

Arianna Dart  
English 101-41  
Professor Melinda Rothouse  
8 December 2004

### Performance in New Orleans: A Closer Look at the City's Haunted Tours

At the very mention of 'New Orleans,' varying visions and emotions kindle within one's mind. Images of streets lined by houses that each possess unique characteristics, the tight quarters of the French Market, and the luring presence of the winding Mississippi, all contribute to the mood that is the city. Adding to the atmosphere, the muffled sounds of jazz and laughter radiate from local bars and the sour smell of booze whirls in the humid breeze. But there is more to the Crescent City than first meets the eye. There is a dark side, a decadence, an unknown, latent segment of history pleading to be discovered. And because of this bewildering presence, many find that their undying curiosity leads them to mesmerizing destinations that boast even greater tales. The mysterious ambiance that attracts visitors to New Orleans emanates from the performance of chilling tales from its haunted tours, which act as living museums for the city.

### A Look at Performance and Heritage

Performance is produced all around us. One clearly witnesses performance when attending the theater, a sporting event, or simply viewing the evening news. Defining performance becomes difficult when we consider where these presentations not only begin and end, but to what avail they magnetize visitors. Should we consider everything in life a performance? Are inherited objects and stories among these exhibitions? What

characteristics draw audiences under their spell? The field of performance studies examines cultural heritage when confronting the difficult issues that surround tourism.

Performance studies scholars believe that the habitual actions of everyday life, serve as unorthodox performances. Two bickering people in the corner of a supermarket, a consoling mother desperately trying to comfort her child, and answering the phone with practiced intonation, are indeed all performances. Richard Schechner, who is the founder of modern performance studies, claims that, “Everything and anything can be studied “as” performance. Just as everything, absolutely everything, can be studied “as” physics, chemistry, law, [or] medicine...” (Schechner 2) The academic work of performance studies claims that every action or display in life can be seen as a performance.

Performance studies scholars ask one to see the world in a new light, a light composed of intertwining presentations. These distinct performances inspire and create curious audiences of tourists, who in turn, search for unique experiences.

Tourists search for enduring cultural displays that act as heritable elements, which can be established, easily exchanged, and forever remembered. Individual performances act as heritable units. Each discrete presentation becomes one piece of heritage that belongs to a larger collective history. Family customs carry on from one generation to the next as an anthology of stories and memorabilia from the past. And cultural performances operate in the same way. A cultural performance serves as an exhibition from the past with added modern influence. The heritage of these distinguished performances allow “the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 369) to renew themselves in the present. This idea permits old, out-dated performances to endure for generations. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, author

of *Theorizing Heritage*, claims that, “Heritage organizations ensure that places and practices in danger of disappearing...survive” (370). The actual act of restoring and displaying those objects or presentations from the past in turn creates performance. And tourists become infatuated with the idea of taking a piece of heritage home with them.

Performance studies and heritage allow one to look at life, every moment of life, as a performance. Our lives succeed as an endless interconnected series of performances that become heritable elements for future generations. But the fascinating idea of performance studies can be applied to far more than just individual actions; it can be applied to whole cities.

#### Performance in New Orleans

The city of New Orleans portrays an endless array of performances. From the infamous parades of Mardi Gras to the Creole-styled Jambalaya, the city’s sense of life emanates from every crowded street in the French Quarter to every quiet, gas-lit neighborhood in the Garden District. The very state of Louisiana symbolizes “...heart over the intellect, spontaneity over calculation, instinct over reason, [and] music over the word...” (Starr xii) Travelers feel as though they have come home for the first time, finally able to feel comfortable enough to follow their hearts. This idea that one feels compelled to listen to his or her emotions rather than to years of taught logic, captures writers and tourists alike. Over a hundred years ago, Lafcadio Hearn secured the vision of New Orleans that still stands. Through his colorful descriptions and imagery, Hearn recorded timeless observations that serve as the images that visitors association with the

city today. And even though the city feels like no other destination on earth, each visitor finds something that feels vaguely familiar and unpretentious in its diverse culture and atmosphere (Hearn 7).

New Orleans' diverse mix of culture creates for an interesting concoction that can only be found in the Crescent City. The ancestry of the Creole culture derives from French, Spanish, and African roots. The combination of these three distinct civilizations generated the formation of a society that collectively shares customs from each individual culture. And not only can the city stake claims for producing a unique ethnicity, but it can claim responsibility for composing a style of music. The city boasts its own music with the development of jazz. Jazz was born in the city to African-American and Creole musicians in the late 1800s as a fusion of Ragtime, Marching band, and Blues (Alexander 1). Its eclectic resonance directly displays its sorted ancestry. New Orleans' culture and distinguishing sounds provoke people from various corners of the globe to visit the infamous city.

Tourists and writers of all decades have long been drawn to the city's immersive scenery. The city's characteristic architecture surrounded by unending lawns creates endless hours of visual interest for its visitors. Ranging from the enormous, old plantation mansions, to the tiny over-crowded shops that line Bourbon Street, New Orleans' structural designs charm sightseers. Tourists feel as though they have been transported back in time, to an era of Southern hospitality and old-world style. The owners of many buildings continually restore them in order to keep their appearances living replicas of their past glory. The characteristic architecture of New Orleans draws travelers to its mesmerizing grounds.

The combination of its dynamic culture, music, architecture, and landscape, all contribute to New Orleans' unique identity.

#### A Closer Look: New Orleans' Haunted Tours

One facet of New Orleans' culture that continually attracts visitors is the notion of haunted history. For hundreds of years, tales of the deceased, the wandering, and the reawakened, have chilled tourists' bones. Each individual sightseer travels to the city in search of an unparalleled experience that he or she can take home. The haunted tours of the city of New Orleans act as living museums that radiate mystic presence.

New Orleans' characteristic haunted tours function as living museums. A living museum is a destination in which characters, objects, and stories from the past are reenacted and recreated for the present audience (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 194). But Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's theory of a living museum can encompass more than just self-contained venues, it encompasses whole cities. This innovative form of museum grasps travelers' attention because it preserves the originality of the relic. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (famed author for her intensive study on museums) claims, "...living history museums are an extreme example of the passion to imagine the past in the most literal detail..." (194) Living museums promote old-fashioned towns to remain unchanged, cultural traditions to carry on, and fascinating stories to continue their unending descent through generations. The haunted tours of New Orleans allow spectators to not only physically journey to the eerie buildings of times past, but to be mentally captivated by the ghosts through the storytellers' words. Tourists' growing attraction to New Orleans

living museums derives from this idea that the mystical and unknown are seemingly more stunning.

Today, visitors hunt for unique journeys that will be remembered long after they have been completed. The entertainment industry has capitalized on the idea that people are not as concerned with the oldest or most famous objects, but the way in which these objects or stories are presented. Tourism companies market themselves accordingly, encouraging explorers to take part in a city's characteristic history. Advertisements for plantation, cemetery, and French Quarter haunted tours boast emotional experiences that will shock and entertain (Hauntedhistorytours.com 1). On the World Wide Web, tours promise visitors a chance to experience something that cannot be found in their own hometown (Hauntedhistorytours.com 1). One website claims, "Escape into the past as our offbeat, theatrical New Orleans tour guides provide you with an eerie, chilling yet fun-filled adventure!" (Hauntedhistorytours.com 1). Here, the website plays up the 'theatrical' component, which tends to make the tour sound inviting and playful. Yet other websites place emphasis on the dramatic aspects of terror: "Drink in the tragic history of the city as it's woven through legendary stories of the gruesome and horrific deeds of the slave owners, the decadent Creoles, and the bloodthirsty! Discover why the unrested and living dead roam among us" ("Ghost Stories"). Whether the intention is to simply entertain or to horrifyingly frighten, New Orleans' tours claim they will change your life. Visitors are willing to pay, either fifteen or twenty dollars, for this one of a kind encounter with ghastly spirits and unnerving ghosts. New Orleans continually entices visitors because tours have discovered a creative and effective way to market their fear-provoking products.

Visitors are captivated to journey to New Orleans by alluring advertisements because, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, travelers have transposed their focus from objects to experiences that “engage the senses, emotions, and imagination” (138). Walking tours with theatrical guides fascinate tourists in a way that conventional museums cannot. No longer are tourists seeking a traditionally passive museum setting where objects and artifacts are meticulously laid out for display in glassed cases. In contrast, they are searching for an experience unlike any other that is thought-provoking and imaginative (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 138). Sightseers wish to be entertained and educated simultaneously. To most a museum is simply a predictable collection of objects from a past time. But when one is standing in the infamous French Quarter surrounded by a crowd of trembling strangers, cautiously awaiting a frightening shock, one cannot compare the experience to that of a mundane outing at the local museum. The successful marketing tactics of the haunted tours in New Orleans reflect the changing interests of tourists all over the country.

One popular ghost story that continually intrigues traveling groups, tells the tale of a haunted blacksmith shop and bar located on infamous Bourbon Street in the French Quarter. Legend has it that over one-hundred years ago, the owner, then a young pirate, ran his business solely by “taking from the rich and selling back to the rich, at a handsome profit.” (Sillery 112) The young man, who called himself, Jean Lafitte, claimed he had descended directly from France with his brother after the Louisiana Purchase. Women swooned for his romantic stories and cunningly good looks and soon he became dubbed the “Creole Robin Hood” (Sillery 112). Lafitte was well-respected in the city, and his death of yellow fever in 1826 shocked many (Sillery 115). His shop on

Bourbon Street was one of few to survive the raging fires of the nineteenth century. But today, people claim that leaning from a barstool raising his flask as if to toast, sits a cloud of smoky haze known as Jean Lafitte (Sillery 109-115).

Lafitte's haunting story depicts only one of many frightening tales of the French Quarter. His Bourbon Street bar continues to be one of the most visited landmarks in the city (Sillery 109). Tourists wan to his hazy billow of smoke because they want to believe they have seen something from the past that no one else has. Travelers stand on the opposite end of the bar awaiting a subtle movement, a blurry vision, a muffled cheer, not only to be startled, but to be roused into thinking that maybe, just maybe, spirits really do exist. Few can account to actually witnessing an apparition, and therefore the haunted tours create this unique opportunity.

New Orleans encapsulates every necessity of a city for haunting. Its frightening history of tortured slaves, murdered lovers, and persecuted family members contribute to a characteristic record unique to the city. This mystifying atmosphere continually captures visitors' inquisitiveness because it cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Only in a city where debauchery is encouraged, cultures are merged, and identities forgotten, would a history so intense and diverse be created. Curious travelers will forever seek out the usually unmentioned, chilling tales of New Orleans.

The field of performance studies analyzes every object and action as performance. The unique cultural performances of a city attract curious outsiders to travel within their limits. New Orleans' characteristic mixture of diverse races, classic sounds of jazz, extravagant architecture and scenery, and the chilling tales of haunted tours, continually



draw tourists to the city. The tourism brought by these unparalleled sights and experiences preserve the city to its original glory.

Works Cited:

- Alexander, Scott. "A History of Jazz Before 1930." The Red Hot Jazz Archive. Jazz is Timeless Records. 19 October 2004 <<http://www.redhotjazz.com>>
- "Ghost Stories." *New Orleans Spirit Tours*. 2 November 2004  
<<http://www.neworleanstours.net/olghst.htm>>
- Haunted History Tours*. RIJAM. 2 November 2004  
<<http://www.hauntedhistorytours.com/GDghost.htm>>
- Hearn, Lafcadio. Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001. 3-22.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage. Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1998.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "Theorizing Heritage." *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), 367-380.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: A Broad Spectrum Approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Sillery, Barbara. The Haunting of Louisiana. Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., 2001.
- Star, Frederick S. Introduction. Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn. By Lafcadio Hearn. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. xi-xxvii.