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From a Protosuburban Past to a Postsuburban Future

Thank you, Roger, for such a compelling and provocative delineation of the central place of suburbanization in urban geography. As someone whose work is not situated in urban theory, your talk has certainly provided an education for me, but also some new ways of thinking about and through my work on New Orleans, tourism, and spatial justice. Until now, my work on race and contemporary tourism in New Orleans has engaged very little with the interrelationship between the urban core and its periphery, but looking at the city's historical development illuminates some of the processes that Roger so eloquently described. I'm thinking particularly of the ways that New Orleans' physical, cultural, and social geographies have been shaped by a constantly shifting tension and reciprocity between the city and its environs.

Beginning in the late 18th century, New Orleans' original suburbs, the faubourgs, emerged: Faubourg Ste. Marie (the current Central Business District, or CBD, where this plenary session is being held), Faubourg Tremé, and Faubourg Marigny were originally plantations subdivided and developed into residential lots, transforming these areas that are now so closely tied to the city's urban identity, from country to city. During the antebellum period, the lucrative sugarcane and cotton plantations situated upriver from the city fueled New Orleans' economic growth and its central place in the domestic slave trade, making New Orleans the largest slave market in the United States. The city's urban geography of slavery produced what the historian Walter Johnson describes as "a pyramidal network of information gathering and slave selling

that stretched from the slave pens through the city's hotels and barrooms…. The lively traffic in information and influence that joined the slave traders to the hotels and bars where travelers and traders gathered and discussed their business suggests that the practice of trading slaves far outreached the cluster of pens publicly identified as 'the slave market'" (Johnson, 2001, p. 52). Slavery was not relegated to the outlying plantations or even the slave pens on the outskirts of the city, but insinuated itself into the urban commons.

Plantation slavery's imprint on the urban landscape was also evident in a settlement pattern characterized by racial and ethnic diversity – though not equality – in the antebellum and postbellum periods, as many black residents in the city lived in slave quarters and domiciles in close proximity to whites. As the cultural geographer Richard Campanella documents, the city's topography further demarcated the more desirable city center from the flood-prone back-of-town where the city's poor and African Americans were often relegated. Throughout the 19th century, New Orleans' character and demography continued to change with the reunification of municipalities and the annexation of outlying cities that further expanded the urban footprint. By the 20th century, new technologies in water management, drainage, and transportation facilitated suburban living within the city limits. After World War II, New Orleans' suburbanization followed the more traditional North American model of suburban growth from the inner core (Campanella, 2007, pp. 705–711). These historical trends belie the oversimplified bifurcation of suburb and city that Roger so rightly critiques.

Yet, whereas Roger turns his attention to postsuburban developments, for me, the New Orleans example that aligns most closely with his notion of the suburb as a "place of disorder and possibility" might best be viewed as a protosuburban phenomenon, that of New Orleans'

neutral ground. In New Orleans parlance, “neutral ground” refers to a street median, a usage attributed to the nineteenth-century division of the city into Creole and American municipalities. However, the term was first used in southwest Louisiana to designate a disputed colonial territory between France and Spain. Campanella argues that in this first usage, “neutral ground” denoted “an unusual cultural interstice where isolated Spanish, French, African and indigenous peoples interacted in a power vacuum, a space without a hegemon” (Campanella, 2015). Given New Orleans’ treacherous topography, political instability, and diverse demography in the colonial and territorial periods, such neutral grounds proliferated as Africans, Afro-Creoles, and Native Americans sought out and created spaces beyond the purview of slave owners and government authorities (See, for example, Bell, 1997; Dawdy, 2008; Hall, 1995; Powell, 2012; Scott, 2005, pp. 11–29; Usner, 1992). These protosuburban enclaves anticipated the vibrancy and prolificacy of the “global urban periphery” that Roger describes.

Maroon colonies epitomized this type of disorderly protosuburban peripheral space. They developed throughout the New World as safe havens, cooperative economies, and cultural repositories for African and indigenous fugitives from slavery and settler colonialism. The most well-known of these colonies in early New Orleans was that of St. Malo, the larger-than-life leader of runaway slaves who traversed the Louisiana swamps in the late 18th century. St. Malo’s territory encompassed the labyrinthian swamps, lagoons, and trenasses between Lake Pontchartrain, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Mississippi River on the outskirts of New Orleans. Although he was eventually captured and summarily executed for killing white men who invaded the territory, St. Malo and his compatriots defended the settlement from invasion by white settlers and slave owners for four years between 1780 and 1784. St. Malo and other

maroons risked recapture, torture, and death in pursuit of freedom and autonomy in this alternative society in the borderland between city and periphery, between slavery and freedom.

Some of the more commonplace indictments leveled against suburbs that Roger outlined in his talk – geographical inaccessibility, environmental detriment, economic inefficiency – were subverted in the maroon settlements. Despite – or more, accurately, because of – the potential dangers of the Louisiana wetlands, their isolation and near impermeability offered real advantages to maroons and other Afro-Creoles for whom the treacherous terrain served as a deterrent for those trying to remand them to slavery. Maroons subsisted, in large part, on the natural environment by planting and harvesting fruit and vegetables, fishing and hunting, and creating handicraft from the habitat where they lived. The maroon economy served as a direct challenge to the slave economy. Maroons traded their produce, fish, game, and crafts in exchange for ammunition and supplies. Many maroons supplemented their income by working in nearby cypress sawmills for white owners who ignored the law against hiring fugitives to pursue their own profit. Unlike the sawmill owners and slave owners, however, maroons shared their own profits equally within their community. As a significant numerical minority in colonial Louisiana, whites could not contain the system of *marronage*. For the most part, they accepted the practice as an inconvenient reality of living in a chaotic, lawless territory where it was often difficult to distinguish white from black, slave from free, criminal from colonial official. This reality made it easier for maroons like St. Malo to move between plantation, marshland, and city without arousing suspicion. These fluid communities were integral in the development and sustenance of New Orleans' Afro-Creole culture (Din, 1999, pp. 89–115; Diouf, 2016, pp. 157–185; Hall, 1995, pp. 201–236; Powell, 2012, pp. 222–248; Woods, 2017, pp. 12–14; 17–18).

Just as Roger has convincingly shown how the study of the postsuburban world is integral to understanding the urban condition, I am interested in how the protosuburban maroon colony might inform 20th- and 21st-century efforts by black New Orleanians to carve out their own urban neutral grounds: cultural, political, and economic spaces resistant to the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism and neo-Bourbonism, a term coined by the urban geographer Clyde Woods to describe the new power structure that emerged in the wake of the civil rights movement. Appropriating largely symbolic tenets of the black freedom struggle, the neo-Bourbonist regime "used urban renewal, the War on Poverty, new suburban political allies, new policing practices, and other policies to defeat the intensifying movements for sustainable development and social justice" (Woods, 2017, p. 180). In opposition to this regime, Woods identifies a blues epistemology that animated the resistant cultural practices of New Orleans' working-class communities. He suggests that this blues agenda had its origins in the maroons' colonial settlements: "Their secret places, religious practices, songs, ethics, and social vision became the pillars of a parallel social order" (Woods, 2017, p. 13).

These pillars, in turn, have supported the parading, musical, and social traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians, jazz funerals, second line parades, social aid and pleasure clubs, Baby Dolls, and other grassroots social groups so central to New Orleans' place identity. Whereas maroons staked a claim and forged a community in the hinterlands beyond the city, these modern-day practitioners lay claim on the urban commons, transforming city space for their own purposes. As the anthropologists Helen Regis and Rachel Breunlin explain,

> As for as long as black New Orleanians have been marginalized, they have also created their own organizations that constitute a subaltern mainstream. For hundreds of years,

> African American communities have organized themselves into social clubs in the New Orleans second-line tradition, participating in a long-standing sociopolitical tradition of self- help, mutual aid, and resistance to structures of oppression. They also publicly register their refusal to be defined by others, by the mainstream media, and by the depressing statistics that typically describe their communities. They create their own social networks, institutions, and events that provide opportunities for public recognition and esteem. Although invisible to other sectors of society, individual and larger social identities develop that are nonetheless extremely powerful in their own communities." (Breunlin and Regis, 2006, p. 746)

As these scholars make clear, when black New Orleanians parade in public streets and parks, their processions are not simply entertainment and should not be confused with the commodified performances stripped of subversive power staged by the tourism industry. By taking "collective ownership of the streets," these marginalized residents create new forms of community in opposition to the political, social, and economic status quo (Regis, 2001, p. 756). Their performances, masking practices, music, rituals, and alternative visions of the urban commons disrupts "the domain of the predictable and the controllable" that Roger attributes to the modern city. Instead, they invoke the chaos and communalism of the protosuburban maroon colonies.

Though guilty of the very city-suburb dualism that Roger cautions against, the American Studies scholar George Lipsitz's description of racially marginalized residents' spatialization of the city is strikingly similar to the protosuburban community developed by St. Malo and his fellow fugitives:

> Ghetto and barrio residents turn segregation into congregation. They augment the use value of their neighborhoods by relying on each other for bartered services and goods; by mobilizing collectively for better city services; by establishing businesses geared to a local ethnic clientele; and by using the commonalities of race and class as a basis for building pan-neighborhood alliances with residents of similar neighborhoods to increase the responsibility, power, and accountability of local government. Black neighborhoods generate a spatial imaginary that favors public expenditures for public needs." (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 14)

The irony, of course, is that this spatial imaginary has been thwarted by one of the widespread postsuburban developments that Roger alludes to, but doesn't elaborate on, in his talk, namely "the frantic reurbanization, densification and hypercompacting of inner cities, often in line with dynamic gentrification and segregation processes." In New Orleans, the trend toward market-based redevelopment was accelerated after Hurricane Katrina, as the suspension of government regulations generated profit for the private sector, at the expense of poor and black residents. Combined with the displacement of nearly a hundred thousand black New Orleanians, the demolition of public housing, and the disproportionate investment in tourism infrastructure and marketing campaigns, post-Katrina New Orleans is a richer, whiter, more racially segregated, and more economically unequal city (Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED), 2016, p. 3; Krupa, 2011).

Like the maroons who defended their territory from white invaders, Black New Orleanians have relied on a range of strategies to resist these policies. Through political protest and participatory public performance, they continue the battle between bondage and fugitivism,

between enclosure and a new commons. As the success of the recent multiracial grassroots effort to remove monuments to the Confederacy demonstrate, sometimes these battles are won, and a new generation of maroons seek out modern-day neutral grounds, spaces without hegemons. In their "Open Letter to the Residents of New Orleans," the organization Take 'Em Down New Orleans articulates their vision for the city: "The New Orleans family is defined by the diverse and inclusive nature of its culture in spaces both public and private. Public spaces are for all of the public and should not be used to promote the abhorrent views of the white ruling class to uphold symbols of Black oppression" (Take 'Em Down NOLA Coalition, n.d.). Despite the resonance of this alternative view of the commons, its realization remains elusive.

In post-Katrina New Orleans, many poor and working-class African Americans, including those whose labor and cultural traditions support the city's dominant service economy, can no longer afford to live there. Following the international trends that Roger discussed in his talk, African Americans have joined recent Latino immigrants in migrating to neighboring suburban parishes. While the black population in the city of New Orleans has decreased, the suburbs have diversified (Adelson, 2015; Krupa, 2011). The suburban parishes surrounding New Orleans are no Brampton, at least not yet. But, they do recall what Roger refers to as the "real and imagined inbetween frontiers of the city and its outside." The protosuburban maroon colonies also occupied an inbetween frontier. Perhaps the protosuburb of the maroon colony will reemerge in the postsuburb of metropolitan New Orleans, the neutral ground of the future?

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