attend the funerals as part of the main line. A second line funeral is described in a collection of vignettes of Louisiana life, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, (Saxon, Dreyer, & Tallant 2012 [1945]), supported by the “The Young and True Friends Benevolent Association.”

To the poignant strains of ‘Massa’s in the Cold, Cold Ground,’ attired in black suits, white shirts, black derbies and white gloves, with arm ribbons of black and silver, and led by the gorgeously attired, six-foot, coal-black Grand Marshall, who wore a jet velvet cordon trimmed with silver braid and stars, they marched with solemnity, with dignity, and gusto, their brand new, shiny-black shoes keeping perfect time with the music. […] When the procession was a half a block from the cemetery, enroute home, the band burst into ‘Just Stay a Little While,’ and all the True Friends performed individual and various dances, and the sister, but lately unconscious with grief, was soon trucking with the rest of them. (306-307)

Despite the evident condescension of the passage, this description captures elements that remain present in parade funerals and SAP second lines; elaborate, coordinated, and new clothing, personal ornaments including arm bands, fans, and sashes, and a mix of solemn, serious behavior and lively dancing to music provided by brass bands.

Live band music has always formed a crucial component of second lines, with the style of music played changing over time. When jazz was invented in New Orleans in the early 20th century, its popularity with working-class people of color caused all second lines to be accompanied by jazz. The anthropologist Helen Regis noted in a radio interview that Louis Armstrong “began playing jazz because he wanted to play for second line parades” (Troeh 2006). Because of jazz’s popularity, New Orleans parade funerals became known as *jazz funerals*, and Richard Brent Turner considers all contemporary second lines to be fully rooted in jazz, with second lines constituting “the most distinctive African diasporic performance form in New Orleans jazz” (2014: 69).
Contemporary second lines are held for funerals (for both local residents [Fig. 1] and for beloved celebrities, such as the musicians Prince and Michael Jackson), as well as celebrations for national sports victories, as protests against unpopular state policies (e.g., the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq), and as annual parades celebrating individual SAP clubs. These SAP second lines are held nearly every Sunday between September and May. Commercial second lines, not linked to social clubs, are also held for weddings, industry conventions, and other corporate events.

Commercial parades are touristic, commodified, and often private. For example, a New Orleans destination wedding guide recommends buying a second line in order to “throw a parade your guests will never forget” (Walenter 2015). A wedding planner’s blog describes second lines as being “a time to relax and be free and listen to the music and dance in the streets with your closest friends and fam and you feel kind of like a rock star! If you're having a destination wedding to New Orleans, it's an absolute must have!” (Elizabeth 2015). This rhetoric frames second lines as personal possessions and as experiential productions starring the wedding couple. A tourist wedding second line consists of purchasing a parade permit and the services of a brass band for a short walk around, most often, the French Quarter, in which only the wedding party and their guests participate (Fig. 2). Corporate second lines are similarly held as entertainment for customers or convention attendees, and, like wedding second lines, are private and often do not include vigorous dancing by guests or participation by passersby. These second lines take place within the lines of the wealthy, approved-for-tourist-use areas of New Orleans, including the French Quarter, the Convention Center, and the Central Business
District. Further, while commercial parades hire local bands, they do not involve SAP club members, leading the executive director of a musicians’ organization to note “the tourism industry needed the idea of a place-based culture and the suggestion of authenticity but not the club members themselves, or, for that matter, the neighborhoods they paraded in” (Hirsch 2015). Commercial second lines are thus tourism-oriented, de-contextualized, sanitized simulations.

Figure 2. Wedding second line in the French Quarter. From http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/a-guide-to-wedding-second-lines/Content?oid=2562614.

In contrast, second lines produced by social clubs serve different purposes. First, they are public, advertised prior to every Sunday, and passersby are enthusiastically welcomed to join parades. A second line parade is not successful unless a crowd, the second line, joins the main line. In fact, a social club dancing down the street with a band is just a procession, not a second line. The participation of an audience is crucial. Second, SAP club second lines primarily parade through neighborhoods of New Orleans considered by simplistic dominant cultural narratives to be dangerous and poor. In doing so, SAP second lines reveal the falsehood of these narratives by creating an experience that showcases the rich, complex humanity of these neighborhoods and their residents.
SAP second lines summon into being a moving set of social and spatial lines that explicitly and peacefully both transgress and rebuke hegemonic colonial lines. The majority of SAP club members are working class African Americans, who raise funds throughout the year to pay for the permits, insurance, brass bands, and other expenses that are required to hold a public street parade. In an intensely racially and economically segregated city (Campanella 2006), working class SAP club members take control of city streets to host public parades in which people of diverse ages, pigmentation, and socioeconomic status walk, dance and socialize together. Second lines call forth a community that, walking and dancing, inscribes a new, living, embodied line over colonial boundaries that seek to maintain spatial and social apartheid. Further contrary to everyday routine, SAP parades wordlessly but physically reclaim the streets for people, stopping traffic, blocking highway entrances, and transforming streets from arteries of mechanized transportation to pedestrian-only stages for music-making, dancing, and social encounters.

Figure 3. Keep-N-It Real Second Line, March 13, 2016. From http://www.bestofneworleans.com/blogofneworleans/archives/2016/03/12/second-line-sunday-keep-n-it-real-parade

In another kind of transgression and reclamation of the physical landscape, participants, within the transitory space created by second lines, use the physical landscape in novel ways, dancing on streetlight poles, on electric junction boxes, on the roofs of buildings abandoned since the flooding after Hurricane Katrina, on the porches
of strangers. Figure 3 shows participants, possibly drivers on the highway halted by the parade, dancing on the overpass as a brass band parades down Claiborne Avenue.


Second lines disrupt the ordinary order of social life, constituting an embodied form of resistance to hegemonic hierarchies. Upending the ordinary White supremacist racial hierarchy, working class African Americans, usually deemed disadvantaged and powerless, literally take center stage on the street as the highly visible, lavishly dressed, and generous hosts of a ritual celebration to which all are welcome (Fig. 4). Inverting quotidian physical, economic, and social hierarchies, second lines reconfigure urban space to accommodate people over machines, non-monetized experience over commercial production, and *communitas* over the individual.

**Re-configuring the city, Re-presenting Blackness**

While whole-city second lines thrown for celebrity deaths or sports wins tend to be routed on the city’s largest streets, SAP second lines follow routes through city streets that are meaningful to organizers, starting at a club member’s house, for example, and
continuing down side streets with pauses at favorite bars, and often concluding with a party at a public park. The routes cross many boundaries; across highway entrances, commercial thoroughfares, residential neighborhoods, and across city blocks claimed by rival drug dealers (Fig. 5). These routes shut down city streets to car traffic, with participants parading in the street. While commercial second lines are usually quite short, perhaps half an hour long, social club second lines occupy whole afternoons. Local government has increasingly regulated second lines, as is discussed further below, so while the duration of second lines used to be indefinite and not bound to pre-arranged routes, today they are restricted to four hours on Sunday afternoons (Olsen 2012).

Figure 5. Parade route for 2012 Prince of Wales and Lady Wales Second Line. From http://uptownmessenger.com/tag/second-line/

Because second line routes are generally designed by working-class African American New Orleanians, they cross through poor, urban neighborhoods that the media normally characterize as blighted hotbeds of crime. Second lines reshape geographies, transforming urban space by, as Regis (1999: 472) puts it, “creating an alternative social order” in neighborhoods “ordinarily dominated by the quotidian order of inner-city poverty and spatial apartheid.” This ‘quotidian order’ is an expression of the inscription
of the colonial line that encloses and confines non-dominant communities. The streets on which parades proceed are often invisible to dominant culture, or visible only in televised pictures of street signs showing the location of shootings in the most recent instance of so-called ‘black-on-black’ crime (Fig. 6). By playing music, dancing, and parading on these streets, second lines transgress the narrative of poor neighborhoods as irredeemably dangerous and without hope.

Figure 6. Street signs showing murder location in USA Today feature. Photo by Alex Brandon, AP. From http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-06-18-new-orleans-murder_x.htm

Route sheets, the printed flyers that announce a second line’s route and host club, are clear examples of how non-dominant communities de-colonize hegemonic orders and create community life that resists boundaries (Fig. 7). This sheet lists the parade start time and location, the themes for the year (Still Standing and Trend Setters) and the names of the year’s Club VIPs, from King to Big Shot. Like the Grand Marshall described in Gumbo Ya-Ya, each social club elects members for positions of honor each year. Club members’ participation in the aristocracy of an annual second line creates a departure from the less glamorous everyday work roles of members, and emphasizes the possibilities for both ludic (Mr. Undefeated-George Dorsey) and venerable (Governor-Mr. Larry Taylor)
positionings. The multiplicity of positionings taken by club members rejects the sustained hegemonic attempt to confine marginalized people to single-dimensional stereotypical social positions. The sheet also notes that junior *Divas* and *Gents* will be parading, meaning children associated with club members. Second lines are intentionally multi-generational, with child members learning the traditions and responsibilities of hosting and participating in second lines. The sheet describes the parade route, noting five stops at local bars (e.g., *Green Room*). These stops are hosted by other social clubs, underlined.
in parentheses after the bars’ names, who pay for refreshments for the parading club. After the route description, the flyer notes the name of the bar where the party will continue. The route sheet ends with thanks to God, to other clubs and organizations who have supported the club, together with a commemoration of members and friends who have died during the previous year. Finally, the sheet urges readers to leave ATTITUDES, WEAPONS, AND ANIMALS AT HOME AND COME HAVE FUN AS WE DO!!!!!

This exhortation is a generic ending for route sheets; a 2016 route sheet for another club ends with God is Good on behalf of Old & Nu Style Fellas please keep your troubles away and come out and enjoy yourself!!!!!, while another, for the Big Nine Club 2016 parade, reads Dedicated To Our Loved Ones who are Gone But not Forgotten!!!! PLEASE LEAVE YOUR TROUBLES, ATTITUDES, AND GUNS AT HOME!!! The recurring theme in these final admonitions reflects the deep concern in New Orleans over extremely high rates of both criminal and police violence, in addition to commemorating recent deaths, acknowledging God, and representing second lines as spaces of pleasure and fun (e.g., have fun, enjoy yourself, and the use of multiple hortatory exclamation points).

Second lines are organized almost exclusively by working class African Americans, who are systematically both criminalized and invisibilized in dominant culture. Because they highlight poor Black people as complex—powerful, joyful, serious, whimsical, contemplative—and also as dedicated community builders, second lines are a direct rebuke to and rejection of the false equation of blackness and poverty with criminality. Repeated studies have shown that SAP members “are model citizens; they are community leaders; they perform service; they support each other in times of need” (Weil 2011: 213). An observation by a police lieutenant who escorts second lines underscores their anti-violence tone: “[i]t’s almost like a religious thing” (in Hirsch 2015). SAP club members neither personify nor celebrate criminality. At the same time, in a city with extremely high youth unemployment and extremely poor education, illegal hustling remains a viable option for young people. For this reason, many club members explicitly see one of their roles as providing a non-criminal model for children. Ed Buckner, the head of the Original Big 7 club, articulated the role SAP clubs play in addressing violence (in Thanos 2013):
Crime and violence in New Orleans is a systemic problem and we strongly believe that safeguarding our cultural heritage helps to address the roots of violence. We are a cross-generational organization, ages 5-70. Our young people grow up in this culture, are fed by it, and feel loved, supported and connected in ways that build neighborhood security. That’s real crime prevention.

SAP clubs provide services for children including mentorship programs and school uniform donations, in addition to including children in second line activities. Even the sartorial choices of annual paraders demonstrate how SAP members model alternatives, with a dramatic distinction drawn between the oversize t-shirt and jeans uniform of the street and the elaborate outfits club members wear, with coordinated suits, dresses, hats, and shoes, along with plumed fans and sashes.

In addition to the anti-violence practices of club members, second lines physically challenge the power of drug dealers who claim territorial control over particular areas, often naming their groups after neighborhoods, such as *Prieur and Columbus Boys, Mid-City Killers*, and *Young Melph Mafia.* Second lines refuse to submit to either the hegemonic or criminal geography of the city, and instead reconfigure it, criss-crossing neighborhoods and creating temporary new geographies, celebrating places imbued with meaning for club members, causing music and dancing to wend down streets which are ordinarily less festive.

Second lines thus actively challenge two forms of power in the city. First, second lines reject the hegemonic narrative that consigns African Americans to either invisibility or criminal stereotype by literally parading the multiplicity and complexity of Black life through the streets. In this way, second lines “work against the general pattern of invisibility of African American working people” (Regis 1999: 495). Second, SAP second lines oppose criminal power and street life. Instead, they offer visible models of blackness that showcase and celebrate ordinary women and men, and defy drug dealing-based neighborhood divisions. Club members at a second line are community activists, their bodies “deployed as symbols” which “convey power when joined with other bodies” (Sutton 2007: 154), overcoming both the invisibility or stereotyped danger usually ascribed to working class people of color, and the territorial politics of drug dealing.
The anti-violence work that second lines and SAP clubs engage in is part of their larger purpose “as a repository of collective memory, a site of moral instruction, and a means of calling communities into being through performance” (Lipsitz 2011: 226). These functions can be seen in multiple practices, from route sheets that commemorate deceased friends, to the fact that second lines, in addition to bringing together family and friends, also bring together strangers—from passersby to street hustlers to tourists—into a four hour long community of practice existing in and moving along the path of the parade.

Second lines also permit public and communal expressions of grief, as described in a study of African American teenagers who discuss second line funerals for murdered friends and family members as events that serve to celebrate and remember the murdered loved one and unite the community, if only briefly (Bordere 2008). SAP second lines also create a place where the pain of life can be temporarily exorcised or released. As one second line attendee put it, “when I go to these things I bring it all, I dance it out, all the tensions and problems that gather up during the week” (in Korsbrekke 2013: 48).

While second lines have always created avenues for the release of grief and stress, their healing function has become particularly acute since the destruction of the city following flooding caused by levee failures after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Cherice Harrison-Nelson, a cultural ambassador and educator, describes the situation by calling SAP club members (together with Mardi Gras Indians), “spiritual first responders to predominantly African American neighborhoods” (in Watts & Porter 2013: 38). Second lines are both acts of healing and physical performances of resistance to the constant efforts of dominant society to control and marginalize the spatial and social contexts of African Americans. Second lines transform ordinarily confined and defined urban spaces into sites of sacred, unruly, and spontaneous celebration, and transform careworn individuals into a joyous *communitas*.

While commercial second lines serve as entertainment for primarily middle class White tourists, SAP second lines are an African American phenomenon. Because Black bodies, and particularly poor Black bodies, are unremittingly represented as threatening and in need of disciplining by dominant culture, there has been sustained regulatory pressure to restrict or eradicate second lines. This pressure is an attempt, in Ingold’s
words, to convert the paths along which Black life is lived into boundaries in which it is contained. The following section outlines the challenges faced by contemporary SAP clubs, and then considers the commoditized appropriation of second lines.

**Containing and Commodifying Second Lines**

That dominant culture finds second lines transgressive is evinced by the fact that civic institutions, including the New Orleans police department and City Council, work to curtail completely or fail to support SAP clubs and the musicians in the bands on which second lines depend. These challenges include violence, increasing costs, and a failure of adequate rebuilding after the flooding after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The power of the false equation of blackness and poverty with criminality can be seen in how second lines are conflated with violence. SAP clubs are emphatically anti-violence, but because second lines are public parties, young people connected with drug and other criminal activity can violently cross paths during them. Drug and vendetta-related gun violence is epidemic in New Orleans: in 2016, there were 176 reported murders for a population of 385,000, the 4th highest per capita murder rate in the country, together with another 485 non-lethal shooting incidents (Sledge 2016). Shootings between rival drug groups or retaliatory shootings between adversaries have occurred several times during or after second lines. Shootings also occur at Mardi Gras parades and at other events, but only SAP second lines have been cast as inherently dangerous. Holding the mostly Black SAP clubs, as opposed to the almost exclusively White Mardi Gras krewes and French Quarter bar owners, specifically and solely responsible for violence at their events is a clear example of racism.

New Orleans has a well-established system for public parades, under which parade organizers must pay for a permit, insurance, and police escort service. A basic permit costs $1200, but police raised the permit fee for second lines to $4445 because of a shooting near a second line in January, 2006, while not increasing the fee for Mardi Gras krewes subsequent to a similar shooting in 2015. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit to fight the increased charges as unreasonable, and the police department settled and lowered the fee, but SAP clubs continue to fight to hold second lines (Watts &
Porter 2013; Olsen 2012). Despite court victories, SAP clubs remain subject to increasing costs; the total cost for a second line can reach $20,000, and further, city council members continue to try to impose zoning laws that restrict possible parade routes (McAllister 2015).

In addition to SAP club-specific restrictions, another set of challenges to second lines are the rebuilding failures since the flooding of the city in 2005, which continue to disproportionately affect poorer and non-White residents. From non-existent evacuation plans before the flooding—train service, for example, was stopped the day before evacuation was made mandatory—to poorly managed emergency relief administration (the Federal Emergency Management Administration, was popularly dubbed *Fuck Every Minority American*), to the permanent closure of undamaged federally subsidized housing developments, poor and non-White residents of New Orleans faced enormous challenges before and after the flooding. These challenges also include efforts to prevent their return to the city. This agenda was discussed openly, as when a Congressman from Louisiana said publicly “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did” (in Saulny 2006). The attempt to exclude some residents from the boundaries of post-Katrina New Orleans constituted an attempt to impose a new colonial line on the city, one that erased the poor and people of color completely. Plans were made to convert parts of the city that lay below sea level into wetlands. Since low-lying areas were predominantly occupied by African Americans, these “shrink the footprint” plans effectively excised Black people from New Orleans’ plans for the future. Ultimately, the “Great Katrina Footprint Debate” (Campanella 2015) fizzled, with residents able to rebuild in any neighborhood. But the continued lack of support for poorer residents is still felt. For example, the Lower Ninth Ward, a working class neighborhood that was historically home to SAP club members and musicians, has recovered, ten years after the flooding, only 36% of its population, and many new Lower Ninth residents are newcomers to the city. In another example, there has been a shortage of musicians post-Katrina, since housing rental prices have increased and affordable housing has deliberately not been rebuilt, and income for musicians is much lower in New Orleans than elsewhere, causing many musicians to pursue careers elsewhere.
The sustained policy efforts to actively undermine or at best neglect the people who create New Orleans culture, from musicians to SAP clubs to Mardi Gras Indians, are remarkable given that the city appropriates images from African American culture, including second lines, to market New Orleans as rich with cultural tradition, a unique attraction for tourists. One SAP leader, Tamara Jackson, notes the dissonance when she says “every commercial New Orleans has, you see somebody with an umbrella dancing in a band, but for us to do our own unique parade, each club individually, you want to price us out of existence” (in Troeh 2006). The website for the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau (Fig. 8) supports Jackson’s claim, making extensive use of second line imagery, including members of brass bands, a grand marshall, and an umbrella waved by an unseen dancer.

Figure 8. Web page from New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau. From http://www.neworleanscvb.com/about-us/

In a further example, the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation has an entry on SAP second lines, listed under a drop down menu labelled “Music History” that nevertheless describes second lines in present tense as:

Second Linin' is another great New Orleans musical tradition that you will surely want to experience in your visit to the city. Remember, it requires no pre-qualification other than the "wish to have a great time." (from
The flippant in’ spelling of lining and the promise that no context is necessary to enjoy a second line suggest that they are simply a show, a “great time,” rather than a complex African diasporic participatory ritual celebration, and, crucially, erases the SAP clubs who fundraise and plan all year to host their public parades. Instead, the noun describing the event, second line, is transformed into a proper gerund Second Linin’, which puts the focus on the tourists’ activity, and in the second sentence Second Linin’ is reduced to the third person neuter pronoun it, further bleaching content from the already-reduced characterization of second lines as only a fun activity for tourists. In another example, an article on a Marriott hotel travel website acknowledges the humanity behind second lines, but orientalizes them, saying “if you’re looking for a genuine, joyous New Orleans experience, it’s pretty hard to beat a Second Line parade — an exuberant group of locals literally stopping traffic as they dance through the streets, with strangers welcome to join them along the way” (Anderson, n.d.). In this characterization, “they,” the “exuberant” natives, provide an authentic, exotic experience for the worldly, culture-consuming tourist. In both these advertisements for New Orleans tourism, the authors confine second lines to an antiquated (listed under a menu tab labeled Music History) and exoticized practice that can be freely consumed by tourists. Second lines are mentioned in many travel features about New Orleans, and symbols of them are prominently displayed in material promoting the city created by tourism marketing bureaus. And these are description of SAP second lines, not commercial second lines that destination wedding tourists or convention organizers can purchase.

One reason why hegemonic institutions make no effort to help those who create the ‘value-added’ experiences that make tourism the economic engine of the city is that, as Hirsch (2015, quoted above) put it, tourism requires “the idea of a place-based culture and the suggestion of authenticity,” but not the lived reality of New Orleans’ Black culture. In fact, dominant White culture cannot acknowledge the working class African Americans who create second lines because to do so would be to recognize both their humanity and their material value to the city. White acknowledgment of African American contributions to the public good requires what the philosopher Axel Honneth
calls “a positive relationship of recognition” which includes “solidaristic acceptance and social regard of an individual’s abilities and way of life” (2001: 49). But White recognition of the positive humanity of others would upend the carefully built construction of poor people of color as immoral, threatening, and one dimensional. Because so much economic and social power depends on sustaining White supremacy, recognition of non-Whites cannot happen without the destruction of the current racist social order. In Ingold’s terms, White recognition of Blackness would vitiate the colonialism that imposes a White cultural line over any other cultural lines. The attempts by civic institution and tourism promoters to vilify SAP club members and confine second lines are clear assertions of colonial dominance. Fighting the refusal of recognition, SAP second lines create a line of resistance to the colonial project that attempts to contain or invisibilize them.

A deeper reason why dominant White culture works tirelessly to harm the Black people that create both public and economic goods is offered by the legal theorist Anthony Paul Farley. He argues that an ontological division, between Whites as owners and Blacks as dispossessed, is at work in New Orleans, and that White ownership is parasitic on its host, which is Black dispossession. In his words, “Owners always want more, so the dispossession, once they begin, continue parasitically until the host is dead. Whites need to take continually from blacks” (2006: 150). Commercial appropriation of SAP club culture is just one dispossession among many, and is a function of White supremacy.

However, SAP club members are aware of efforts to absorb and dispossess them. One online commentator writes:

the culture has always been of the people, created by the people for the people. Not for tourism, nightclubs, "performances", destination weddings, conventions, festivals, political campaigns, Hotel brochures, Tourism commercials, TV ads, white folks parties, Television [sic] shows, nor the countless photographers, media, videographers, writers, "producers" of all types. The Parade culture has been "commodified" for many years now. It's evolved in many ways, some good, some not so good.
This account lists the many social actors who benefit from second lines, and suggests that “Parade culture” has been affected by commodification. Nonetheless, these comments are preceded and governed by the invocation of the hopeful, communitarian words “of the people, created by the people for the people.” The author’s words insist that second lines remain predominantly public, communal, and non-commercial. Commercial, colonial appropriations and impositions are resisted or absorbed and transformed by SAP clubs.

As the sociologists Kwan and Roth write, “[r]esistance can be literally embodied through practices that establish symbolic boundaries between the bodies of those who hold social power and those who resist or negate it” (Kwan & Roth 2011: 187). Second lines are literal embodiments of active resistance against institutional power that “counter efforts to mark their communities as disposable” (Watts & Porter 2013: 45). Second lines resist colonially-imposed boundaries re-configuring and re-forming them into paths along which life is richly lived.

Notes
1. Creole is a contested term with many meanings, and is used to describe both the children of colonists of European descent and children of mixed European and Native American or African descent (Domínguez 1972; Hirsch & Logsdon 1992; Hall 1995; Kein 2000). New Orleans Creole culture came to be associated with people of mixed ethnic descent, and Creoles were considered to be people of color despite their European heritage. Creole New Orleanians have always fought against the strictures placed on them by European and, later, White American institutions. During the Civil Rights movement, many Creoles joined African Americans in political struggle, and today most Creole New Orleanians also identify themselves as African American.

2. In general, White middle and upper class New Orleanians despised jazz, associating it with Black lower class criminality and moral depravity, until White music critics and aficionados started writing about jazz and traveling to New Orleans to hear it (Souther 2003).

3. Melph is an abbreviated form of Melpomene, the name of a housing project in New Orleans.

4. At times, second lines take place in club members’ former neighborhoods, as urban gentrification of some neighborhoods steadily pushes low income residents out to the now less-desirable suburbs (Hirsch 2015).
References


