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How Should We Memorialize Slavery?

A case study of what happens when research collides with public memory

By Marc Parry

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CLAIRE BANGSER FOR THE CHRONICLE

Rashauna Johnson stands outside Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, a bar symbolically connected to multiple histories of slavery.

In the aftermath of Charlottesville's violent white-supremacist rally, Americans are waging a renewed culture war over Confederate monuments. But a more complicated question lurks beneath the upheaval over what to do with these statues, one that will linger once the TV cameras have moved on. After a community takes down Confederate relics, how should citizens and scholars remember and memorialize the slave system those rebels fought to preserve?

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New Orleans exemplifies that dilemma. The city's mayor, Mitch Landrieu, won national attention in May for a speech that dismantled the bogus Civil War history enshrined in Confederate monuments. But in defending his city's removal of those statues, Landrieu also demanded that New Orleanians reckon with their city's history of bondage. "New Orleans was one of America's largest slave markets: a port where hundreds of thousands of souls were bought, sold, and shipped up the Mississippi River to lives of forced labor, of misery, of rape, and of torture," he said. The lack of monuments to that past amounted to "historical malfeasance, a lie by omission."

Landrieu's remarks mirrored decades of research that has recast the former French and Spanish colony, once seen as a place apart in U.S. history, as the beating heart of the country's 19th-century slave-powered expansion. The city has become a case study of what happens when slavery scholarship collides with public memory. Perhaps the ultimate case study: It's hard to think of an American metropolis that presents more challenges to reconciling those tensions than "the city that care forgot,"

a tourism-dependent destination that traffics as much in historical fantasy as in history.

At least, that's how it seemed one warm, cloudless Sunday morning not too long ago, as a Dartmouth College historian, Rashauna Johnson, guided me on a tour of her native city's hidden slave landmarks. For Johnson, 34, Landrieu's speech was "shocking," partly because you don't expect a mayor to "sound almost like a cutting-edge historian," but also because he acknowledged that slavery happened in the city at all. That legacy never came up during her education at one of the city's finest high schools, says Johnson, who went on to spend years researching the subject for a book she published in 2016, *Slavery's Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans During the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge University Press). Her study sprang from a basic question: Where were the city's enslaved people?

Reckoning With Slavery

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"I still marvel at this massive disconnect between how central it is — and how historians and certain people know how central and how important this institution was here — and how absent it is from the present landscape," says Johnson, who is herself a descendant of slaves from rural Louisiana. "It speaks to just how much work has to go into completely erasing the history of something that was once common knowledge."

The present landscape, on this particular morning, feels like an outdoor fraternity party set in a historical theme park. Our walk coincides with the final day of a 23-stage jazz-and-food showcase called the French Quarter Festival. The streets of the *Vieux Carré*, the oldest part of the city, smell of fried dough, spilled beer, and weed. Beads hang from trees. Vendors hawk jazz-themed paintings. Revelers carry green plastic cocktail cups shaped like grenades.

It's a safe bet most of them are not here to meditate on human bondage. But Johnson leads me to the spot they would probably visit if they did want to learn about slavery in New Orleans. It's a circular, stone-paved space tucked away in a corner of Louis Armstrong Park just beyond the French Quarter, with a scuffed, brown historical marker that draws a steady stream of pilgrims. This is the area today recognized as Congo Square. In the antebellum period, it was one of the only places in the country where slaves could drum and dance on Sundays. Scholars trace the roots of jazz to the pulsing circles of slave dancers that could comprise as many as 500 or 600 people.

Johnson speaks of Congo Square with a mix of respect and ruefulness. "At the risk of seeming flippant," she writes in *Slavery's Metropolis*, "only in New Orleans could the paradigmatic site of slavery be a party." Her point is that an exclusive focus on what enslaved people accomplished in their scant leisure moments presents a warped picture of how slavery functioned. "The way that the systematic exploitation of enslaved people and their labor was foundational to the creation and growth of the city — that story has to be told alongside the powerful story that's being told at Congo Square."

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Though the streetscape hasn't caught up, that story has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in history books. Early New Orleans had long been

known for its large community of free black people. But Johnson entered her profession as a series of major studies focused fresh attention on the history of slavery in the city and neighboring areas, connecting that story to national and trans-Atlantic processes of cultural, economic, and political development.

In *Slave Country* (Harvard University Press, 2005), Adam Rothman traced how decades of post-Revolutionary conquest, migration, and diplomacy transformed the areas that would become Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama into major suppliers of slave-grown sugar and cotton. In *Soul By Soul* (Harvard, 1999), Walter Johnson showed the centrality of the New Orleans slave market to U.S. economic and social life prior to the Civil War, a period when roughly one million slaves were forcibly transported from the upper South to the lower South. In *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Michael A. Gomez charted the history of Southern slaves' cultural transition from African to African-American.

Some of the most lauded history books in recent years have examined slavery's role in the coming of capitalism. Pick up any of those works, and New Orleans emerges as an epicenter of slavery. Here's how Walter Johnson, in *River of Dark Dreams* (Harvard, 2013), depicts it from the viewpoint of a Mississippi River traveler in 1850: "Downriver was the great city of New Orleans: the commercial emporium of the Midwest, the principal channel through which Southern cotton flowed to the global economy and foreign capital came into the United States, the largest slave market in North America, and the central artery of the continent's white overseers' flirtation with the perverse attractions of global racial domination."

Rashauna Johnson's work builds on this body of literature in a way that reveals just how difficult it could be for modern residents to fully absorb and commemorate their city's complex slave history. To illustrate that complexity, she takes me to a bar.

When tourists look at the piano bar and lounge known as Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, they see a quaint Bourbon Street relic. The dilapidated brick building, said to be built

in the early 18th century, advertises itself as perhaps "the oldest structure used as a bar in the United States." Its sign notes that the brothers Lafitte, Jean and Pierre, allegedly used it as a smuggling base between 1772 and 1791. Today the bar is known for a bourbon-and-Everclear mixture called "purple voodoo." You feel almost drunk just looking at its unevenly sloped roof, which seems on the verge of collapse.

When Johnson sits down at one of the inked-up wooden tables — "Kristina & Becky's YOLO CRUISE," reads one of its many inscriptions — what she sees is a place symbolically connected to multiple histories of slavery. One of those histories is about trading. The Lafittes were pirates who engaged in a variety of commerce, including the traffic in slaves, so slaves probably circulated in places like this as goods. The other history is about boozing. Formal and informal drinking spots filled early New Orleans. Though it exposed them to danger, slaves managed to patronize these "places of riot and intoxication," as Johnson shows in *Slavery's Metropolis*.

The tavern story is one piece of Johnson's broader effort to map an alternative geography of New Orleans. She developed her project in the shadow of Hurricane Katrina. What struck her then was the gap between the mythical image people had of New Orleans — fun, fluid, racially transgressive — and their sudden discovery of its abiding poverty. "I wanted to look deeper into the city's history, and to think about the ways that that kind of pervasive material inequality … was baked into and built into a society based on slavery," Johnson says. "It would be impossible to understand what we saw in 2005 or what we see in the present without really thinking about this longer history."

Slavery scholars often complain about the archives, in part because their subjects usually did not leave behind enough records to trace their lives. But when Johnson, who was a graduate student at New York University, began her research in 2006, she found thousands upon thousands of documents attesting to slavery's importance in New Orleans. One of the first records she discovered, for example, detailed the minute tasks enslaved people performed on public chain gangs, like paving streets and

cleaning up stalls in the market. Johnson's growing awareness of slaves' ubiquity provoked a new question: If enslaved laborers were circulating all over the city, how did the city's elite maintain social control in a place that even then was known for disorder?

Slavery's Metropolis argues that the emergence of New Orleans as a modern city hinged on this contested process of manipulating and harnessing slave labor. The book zooms in on a transformative period in the city's ascent from colonial backwater to emerging powerhouse. These were the years between the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, whose aftermath drove thousands of free people of color and slaves to the city, and the close of the War of 1812, which climaxed in 1815 with Andrew Jackson's defeat of the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Each chapter of her "spatial history" focuses on a place or on circuits of migration. In one, for example, she looks at the management of slaves in the jail. In another, she follows the trajectories that took people of African descent from Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) to Cuba to Louisiana, focusing on how people became enslaved in New Orleans.

Johnson's larger aim is to expand our notion of how slavery worked. We are used to thinking about the system in terms of remote plantations that restricted mobility. That's captured in the movie *12 Years a Slave*, when Solomon Northup arrives at a plantation that feels like a hermetically sealed universe unto itself. But the New Orleans of *Slavery's Metropolis* lacked such stark boundaries: slaves here, free people there. Slave circulation was not only permitted, it was required to build the city's infrastructure. Slaves worked as couriers, peddlers, newspaper deliverers. And they had their own ideas about where they should be (sneaking into parties, say).

So how do you go about memorializing all of that?

"If you just step back for a second, the whole city is a memorial to slavery," says Walter Johnson, a Harvard University historian. "The levee is a slave-built levee. The entire

economic development of the city was premised upon slavery. All the buildings were built by enslaved people or free people of color."

He adds, "You could memorialize the city of New Orleans with a million markers of which enslaved people lived there, which enslaved people worked there, which enslaved people built this."

Something in that spirit does exist in Louisiana. In 2014 a retired New Orleans trial lawyer and real-estate magnate turned a former indigo and sugar plantation into what has been promoted as America's first museum focused wholly on slavery. Across the South, historic plantation homes are major destinations for weddings and other tourism. But visitors to this museum, Whitney Plantation, experience the flip side of that sanitized charm: the plantation as slave labor camp. Exhibits include a granite memorial to 107,000 enslaved people listed in the "Louisiana Slave Database" built by the historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall. Another memorial there honors what Adam Rothman, a historian at Georgetown University, labels "the largest slave rebellion in the history of the United States": a brutally defeated 1811 uprising in the sugar areas above New Orleans. The memorial displays dozens of brown ceramic heads mounted on steel stakes.

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When I visited Whitney Plantation, a wall inside the museum was plastered with colorful notes left by visitors attesting to how the experience had affected them. A blue note read simply, "WOKE."

But Whitney Plantation is in a rural area on the west bank of the Mississippi, an hour's bus ride from New Orleans. The city itself lacks a permanent museum exhibit on the history of slavery. Back in the jazz-happy French Quarter, Rashauna Johnson could only imagine the impact of New Orleans opening a Whitney-like destination. "The

rural plantation that's somewhere else spatially and somewhere else temporally can be a little bit easier to digest," she says. "Having it right here does a different thing in terms of forcing us to think about the ways that that institution could function at the heart of what feels like a deeply fluid, heterogeneous society."

The city has made some progress. In 2015, after mostly avoiding the subject for decades, the Historic New Orleans Collection, a museum and research center, presented an exhibit called "Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808-1865." The show spotlighted the stories of families and communities torn apart by one of history's biggest forced migrations. It also looked at the many industries, including health care, insurance, and banking, "whose operations intersected with and were in large part supported by the trade," according to Erin M. Greenwald, the exhibit's curator.

Still, New Orleans lags behind other former centers of the domestic slave trade in commemorating that history, as Greenwald noted last year in a *Times-Picayune* op-ed co-written with Joshua D. Rothman, a historian at the University of Alabama. Natchez, Miss., has a memorial and signs dedicated to the trade. Richmond, Va., has a walking trail that explains the pre-eminent role the city played as an exporter of slaves to the Deep South. "It's only since Katrina that the city and the tourism industry have begun to understand that the public is actually seeking a much more complicated narrative" than the celebratory ode to New Orleans's uniqueness, Greenwald says. Plans are in the works to put up at least eight slave-trade markers by the end of 2018.

As Johnson and I wind down our walk, we discover one of the new signs. The placard sits beneath a canopy of leaves on Esplanade Avenue, near an elegant gray building with a wrought-iron balcony. It marks the former site of a slave pen where Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, was sold into slavery in 1841.

A tourist comes up behind us, hoping to have a look at the sign.

“Did you want to take a picture?” I say to the woman, offering to move out of the way.

“Yeah,” the woman says. “I saw the movie.”

Marc Parry is a senior reporter at The Chronicle.

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OPINION

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