

## Hollywood South

### *Structural to Visceral Reorganizations of Space*

At first glance, everything about Hollywood South seems mobile, if not virtual. Unlike Hollywood, a place rooted originally in a nexus of studios and today radiating out to a network of joint business partners in the Greater Los Angeles Area, Hollywood South seemingly has no such physical markers. There are no actual home offices and only a few dedicated physical locations in the form of sound stages and production houses. The only central managing offices might be the government offices in Baton Rouge charged with both the industry's sustenance and its oversight. Whereas Hollywood emerged from the settling of filmmakers in a location, Hollywood South first existed on paper, the result of proactive government staffers, industry lobbyists, and elected representatives. As described in the Prologue, the incentives for film production are themselves mobile, passing between producers, financiers, brokers, and buyers before resting on a final balance sheet. Even the legislation authorizing the incentives for film production is a moving target, the result of strategic revisions and last-minute addenda in every budget cycle.

The stated objective of the policy itself has been to attract location-based film production, itself a seemingly ephemeral and weightless endeavor that leaves no footprints behind. As described in the Introduction, Louisiana's law was a forerunner in the United States in creating expedient efficiencies for film producers looking to reduce their risk and for regional governments looking to stake claims to a new economic engine. Yet others have used cultural policies to engineer a film economy. Press reports at different historical moments have hailed a new "Hollywood South" located in Texas, Florida, various Australian cities, Cape Town, and the Argentinian pampas before Louisiana claimed the mantle. Today, Georgia threatens to steal the title away, though it was Hollywood South in the late-1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Within Louisiana's borders, New Orleans dominates location shooting, though the city loses some business to the studio facilities at the opposite end of the state in Shreveport and in the middle of the state in Baton Rouge. The shoots themselves can last a day or a week, but seldom more than a month on the same set. Television series may use space recurrently, but that too can change from setting to setting and season to season. At different moments, location shooting seems to be happening everywhere in New Orleans, but nowhere in particular. "This industry doesn't put down roots," opined the *City Business News* in 2005. "It moves to the most advantageous tax climate possible. Right now that setting is Louisiana."<sup>2</sup>

These expressions of political and economic power remake space. Much like sports franchises and high-tech firms, film companies can use their regional perks to move operations anywhere.<sup>3</sup> The disintegration of the big studio monopolies over all aspects of the industry left a competitive market in production, the aspect of filmmaking in which investors take the most economic risk, and producers thus scramble to do more with less. Easier technologies and transportation have helped close the distances between different stages of production and their often itinerant labor forces. In the era of competitive public film subsidies, space is a tangible trade that can lure film projects and tempt workers to stay long term.

Contrary to the metaphors of rootless mobility, Hollywood South not only put down roots, but also partnered in transforming the way it feels to move around in New Orleans. Mapping the physical locations where films are shot and where their temporary crews cluster helps us visualize the patterns of spatial uses in Hollywood South, including the tight and expedient relationships between film production, tourism, and gentrification. These patterns follow historical industrial paths and a trajectory of internal colonialism that left the city more unequal after Hurricane Katrina. These patterns also have gotten under the skin, interrupting mobility around the city and creating the unsettling feeling that urban space under these private–public partnerships belongs to someone else. This transformation has been a sentient experience in my own wanderings around the city, reinforcing where I can go and how. I track these paths, not only as a counterpoint to the myth of rootlessness and weightlessness, but also in showing how the driving mythology of the film economy relies on the "differentiated mobility" of those social groups who can direct the movement of people in space—and those ultimately kept in stasis or excluded from those spaces.<sup>4</sup>

## COLONIAL AMBITIONS OVER THE LAND

While Hollywood South may have no brick-and-mortar edifices to embody its existence, the reorganization of space in New Orleans is produced by the shared structures, or homologies, between the film economy launched in 2002 and the tourism economy that preceded it by half a century. With their colonial

aspirations, elites in both industries found common cause in the post-Katrina moment to reshape the urban landscape for their own profit.

The word *colonialism* refers to the domination, containment, and control of a social group within a territory. In this sense, New Orleans has a colonial power structure in that elites have maintained their wealth and status on the backs of a population kept in poverty and in spaces demarked by race and class. The social justice activist and scholar K. Animashaun Ducre argued after Katrina that the flood revealed nationally the internal colonialism that had enforced racialized spaces in the city since its founding. While this dynamic has not been unique to New Orleans, the city compensates with stories of its own exceptionalism. As I explained in the Introduction, these stories are marketed primarily through the tourism industry.

Since World War II, New Orleans's establishment moved from its focus on shipping, banking, warehousing, and insurance to develop tourism. In doing so, the city ceded both public space and history to the commercial needs of hoteliers, developers, and preservationists dedicated to framing the city's history as romantic creole charm rather than contemporary colonial inequality. For just like shipping before it, "the greatest profits from tourism found their way into rather few hands."<sup>5</sup> In spatial terms, the epicenter of the tourism industry is the conjoining areas of the French Quarter and the Central Business District (CBD). Whereas the former neighborhood displays the iconography and stories of the city's heritage, the latter contains the financial and physical infrastructure for managing the industry and its flows of visitors throughout the year. The abundant service jobs needed to support tourism have been occupied by a nonwhite underclass that can nary afford to rest, much less settle, in the French Quarter and the CBD, except under heavy surveillance. Meanwhile, the vast workforce for the city's leading industry relies on public subsidies that enable them to live and travel between peripheral neighborhoods and the downtown core. This tourism geography—today managed by the publicly funded but privately operated New Orleans Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau and the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation (NOTMC)—is an effect of the internal colonial structures that maintain de facto class segregation despite de jure racial integration.<sup>6</sup>

It was the power brokers in these structures who infamously looked to eliminate public goods through the mechanisms of privatization after Katrina. Dubbed the "exclusionist movement" by the well-connected director of the Southern Institute for Education and Research, the private profiteering from the redistribution of public goods up the social ladder in post-Katrina New Orleans has been well documented in journalistic accounts and scholarly research.<sup>7</sup> Without any public input, city elites together with planning experts began answering the profane question of *where* should be rebuilt. They tried to "deal with the city's blighted neighborhoods by engineering them off the map."<sup>8</sup> From the shuttering of public

housing projects and the end of the only hospital for indigent care, to the efforts to turn public schools into privately managed charters and working-class neighborhoods into green space: “New Orleans as a city increasingly divided between those who it had been purposely rebuilt for and those who it has manifestly attempted to exclude,” in the words of historian and social critic Thomas J. Adams.<sup>9</sup>

How the film economy dovetails and supports this upward redistribution of wealth speaks to the colonial tendencies within the film industry itself. Much like the tourism industry, Hollywood has always aspired to spatial domination. When the sociologist Leo Rosten called Hollywood “the movie colony” in 1941, he was not merely describing the well-accepted merger of a geographic region with a dominant industry; he was also examining the concentration of economic and cultural power in that space. Indeed, the centralization of film studios, together with their agglomeration of related and servicing firms, had made for a colonial-like social system. At the top, Rosten documented a group of no more than 250 people who led the industry in terms of both salary and social capital. They were a nervous bunch, in constant pursuit of more property and public approbation. The rest of the industry’s workers fell into line in support of these goals, presumably leaving everyone else at the margins, both of the local social structure and of the Hollywood cultural milieu. In what might be called a rather blithe application of the totality of colonial dynamics, Rosten revealed the ways in which film work and film workers produced the land they occupied.<sup>10</sup>

While Hollywood continues to dominate the spatial flows in Southern California, the global expansion of film production might be better described as imperial rather than colonial. The short-term, project-based orientation of Hollywood since the 1960s underwrote the contracting out of film production “as the major studios gradually adopted the business practices common in the independent sector.”<sup>11</sup> Today, the hub controls the deployment and movement of an array of contracted film companies and their subcontracted service providers via telecommunications and travel infrastructures, guaranteeing maximum flexibility in mining profits elsewhere. Film scholar John T. Caldwell calls Hollywood “the para-industry,” culling the reference from the infamous regimens of paramilitary contractors, such as Blackwater, which have occupied territories in the name of their employers.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, occupation is not simply economic, but also cultural. Each contracted unit is a “profit-driven hermeneutical enterprise,” complete with its own self-theorizing rationales and reflective analyses to justify its position in the larger field of operations.<sup>13</sup> These justifications form their own unique narratives, including countless ways that the industry enters places, establishes control, and then leaves when those places no longer suit the contractor’s mission. In other words, Hollywood’s colonial ambitions are less a unified force of domination than a peripatetic system of rhizomes, with each unit of the network spreading quickly and taking control of existing structures in its own fashion.



FIGURE 9. Spatial impacts of location shooting on an Uptown residential neighborhood. Photo by Aline Maia, reproduced with permission.

The symbiosis of development aims between Hollywood film producers and Louisiana government officials can be traced to a small revision in the state tax code in 1990. In it, the code articulated Hollywood's role in a new economy: "It is hereby found and determined that the natural beauty, diverse topography, and architectural heritage of the state, the wilderness qualities and ecological regimen of its scenic rivers system, and the profusion of subtropical plants and wildlife provide a variety of excellent settings from which the motion picture industry might choose a location for filming a motion picture or television program, and together with those natural settings, the availability of labor, materials, climate, and hospitality of its peoples has been instrumental in the filming of several successful motion pictures."<sup>14</sup> The implication was evident in the wording: the film industry needs locations, and Louisiana has them. Added to this, Louisiana would sweeten the pot with accommodating weather, workers, and studio-ready warehouses to create a film-friendly destination. In return, the code continued, "The multiplier effect of the infusion of capital resulting from the filming of a motion picture or television program serves to stimulate economic activity beyond that *immediately apparent on the film set*."<sup>15</sup> The tax code envisioned a virtuous exchange between

the producers and the consumers of a unique place beyond the set, one in which the place is only enhanced by the film crew's presence.

The balancing act between film friendliness for production companies and multiplier impacts for state officials was, in itself, nothing new. Several states in the 1980s and 1990s had almost identical language in their tax codes, usually meaning a repeal of lodging or sales taxes in return for motion picture production.<sup>16</sup> These state policies were cribbed from production incentive policies crafted abroad, creating an international pitch tournament to attract Hollywood production. As the competition got more intense, with a wider range of places bidding for Hollywood films, the policy crafters had to make places more malleable to the needs of the producers. This happened at local, regional, and national levels of governance. What began as the purview of film commissions now extended into massive, coordinated, and ongoing "placemaking" strategies between government and infrastructure agencies, commercial businesses and their associations, representative citizen and neighborhood groups, and public service (e.g., safety, health, and transportation) providers. Film friendliness has involved shaping both locations and locals "to build or develop local capability and capacity to host and service inbound production, to educate local communities about the benefits of filmmaking, and to market a place to filmmakers as a 'pro-film,' low-risk production destination."<sup>17</sup> In Louisiana, these capacities to host, serve, and market had already been captured by the tourism industry.

While the policies originally aimed to develop the most depressed areas of west Louisiana, it was quickly apparent that New Orleans would be able to best capitalize on the multiplication of film-production impacts within its own tourism infrastructure. In the three decades prior to the first film tax incentives, the city pinned its economic future to the expansion and promotion of its local hospitality industries. Fueled by a short-lived oil boom that attracted thousands of new taxpayers to settle in middle-class neighborhoods, a new urban business elite used public funds to spur developments to lure and service tourists with recently constructed venues for entertainment, lodging, and leisure. The result, according to historian Mark Souther, was a "creole Disneyland" that promised to satisfy the needs of increasingly affluent visitors, whether oil executives in from Houston or suburban families, white and black.<sup>18</sup> What this meant, both for tourism and for film investors, was that the city would modify the place to suit the desired buyers.

Within a decade, the draw of the state's regionally distinctive spaces as proposed in the original policy had slipped into a grab bag of resources that Louisiana had on offer for film studios. The 2002 film incentive policy, introduced as Title 47 of the tax code, offered film producers with budgets over \$300,000 credits for using "*substantial Louisiana content*."<sup>19</sup> In an unconventional interpretation of the word, *content* as referred to by the law could mean locations, labor, or both. In addition,



without defining *substantial*, the new program funded producers who did much of the studio production work, and all of the post-production work, out-of-state while cashing in on the entire budget for the project in-state. After this loophole was closed by later revisions of the policy, the political salience of the state's physical locations in spurring industry investment declined.

Instead, film policy followed in the footsteps of a tourism industry eager to make spaces respond to market demand. In 2003, legislators deleted wording that would mandate that the newly formed Louisiana Film and Video Commission market "desirable locations within the state for the production of motion pictures" or "siting or location filming." Instead, the commission would broadly promote "key economic, social, and cultural benefits of basing film and television production in Louisiana."<sup>20</sup> With this, Louisiana entered the regional competition for presenting its space as a relatively open slate for film investors. Couched in a win-win language for economic, cultural, and social development, the policy incentivized the creation of new spaces over preservation of existing spaces. Tax credits were extended to cover infrastructural development, including nearly any construction project used in or for production purposes.<sup>21</sup> The definition of "Louisiana labor" was also expanded to encompass any employee who had moved to the state for more than six months in a year, an incentive designed to motivate studios to relocate their payroll workers inside state boundaries.<sup>22</sup> The only references to production activities in physical locations around the state were embedded in a public relations agenda for local governments still trying to compete with New Orleans.<sup>23</sup>

By 2015, after multiple rounds of tinkering with the efforts to be film friendly, the colonial needs of the tourism industry and the film industry had converged. Beneath a veneer suggesting that both industries use but do not abuse space, each works to make the entire city responsive to their needs. A critical report on the film economy in 2012 conceded that the policy would never seed a stable film hub with physical locations that would rival the power of the major studio complexes.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the state in general, and New Orleans in particular, offered film companies the equivalent of an all-you-can-eat buffet of malleable locations, complete with flexible labor and services at the ready. The para-industry, by this logic, needed to roam freely. And New Orleans needed to court the film industry as it did tourists, with place-based adaptations and spatial redistributions. No longer conceived as a Disneyland, which would exclude social groups from the city center and white-wash their history, film companies and tourism prefer a city that can be an available canvas for meaning-making. Media scholar Helen Morgan Parmett prefers the term "Disneyomatics" to describe the ways these industries compel every neighborhood to compete for attention and subsidy, whether public or private, to show their worthiness.<sup>25</sup> The competition, framed as open and inclusive, operates at a structural deficit for citizens who cannot sell their neighborhood as a distinct

place. With the full support of the city, the logic of Disneyomatics has redrawn the map of New Orleans, letting Hollywood South occupy land, identify its value, and modify it to its own greatest benefit.

### HOLLYWOOD SOUTH AND THE INVISIBLE INFRASTRUCTURES OF PRIVATIZED SPACE

The struggle to evidence and produce value as a justification for public investment has been one of the primary ways that Hollywood South participated in the all-out spatial warfare waged in the city after Katrina. Public space is a political manifestation of a territory, which governs its uses through zoning, permitting, and enforcement. In cultural terms, public spaces are sites of struggles over modernity, between stakeholders in different visions of an urban community.<sup>26</sup> With much of the population displaced from their homes, planners and developers—many of whom were involved in the construction of the city’s tourism infrastructure—envisioned the urban blueprint as a blank slate that could better be capitalized. As they headlined in the local newspaper, “Hardest-Hit Areas Must Prove Viability,” a message accompanied by an influx of multinational subcontractors to control the process of assessing land and property values.<sup>27</sup> Even as local residents raged against them, these third-party assessments led to a refashioning of the entire city. Under the twin banners of “renewal” and “rebirth,” the City of New Orleans embraced “new privatization strategies” that emphasized public–private partnerships as a form of operational best practice for the distribution of public goods and stressed entrepreneurialism over the uses for public space.<sup>28</sup> In these struggles, Hollywood South seemed inculpable, hidden beneath its own shiny aura and mythologies of weightless mobility.

Privatization, however, is a structural and visceral process, one that gets under the skin as public space responds to political and market pressures. The sociologist Richard Sennett plotted the experience of public space as one that has been increasingly individualized. On this continuum of the past three centuries, modern urbanites gradually rejected public space as a zone of active engagement with strangers, and instead became traveling spectators in the public. Industrialization encouraged people to treat public space as a mere passageway to the more important zones of work and family. What citizens witnessed in public space enabled them to reflect more on their private life.<sup>29</sup> Such experience, ever more personalized and detached from the experiences of others, confronted another set of social relations under neoliberal governance and postindustrial restructuring. Not confined to New Orleans, the federal abdication of funding of public goods and institutions is what precipitated the new social contracts between local governments and private companies to offset the shortages. Broadly speaking, these transformations have disrupted people’s expectations of physical space once again.



The changing governance and geography of post-Katrina New Orleans owes much to Hollywood South. The 2002 incentive policy positioned film companies, developers, and the city to be convenient collaborators in returning properties to the market through short-term rentals, purchases, and resale. These broad interventions put the private life of citizens into direct conversation with the forces of privatization in their daily lives. The influx of film workers and their preferred spaces for location shooting not only affected the neighborhoods where these citizens live and work and the public places where they play, but also contributed to the privatized ways in which citizens have learned to move through space in their city. Each of these impacts can be examined in turn as we look at the ways Hollywood South has reorganized space in New Orleans.

### *1. Location, Location, Location*

Hollywood South defines its own spatial uses by its variety of locational shooting spaces. Regional marketing campaigns aimed at film executives and producers have alternately sold the state as offering either distinctive places or generic spaces that can be remade into “Anywhere U.S.A.”<sup>30</sup> The City of New Orleans boasts both. For more than a century, the tourism industry has packaged the French Quarter as America’s most unique and historically Old World place, while the mix of skyscrapers and early-modern buildings in the CBD could stand in for nearly any contemporary U.S. city. Location scouts frequently come to New Orleans in search of both of these types of spaces to fit film scripts, and New Orleans offers spaces to suit their needs.

The New Orleans Office of Film and Video (NOOFV) assists with location shooting directly by recommending spaces and the scouts who can vouch for their film-friendliness. The office streamlines public permitting for the use of roads, bridges, streetcars, police, or any other city personnel in a location shoot. Office staff even meet with neighborhood associations and mediate any potential conflicts “to keep New Orleans film friendly” for producers and residents alike.<sup>31</sup> These services are free, funded through the state’s tourism funds. The permits themselves can be attained for a nominal fee.

City service providers, including police, fire, and medical personnel, are subcontracted through each agency’s procedures. When budgets are lean, the reorientation of these services to be more entrepreneurial means they are less available to the general population. In 2011 a federal investigation found that film studios were the largest clients for public police details, calling it “an aorta of corruption” that funneled kickbacks to assigning officers. Paid to secure movie sets from outsiders—tourists, fans, and random residents alike—police details for film became lucrative ways to boost the notoriously low salaries of people on the force. The film economy was so profitable to police officers that after Katrina, the department established its own “check-writing service” to process requests more efficiently.<sup>32</sup> In these ways,

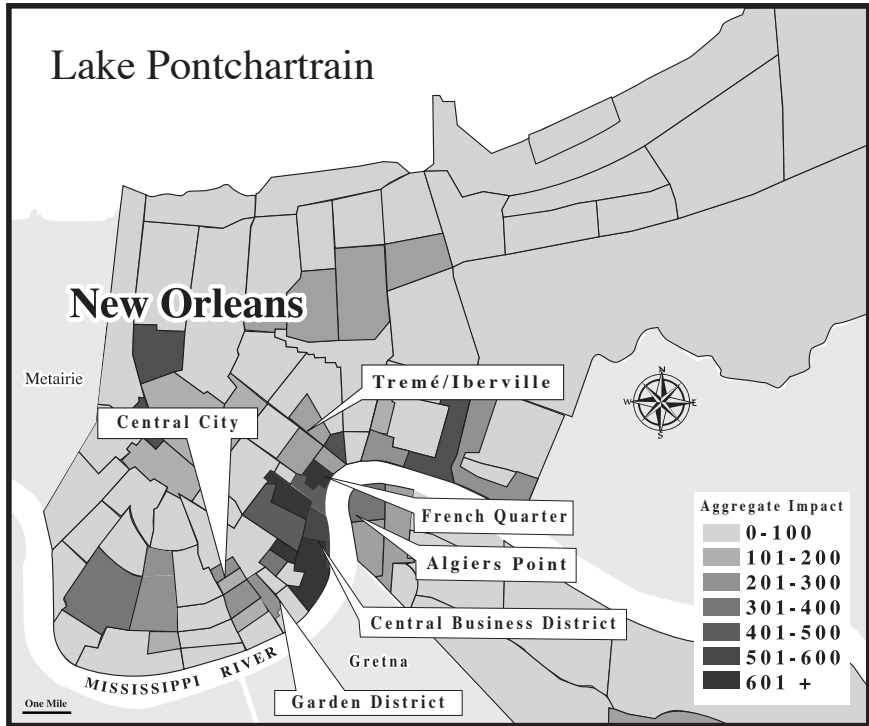


FIGURE 10. Signs directing workers, including police details, to a neighborhood film-production location. Photo by Vicki Mayer.

spaces and their public caretakers in the city are for sale; they are part of a market that few people can access in such a privileged way.

In 2013, fewer than a dozen location scouts were the primary buyers in this market for the lion's share of the major film productions receiving tax credits. They selected the spaces and assessed their value in relation to their projects' bottom lines. Interviews with five location scouts showed that they all knew each other.<sup>33</sup> They had developed track records with the studios and the city, moving to New Orleans just after the passage of the 2002 incentives policy led to major film shoots in two residential neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup> Despite their expertise, however, they remained a rather mobile labor force, traveling between the states competing for locational dominance with incentives. Union records from 2007 to 2012 show that as many as eighteen location scouts were registered with the Local 478, but in that time, ten had arrived in state only in the past five years, and four others had moved out of state in exchange.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to the workers, the spatial patterns of actual shooting locations in the city have been relatively stable. A study of city permits filed with the city's Office of Traffic and Transportation reveals how film companies' use of public space is concentrated geographically. Over four years (from January 1, 2007, to December 31, 2010), film personnel filed more than eight hundred permits for productions that would receive state tax credits. Some of the permits allowed crews to park equipment on public roads for indoor shoots, while others sanctioned the closure of entire streets or blocks for outdoor shoots. Using a calculated metric for



MAP 1. Aggregate impacts of location filming activities by major Hollywood productions on urban public space in New Orleans, 2007–2010.

the duration and intensity of public-space use, a map of the city visually demonstrates the areas with the highest and lowest concentrations of film production in public spaces.<sup>36</sup>

Far from the myth of its own mobility, film location shooting makes the highest use of the two neighborhoods already assessed with the highest commercial value, before and after the storm. As outlined earlier in this chapter, the French Quarter and the CBD have been the epicenter of the tourism industry since the end of World War II. Before that, as shown in chapter 1, they were the hub of the city's shipping, banking, and other commercial interests, with the highest concentration of leisure and entertainment options for locals and visitors alike. After Katrina, many rebuilding efforts began in these two neighborhoods, despite the fact that neither of them sustained as much damage as the rest of the city. Using a combination of state, city, and federal funds, private investors coveted this area as an upgraded destination for professionals to live and play in. Together with millions in state and federal aid, Mercedes Benz sponsored the luxury refurbishment of

the Superdome for billionaire Tom Benson, while the city used federal money and leveraged millions in its own debt to finance a streetcar line between the Superdome, a number of renovated upscale hotels, and the French Quarter. By “feeding the downtown monster,” in the words of the geographer David Harvey, the city benefited film companies by investing public monies to better enable and equip the spaces of the privileged few.<sup>37</sup> Setting their trailers in precisely the same spaces, the film industry has not been a nomadic network of social actors or innovative pioneers into the city’s diverse locations. It has been more like the next wagon train to follow the well-trod paths worn by other dominant industries.

While these clusters might seem coincidental, the location scouts themselves spoke to the economic and cultural logics driving these patterns. Most of the scouts were not native New Orleanians, so they came to know the downtown areas first as tourists, and then through the city’s film staffers. Beyond this, however, location choices followed the laws of agglomeration. The city’s dedication to concentrating commercial goods and services brought their own efficiencies to film production. Film trucks on a blocked city street could be positioned simultaneously in proximity to caterers and hotels, the well-groomed park for an outdoor shot, and a bevy of working fire hydrants for a scene with pyrotechnics. As one scout said, “I’m not going to hopscotch to another neighborhood if I got that in one place.” Together, their knowledge of the city, enhanced by public–private investments in infrastructure, drew scouts back repeatedly to the places they already knew. Citing the social relationships surrounding location shooting, another scout said, “It’s really about familiarity and knowing where I can park, who are the property owners, who are all the players involved, where I can get all of my support parking, and all of my support space.” By pulling crews into familiar locations, scouts benefited from prior knowledge of the place (including who is authorized to give space and facilities) and thus saved time managing the locations during production.

In the end, film location shooting replicated the symbolic assets of those places where they clustered. Old World and New, the French Quarter and the CBD looked as different as could be, but together their geography symbolized the “upper-class lifestyles that dominate in Hollywood films,” as a scout said, continuing: “Most films aren’t going for the gritty real-world experience. They’re going for a little Hollywood beautiful picture. And most directors [. . .] want their pictures to look good no matter what the story is. So when I say ‘polished’ and even if we get away from the iconic restaurants. . . . You still are creating an upscale imaginary world that these people lived in that we’d paid money to go see.” In other words, to locate anywhere else would gamble that the production space no longer syncs with the class assumptions embedded in most Hollywood film and television scripts.

Meanwhile, the permits map shows most of the city as a territory untouched by film production. Virtually no film crews purchased space or contracted public services on the city’s eastern and western sides or in the swath of working-class

neighborhoods that cut through the middle of the city.<sup>38</sup> These areas included the neighborhoods hardest hit by flooding, which, arguably, would have benefited most from an infusion of public spending and support. Yet these neighborhoods were transformed too, showing that film locations may symbolize a wealthy life-style on the screen, but filmmakers create wealthy locations when they use public money to buy property on the cheap.

## 2. *Movin' On Up*

As if taking a page from the playbook of the Nola Film Company in 1914, Hollywood producer Peter Hoffman and his New Orleans-based wife purchased a dilapidated, pre-Civil War mansion in 2007 for \$1.7 million to start a film studio. Working with the Hoffmans was Michael Arata, a New Orleans lawyer and bit actor with such enviable roles as “man with piña colada.” The studio project was a “real estate success story,” according to the local newspaper, turning an eyesore on the urban skyline into an example of film-economy entrepreneurialism. Both Arata, whose wife was deputy mayor of the city, and the Hoffmans, who owned a prominent restaurant and tourist attraction in the French Quarter, were well connected to the city’s business elite and to Hollywood studios. The group claimed that \$13 million was needed to renovate the house, 90 percent of which would be paid through tax credits from state film and city historic-preservation funds. Echoing local boosters for a silent film studio, Peter Hoffman argued that the city itself would draw producers to finish their films there, rather than sending them back to Los Angeles after the location shoot. “They can do the complete sound of a \$200 million picture right here,” he said. “Rather than going back to L.A. and doing it, they can stay and be happy. They can walk over to Frenchmen [street music clubs]. They can go over to the French Quarter.” He and Arata were convicted in 2014 of fraudulently receiving \$1.1 million of their film tax credits, which they had sold already for a handsome profit in 2009. Ultimately, the renovated Whann-Bohn house would attract film-producer tourism. Situated close to the city’s music and entertainment scene, the new owners operate a pricey bed-and-breakfast for visiting “Film and Entertainment industry tradespeople [looking] for an unforgettable New Orleans experience.”<sup>39</sup>

The case of the Whann-Bohn house would be an outlier if it were not part of a larger strategy within “creative economy” policy. Proselytizers for film economies tout the use of public funds to return “undervalued properties” to the real estate market, where they can find new economic life for private investors. By offloading their risk onto the public, the investors can look to profit by building production infrastructure and “loft-style living” accommodations for film personnel.<sup>40</sup> When film economies fizzle, as the Michigan one did in 2012, the public is left holding the bag. A bankrupted film studio in Pontiac, Michigan, used \$70 million in tax incentives to renovate an old General Motors facility, leaving years of holes in the city’s

budget and the state pension fund to cover the project's bond debt.<sup>41</sup> Still, these projects have been a boon to real estate speculators who have scoured the abundant New Orleans inventory of abandoned warehouses, factories, and nineteenth-century estates for easy renovation dollars.

The Whann-Bohn project, along with hundreds of other development ideas, relied on an infrastructural film tax credit, which was hatched in 2004 as a separate program from the film-production credit. Justified as a key to sustaining the film economy, the infrastructure tax credit was more generous at the time than the production credit, allowing 15 percent *on top of* the regular 25 percent credit awarded to productions. Although a lobbyist later told me this was an error of poor wording in the bill, the definition of infrastructure included "any moveable and immovable property and equipment related thereto, or any other facility which supports and is a necessary component of" film, television, and video production and post-production.<sup>42</sup> The unintended consequence of the policy led to a flood of proposals for a series of construction projects only loosely related to film production, causing the legislation in the following session to specify that hotels and golf courses would not be covered under the program. These scandals precipitated the sunset of the policy at the close of 2008, but investors have continued to cash in tax credits on projects that were certified before the deadline. According to the state's own auditing report, Louisiana gave \$15.3 million in tax credits to support film infrastructure in 2010, for example; and this amount was bolstered with other state-subsidized projects to support infrastructure for sound recording and live performances.<sup>43</sup>

Among the projects that went forward was the city's main film studio space, Second Line Stages. The owner and developer Susan Brennan acquired the fire-damaged and decayed warehouse near the port in 1998 with an eye to making high-end condos. After sitting on the land, however, film infrastructure tax credits became more appealing. In 2009, Brennan and her partners decided to create a gold-plated venture, combining tax-credit programs to create the first LEED-certified environmental studio complex in the country. Using \$14 million in infrastructure tax credits, the team then secured \$10 million in federal new-market tax credits and more than \$3.3 million in federal, state, and city historic-preservation tax credits for, presumably, its old buildings. Although Second Line's owners claimed that their lofty principles would give them a competitive advantage in booking "eco-friendly" entertainment executives, the studio has rarely been booked full-time by film projects. Between the three sound stages, a screening theater, and commercial offices, Second Line occupies 150,000 square feet in an impoverished and relatively desolate part of the inner city, where the shrinking footprint of the port abuts a housing project that was razed, post-Katrina, to make way for mixed-income housing. Prior to the hurricane, a quarter of the residents in the studio neighborhood lived below the poverty line; the

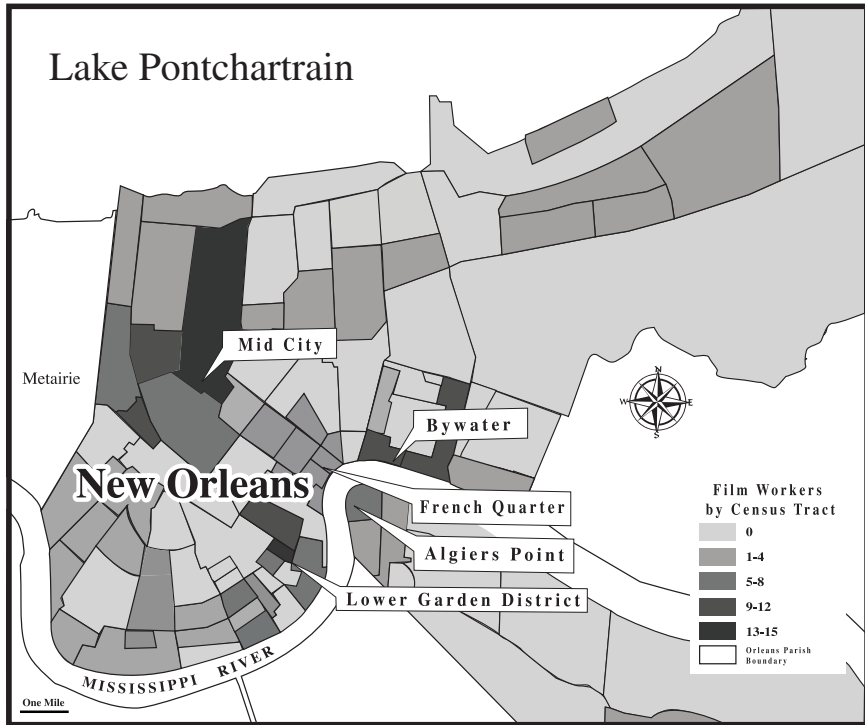


nearby housing project offered 1,510 public units. In 2015, the mixed-income neighborhood had 182 public units while property values soared in the adjacent Lower Garden District. Second Line has returned its gifts to the public in the form of educational programs for at-risk youth, apprenticeship programs, and safety and security initiatives, but it only staffs ten employees.<sup>44</sup>

The vast economic disparity between those who get public subsidy through the film economy and the vast majority of working-class people who do not is nowhere more evident than in housing, where gentrification has transformed entire neighborhoods. In 2012, the Cité Européenne du Cinema was part of the city's plans to lure well-heeled Parisians to the "troubled" lower-class neighborhood of Saint-Denis through a filmmaking center, art galleries, and boho cultural tourism.<sup>45</sup> Recommendations for New Orleans involved coordinating the efforts of the regional development agency Greater New Orleans, Inc., the businesses represented by the Downtown Development District, the utility Entergy, and the Mayor's Office of Recovery and Development Administration to pinpoint the city's disaster recovery grants to places best suited for creative industry growth. In partnerships with local universities, land developers, and the year-long festival industry, advocates of the new privatization claimed that the city would see economic rebirth in the development of "livable communities" when an in-migration of younger, highly educated workers repopulated areas marred by high poverty and crime rates—a theory that the boosters called a "people-centered approach" with no sense of irony.<sup>46</sup>

Another map of the city shows the neighborhoods where a cross section of middle-class film-production workers lived in New Orleans from 2007 to 2012.<sup>47</sup> Members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) are among the rank and file who receive steady work from the tax incentives. Producers of major-budget productions have to hire union workers before contracting with outsiders. Louisiana IATSE 478 membership has grown by 900 percent since 2003—even if, at 1,300 members in 2015, the local is tiny compared to those in California and New York. They also earn and pay a bit less than their counterparts in other regions, owing to the different cost of living in the Big Easy compared to the Big Apple or SoCal.<sup>48</sup>

While it would be not only impossible but unfair to blame gentrification on 1,300 individuals, the footprint of their housing choices mirrors the broader ones advocated in creative economy policies. As pointed to on the map, Bywater, Mid-City, and the Marigny have been hives of gentrification in the city, with rental and housing prices exploding. In Bywater alone, where nearly 40 percent of the population lived below the poverty line in 2000, around 20 percent did in 2010. "The declining poverty rate does not speak to some miraculous redistribution of wealth to working-class families, but rather to their forced exit amid a corresponding influx of high-income residents," writes Meghan French-Marcelin, a planning and policy historian. The market for flipped homes, which has been among the highest in the



MAP 2. Residential neighborhoods of unionized film workers in New Orleans, 2007–2012.

nation even during the mortgage crisis, is due in part to the technically skilled film workers looking for other projects between formal employment gigs. These areas have also received disproportionate amounts of federal aid to rebuild mixed- and multi-use housing complexes with only a fraction of their available units designated as “affordable,” and those too cost much more than before.<sup>49</sup>

This trend would likely be replicated if the data included the thousands of film workers who come to New Orleans for a shoot, some of whom decide to buy their own acreage. A newspaper audit of a sample of local film payrolls found that the vast majority of middle-class film workers come to the city from out of state.<sup>50</sup> Featured on websites such as Air BnB, VRBO, and Craig’s List, the short-term housing market in New Orleans caters to mobile professionals willing to spend more than \$250 per night.<sup>51</sup> For some at the very apex of the production hierarchy who return frequently to the city, it is often cheaper to simply buy in and take their pick of the relatively underpriced mansions that are a steal in a variety of senses. The history of film producers who declare residency outside of Southern California in order to reduce their property taxes reflects a standard operating procedure

among Hollywood's elite since at least the 1950s.<sup>52</sup> New Orleans newspaper coverage of celebrity home buyers tout their rootedness to the city, even though their properties are rarely occupied by them. As with the native workforce, many of these rentals and part-time residents end up in the same neighborhoods affected by high gentrification. In the end, rebuilding *did* produce the sort of gap-toothed pattern of empty or infrequently occupied houses that residents feared—the “jack o’ lantern effect”—except that instead of a patchwork of poor homes, the city now has a patchwork of unaffordable ones.<sup>53</sup>

The results are visibly evident to locals. Where dive bars and corner stores used to abound, craft cocktail bars and upscale coffeehouses predominate. The growth of eateries in the city from 800 to 1,400 in the five years after Katrina has been attributed to the influx of film crews feeding off their tax incentives.<sup>54</sup> Alongside these privately owned businesses, the city has crowed about public block grants used to build local food markets and green spaces, complete with new festival stages and industrial details repurposed as art. In a city with a minimum wage under eight dollars an hour and service workers struggling to get by, the pursuit of the creative class is expressed as fancy lifestyle consumption rather than encouragement of production or of guaranteed safeguards for those working in production.<sup>55</sup> Hollywood South walks the same paths even as it denies its own footprints.

### 3. *Following the Signs of Privatization*

Film shoots and crew housing are visible, material manifestations of the privatization of public space, but Hollywood South has also affected New Orleanians' ability to move through these physical spaces. Much of the city's iconic public culture involves traveling through the neighborhoods. The sudden transformation of ordinary space in the service of kinetic rituals and events—from second-line parades to jazz funerals, from impromptu street performances to block parties—has been celebrated in the soundbite stories of New Orleans's exceptionalism. Scholars have framed these public movements as resistant to the dominant ways in which their practitioners are kept in place, physically and metaphorically, in daily life.<sup>56</sup> Yet, ordinarily, the way space *feels* can seem rather mundane: New Orleanians have to go to work—and, in the local vernacular, “make the groceries”—just like people do anywhere else. In these everyday acts, movement through public space is a series of social contracts whereby “the experience of the whole is determined by the intactness of the constitutive parts.”<sup>57</sup>

This mobility was rerouted after Katrina. The flooding of black neighborhoods, where much of the celebrated “mobile escapism” occurs, forced those who remained to determine which traditions would survive—often based on their viability for tourism, according to music historian Bruce Raeburn.<sup>58</sup> Transportation was upended too, affecting everyone's ability to get places, particularly the working class. Many of the regular bus lines that had traversed the city ended. Workers

from across the Mississippi River who depended on public ferries to get to their jobs found that service was intermittent, closed one time for nearly a month. The gleaming streetcar line in the CBD led to the cancellation of bus services there, resulting in a steep decline in ridership of both. In contrast, film companies have found that iconic streetcars, ferries, and even bridges can easily be hired and monopolized.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps nothing has shown how Hollywood South directs movement more than its signs. Affixed to telephone poles, the location-filming signs are two to three square feet, monochromatic (usually in blue or yellow), and decorated with acronyms and arrows. They are more sturdy and standardized than the usual “garage sale” or “queen mattress for sale” signs around town, but their placement implies a similar short temporality. They are generally found on the way somewhere else, for example on street corners and in entryways to parking lots or public buildings. Such spaces are what the anthropologist Marc Augé classically called “non-places,” places where mobile users are encouraged to plug in and pass through.<sup>60</sup> The signs are impossible not to see, though some people may try to ignore them. They are part of the urban texture of the city in that they enter the sentient feeling of being located in a space, at that moment, directing actions and movement through a geography.<sup>61</sup>

Signs have always had a particularly special role in communicating to urban denizens. In 1928, the social critic Walter Benjamin suggested that we all should read the modern city as we wander through it; in turn, the city communicates back its gestalt meaning as if we are following a one-way sign. Following the arrow, he wrote, the critic maps the urban experience on the basis of various things one encounters on the street.<sup>62</sup> Yet film signs are not like advertisements or other “legible, local, ‘friendly’ emblems of economic power,” in the words of sociologist Sharon Zukin.<sup>63</sup> Most of the signs are acronyms or have undecipherable phrases, like teases for a treasure hunt for “Fallen Angel,” “Patriots,” or whatever a “Looper” is. For example, “BC” on one sign stood for “base camp,” which usually means a field or parking lot holding an encampment of trucks, trailers, and heavy equipment. Most references are more specific to the project itself. MB meant the film *Memphis Beat*. FNN was “Fee Nah Nay,” the name of the local LLC for the production of *Treme*. When the temporary placards have legible phrases, they point passengers cryptically in a direction toward “Common Law” or, more confusingly, “Home.” In a city in which so many people already have questioned the law and the politics of homecoming, could it be that these signs are slyly touting the film economy as the answer to residents’ problems? Moreover, what do the film signs want people to do in those times and spaces?

In contrast to the film signs, New Orleanians made signs that have been far more legible in the post-Katrina landscape. In the early aftermath, homemade signs responded to those authorities and their subcontracted workers who had



FIGURES 11–14. Filming location signs are ubiquitous but speak in code. All photos by Vicki Mayer.

claimed imminent domain in entering and seizing their residences. Some of these signs were not so subtly spray-painted on the sides of abandoned refrigerators tossed out with their rotting contents. Locals soon grew accustomed to fashioning





FIGURE 15. “Thee Broadmoor Sinkhole.” Photo by Bart Everson (<http://barteverson.com>), reproduced with permission.

their own decorative street signs to direct officials where citizens lived and needed assistance. They hand-penned signs to hail utility workers to broken power lines after Hurricane Isaac left the majority of the city in darkness in 2012. Neighborhoods that competed for public spending used dark humor to remind the city of its spending priorities. Potholes have sported welcoming placards for city employees to visit, likening the gaping sinkholes to tourist attractions, such as the Grand Canyon or mystery caverns. When the city sponsored an international public arts exposition as an official attraction in 2008, a series of handmade signs appeared to tell readers, “You Might Be Wrong.” Later associated with the expo itself, the signs drew the elite and culture vultures alike into debates about citizens’ mutual responsibility and/or arrogance in the city’s recovery efforts.

Unlike that debate, film-production signs close off public dialogue, directing their messages more internally. They make liminality a daily experience, posits Zukin, by disorienting readers with ambiguous messages during a time of economic restructuring.<sup>64</sup> To the local citizens, it quickly becomes apparent that these messages are not directed at them. The signs do not hail one to consume or come closer, to engage or react in any way. Rather, they simply announce that these



non-places are spaces of production, where the hidden labor of the film industry becomes manifest and visible.<sup>65</sup> If anything, savvy travelers learn to move away from the directions pointed in the film signs because that is where public space is owned, for the time being, by someone else. The signs thus break those small social contracts about which public spaces we can move in or wander through. One only has to witness the rerouting of commuters trying to avoid the sometimes dense maze of filming locations to understand that these signs have a pedagogic effect over time. They teach that city space does not belong to all citizens equally.

#### HOLLYWOOD SOUTH'S STAR MAPS AND TOURIST TRAPS

Striving for a creative economy through mechanisms of privatization, New Orleans in a quick decade became a whiter and more affluent city with fewer spaces dedicated to housing, educating, serving, or protecting the underclass that still struggled to find living wages in the tourism economy.<sup>66</sup> Much like the tourism economy, the film economy increasingly, and through incremental policy changes, sought to make the land and its residents serve the needs of the most connected producers and the most affluent consumers.

The city's film office is financed through the New Orleans Office of Tourism. This mutuality is by design. It harks back to the first city permits that were granted to the visiting moving-picture crews in order to promote official Carnival festivities, as described in chapter 1. In the era of global Hollywood production, major film projects have been tied to regional planners' dreams of place-based tourism since at least the 1980s, when new film commissions sought projects that would enhance the "popular perceptions of a place."<sup>67</sup> At a time of incentives that were relatively modest compared to those of today, such as a hotel tax rebate, the film officials hoped that tourism would be a cumulative effect of prolonged and positive media exposure of the place over the long term. Tourism studies gave evidence that the language used in film stories could imbue local architecture with a romanticism that drew visitors long after the film wrapped. Die-hard fans could make pilgrimages to film sites, spending money in return for the chance to engage with a familiar space, revisit a remembered scene, or to simply give tribute to the power that a media story has held in their lives.<sup>68</sup>

Tourism operates in a push-pull dynamic with film production. The city office charged with promoting film projects and giving fans access to knowledge about shooting locations and schedules is usually the same one that has to then assist the production crews to secure the space, keeping crews in and everyone else out. By mediating these flows, the city can hope to capitalize on the same space by asking satisfied movie studios to assist in promoting it. Local officials hope that a blockbuster film will be the gift that keeps giving through movie clips or star cameos in

tourism campaigns. To this end, NOTMC decided to issue a tourism app for New Orleans in 2013. Called GO NOLA, the download, currently supported with the help of actors John Goodman and Wendell Pierce, is meant to allow users to “take your pick of celebrity-narrated walking tours of famous New Orleans neighborhoods, each with a unique archive of historical documents and photographs.”<sup>69</sup>

Media scholars Susan Ward and Tom O’Regan have likened film personnel in Brisbane, Australia, to long-stay business tourists, a characterization that fits New Orleans’s own Hollywood-moneyed class.<sup>70</sup> The buyers of the Whann-Bohn house, for example, may have used public money to build film-production infrastructure, but a glance at reviews on the vacation rental site VBRO by a group of fifteen who came for Mardi Gras confirmed what I already knew: that movie-industry investors had reconfigured urban space to be one of their own personal playgrounds. “I’ve been to some of the best restaurants in my entire life,” one director raved after coming to New Orleans in 2008. “I’ve heard some of the best music on the street with 70-year-old guys who are better than any other musician I’ve seen in my life. And every weekend’s a festival. I will come back as visitor in addition to as a movie producer.” The director added that he came close to buying a house because “if you’re going to a city to shoot a movie, you do have days off. You have your family with you sometimes, and this is a pretty great city to spend time in.” In 2016, the director’s review was repurposed, on a quasi-public economic development website, as one of the selling points for using media tax breaks as a “creative catalyst.”<sup>71</sup>

Ironically, when media executives decide to stay, they tend to live in neighborhoods that strictly regulate film production or keep it out altogether. The Garden District, which is home to a number of Hollywood Southerners, cracked down on filming simply by limiting shooting hours and days per year and requiring a \$500 daily “contribution” to neighborhood association coffers. Other prestigious communities in the city enjoy relative freedom from major studio projects through their homeowners’ associations, increasingly secured by residents’ private guards. By levying their own supplemental taxes, the rich have effectively created their own exclusive zoning rules for the occupancy and use of public spaces in those parts of the city. Other neighborhoods have no such luxury. Not only has the explosion of festivals and cultural events since Katrina perpetuated the image of a public culture for sale, but these increasingly unexceptional events compete with film crews eager to find locations in the same areas. Residents have been blindsided by their neighbors letting their houses to the industry without public discussion or input. For example, one multiseason television series paid the chairman of the Uptown Neighborhood Triangle Association to rent his home, inconveniencing neighbors and attendees of a nearby elementary school who had already suffered the elimination of busing services. When about forty residents filed a petition with the city to stop the company’s heavy use of public roads and its noise pollution, the spokesperson for NOOFV dismissed them, putting the onus on each neighborhood to



FIGURE 16. A filming location in the Garden District, where some of Hollywood South's elite reside but where production activities are restricted. Photo by Vicki Mayer.

decide how much exposure to the film economy is “tolerable.” A few gripers, she explained, should not be allowed to overshadow the silent “thousands of residents in the city who support the film industry.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, the media production elite is welcome to regulate their own exposure to the impacts of the film economy, while everyone else must be complicit.

In the epicenters of location shoots and festivals, the tourism industry compounds residents’ inability to regulate the presence of film production in their own neighborhoods. Unlike a construction site, film-production space will not be improved for the public after its use. To the contrary, when the crews leave a street or corner, they are supposed to restore it to its original state, potholes and all. Yet the production still leaves traces in memory (even in non-places) that can be used commercially, such as for branding a new place or selling a film tour. In Toronto, another favorite destination for runaway films, the local film commission has overseen the reconstruction of downtown to look so much like the New York City skyline that new housing construction projects have adopted the names of this faux geography, including Soho, Manhattan, and the NY Towers—the latter meant as clever wordplay on North York and New York. Similarly, a study of local Toronto business owners in the Distillery District revealed they had located

there for its historical association—not with distilling, but with contemporary film shooting. These changes to a place can become permanent when the filmic versions of the place become more economically viable than actual history. “If visibility is a concern for Toronto, then arguably the city is rendered less visible through these representations than if none had been made at all,” argues urban studies and media scholar Aurora Wallace. Unlike in Toronto, however, film-production branding and tourism in New Orleans competes with the already hyper-visible cultural places in the city. Here, businesses have had to be creative in mapping new meanings onto spaces that have been used to portray “anywhere U.S.A.”

Exemplifying these tensions over place branding, New Orleans Film Tours runs a seemingly lean operation out of a van owned and driven by former film worker Jonathan Ray.<sup>73</sup> Although there have been walking and bicycle tours that have capitalized on film locations in the city, New Orleans Film Tours seems to be the first and longest-running outfit dedicated to telling the story of Hollywood South. Ray got the idea for the business after he broke his arm on his first major shoot after working his way through a variety of unpaid assistantships. Laid up at home, he watched a lot of movies, including *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *JFK* (1991), and *Easy Rider* (1969). All were located in New Orleans. He took his epiphany and his entrepreneurial pitch to NOOFV in 2010, and it was show time. What was striking about the film tour, though, was not how many movies had been filmed locally, but how few had been set there. Most of the contemporary movies shot in New Orleans had nothing to do with its distinctive spaces. This presented some challenges for Ray. When he pulled up to a nondescript parking-garage door, he directed visitors to seatback TV monitors where a *Dukes of Hazzard* (2005) car chase began with the breaking down of that door. Similarly, Ray drove the streets of CBD while referencing their roles as streets in Chicago (*The Mechanic*, 2011), Pakistan (*GI Joe*, 2009), and Panama (*Contraband*, 2012). In fact, nearly all of the post-2002 oeuvre in the tour was just average city space: street corners and open plazas, a tattoo parlor and the aquarium, under a bridge and inside a warehouse. Ray punctuated each stop with the same bucolic economic data found in the local newspapers and promoted by city and state boosters. Yet he was no shill. “You used to go film places because you wanted to show that location. Now we don’t even get the benefit of showing the city in the movies we do make.”

The Hollywood South of the policymakers, urban planners, and corporate executives is a projected vision of a new regionalism, founded on a subsidized industry that will use the marketplace to reverse a century and a half of unequal social relations. Proponents of this vision for Louisiana claimed that entertainment industries, including film, new media, and theater, held “the prospect for rapid export-based economic growth, high-wage employment, clean and eco-friendly conditions, and tourism promotion.”<sup>74</sup> They imagined what the social theorist

Michel Foucault called “heterotopias,” spaces that do not seem to have a fixed location or time coordinates, which nevertheless become containers for a society’s hopes and dreams, as well as its anxieties and fears. Asking us to envision the uncharted geography surrounding a boat that has set sail, Foucault argued, we can only imagine what a spatial heterotopia is like for the real people located there. It is a space of projection on, and juxtaposition with, what seems to be “a place without a place.”<sup>75</sup>

The problem is that Hollywood South has used space in ways that reproduce social inequalities. Locational occupation has countered citizens’ mobility, and gentrification has displaced those who were most in need of public assistance after the storm. The film economy bolsters the worst features of the tourism economy by focusing on high-end consumption rather than sustainable production. Hollywood South may be a heterotopia, but we must remember that even imagined places are located in real spaces. Even the boat in Foucault’s example must have space to move in and through. It must have public goods, such as air and water. It must be governed and must direct others within their borders. The problem with the heterotopic Hollywood South is that it seems more real than the people who happen to occupy the same spaces.<sup>76</sup>

