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John Foley

*University of New Orleans*

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**New Orleans' French Quarter: Framing diverse visions of urban living**

John Foley

College of Urban & Public Affairs

University of New Orleans

New Orleans, LA 70148

Foleyjm@aol.com

Universidad Central de Venezuela

Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo

Caracas, Venezuela

## **New Orleans' French Quarter: Framing diverse visions of urban living**

The French Quarter in New Orleans, a diverse and homogeneous area of unique historic character, is the locus of study. It is an area pregnant with tensions between development interests tied to tourism supported by local political and economic interests, and preservation concerns that have been defended by long standing neighborhood movement organizations.

This research addresses the question of how, within these overarching development and preservation frames, subframes can be identified that incorporate elements of diversity/exclusivity (how different groups, minority racial groups, gays, gutter punks, transient tourists, local lower paid service workers, etc., are considered acceptable or not), homogeneity/heterogeneity (tolerance of noise, mixed uses, tourist activities, etc.), as well as different visions of what preservation of historic buildings implies. Incorporated in the analysis is concern for the way these frames are constructed in the process of neighborhood organizing and through “life-politics,” and how they are related to the unfolding of specific controversies over intervention in the French Quarter.

The new social movement literature (as represented in Laraña, Johnston and Gutfield 1994; Johnston and Klandermans 1995) is used as a guide to link these aspects to more general social and political processes of change as well as pointing to relevant forms of analysis and interpretation (Hunt, Snow and Benford, 1994, Melucci 1989, Taylor and Whittier, 1995). The work of Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992) is used in relation to the formation of individual lifestyles and the politicization of daily life.

The principal data sources are my conversations (Kvale 1996) with neighborhood activists and sympathizers as well as participant observation of neighborhood movement, planning and other meetings.

In this paper, three elements which could be considered sub-frames, are used to analyze the data; communication, diversity and tolerance. These are then viewed in relation to specific minority groups: the gay and Black communities. It provides descriptive elements which help understand why the French Quarter is such a unique place, and why neighbors defend it with such tenacity. It is also the base of a vision of the Quarter as a diverse and tolerant neighborhood which is the image that neighbors defend as strongly as they do the physical environment. At the same time, tolerance is not uniform and some groups may find more tolerance than others.

The relevance of the work lies in a desire to give voice to residents of an urban area, to understand their capacity, individually or as organized groups, to influence the place in which they live. Following Patsy Healey (1997) I feel there is a need to incorporate, more explicitly, this diversity in processes of urban intervention and I think this type of analysis suggests a way that this can be done.<sup>1</sup> It aims, also at understanding if relatively affluent neighborhood movements can have an oppositional role capable of bringing about change. Initially it seems that they do, especially in emphasizing the importance of diversity as a vital aspect of neighborhood preservation and their tolerance of diverse lifestyle, social and racial groups. The creation of a “safe” space for the flourishing of certain minority groups could have significant effect on the dominant discourse, for instance questioning the role of the traditional family. But there are limits to the degree that this dominant discourse can be questioned because of the very status of the people involved and their desire to preserve their economic and social capital.

*Communication; “how you doin’ darling?”*

More than just the protection of the physical structures, since the 1920s, has been the aim of the preservation movement in the Quarter. Preservation has been tied to the maintenance of the residential base for a diverse population (Raffray 1993, 3). Today, existing residents assign great importance to the sense of community that exists in the Quarter. Of the twenty-eight conversations with people living in or closely associated with the Quarter, twenty-three expressed the importance of the ease of communication between denizens.<sup>2</sup>

They frequently refer to it as being a small neighborhood, a village within the city. Ophelia for example, says, “it is a village. It's a small town surrounded by a city and by water.” With this goes a sense of community and civility. The two terms most used to describe the area are community and neighborhood. Thus again we get the idea that here there is much more than a collection of historic buildings. As Chris says, “It's really a sense of community. It's not just the buildings but really a community that lives here.” However, it is not a community or village in a closed and conservative conception because this still “has a big city atmosphere” (Beth).

In such a place constant contacts are facilitated. In the day to day activities of Quarterites, many carried out on foot, contacts are made out on the street, with known people. Francis expresses a common sentiment: “You can't go out on the street really without running into people that you know.” Many of these contacts are casual and come about by the regularity with which denizens use the street and the familiarity and confidence that this creates. Residents get to know who belongs and whom they think they can trust. It is friendly. Like Roberta you can be welcomed “with open arms.” She does, however, remind us that this is no idyl as she comments that she knows people on her block who never communicate with anybody. Similarly

Mike, an older resident, who laments the invasion of the Quarter by “strangers,” comments on a neighbor who moved in two years ago and has not spoken to him yet. Thus, while neighbors are generally tolerant of different people, they do not look favorably on people who do not maintain civility, conscious of the fact that communication is an essential base of the defense of the Quarter as a residential neighborhood.

So the street is the arena for social contacts where people recognize each other and communicate. Betty loves to talk to people going up and down the street and has a whole group of friends that she says she will never know off the sidewalk. These are thought important because she sees them as people important in her life: She says. “They are people I care about and they really like me I think . . . there are Black men my age who walk down the street and we meet each other they will say: ‘how you doin’ darling?’ and I don't feel threatened.” It gives her great satisfaction that she is able to communicate in a friendly way with diverse types of people. “I am just so elated that a man who is a stranger to me, who is a Black person, is comfortable saying to me ‘how are you darling?’ and it has made me happy that he is comfortable with me and I am comfortable with him.”

These are friendships of great significance for residents many of whom carry out their social life almost exclusively in the Quarter. For many, this is family. Such relationships could be thought of in terms of the “new kin ties” developed not through the taken for granted kin relationships, but through the negotiated relationships more typical of late modernity (Giddens 1992, 96). As is the case of any extended non-kin family, this has practical repercussions. The sense of community gives a feeling of protection—people look out for each other and can be counted on in the case of emergencies. Cathy again points out that, although you may not be intimate friends with everybody, neighbors “look out for each other.” Such concern translates

into genuine care when older or sick people are involved and Quarterites are especially desirous to look after, and keep in their homes, older residents who have been so important in the history of the Quarter. Roberta, for example explains: “There are many people who live in the Quarter, who like me, do not have family networks or they are alienated from their families . . . What will happen here is somebody will see after them. There are people carrying food. There are people getting food and carrying to sick people more that you would guess . . . They know each other well enough that this one has chosen to take care of him till he gets well.” While I was talking to Roberta, I noticed a large number of keys on her key ring and assumed that she had many locks on her doors. In fact she explained to me that she had four sets of keys of the houses of friends who she “looks out for” in different ways.

The communication between neighbors has other practical implications. Communication between neighbors makes easier identifying problems and notifying the appropriate local government agencies of infractions. First of all Frances sees the very fact of living in such a close neighborhood and knowing everybody stimulates community activism. Stella too sees this relationship: “we do have a lot of neighborhood atmosphere which is very important. And I think that everybody works together to maintain that.” There is considerable disagreement between organizations with regard to how the neighborhood is “maintained” through what Chris calls, “the way we come together for different causes and the way that we disagree and at the same time remain friends.” She adds, “You know, we all have the same goal in mind, sometimes we don't get there the same route but all of us really want to see this place where we can all live, and we can.”

Thus, one of the basic values in the Quarter is the possibility it offers for easy communication between a diverse group of people. This makes it much more than just a

collection of historic buildings, although without doubt its physical structure is an important factor favoring communication. The relationships created through such regular contacts are important for creating a protective and nurturing environment suitable for certain minorities such as older people. The facilitation of communication is something to be protected, requiring both the preservation of the space in which it occurs, and the diverse population which makes it worthwhile.

*Diversity of social groups; "everyone is welcome."*

Norman reiterates the importance of communication. It is not any communication but one where you can have a diversity of contacts; you "get to know people you wouldn't otherwise ever come into contact with." This is associated with the tolerance of diverse social groups. What it means is that friends and acquaintances can be drawn from diverse groups both because of their occupational status and because of their lifestyles. This is considered a positive aspect of living in the Quarter and is mentioned in the conversations by a similar number of persons (twenty-three of twenty-eight) who had stressed community and communication.

People relish contacts with people that they would not find within more homogeneous social circles. First of all there are varied occupational class groups. For example, Andrew speaks of this as being the only place he has found such diversity, "where Bank presidents live next to bar tenders . . . Usually, every place else becomes one extreme or the other." Or in a similar vein, according to Queenie where "a bar tender, or a person that waits tables can be very good friends with a doctor or a famous lawyer, or a movie star." Such a situation, in part, results from the existence of rental properties of greatly varying qualities and size. Importantly, residents recognize the importance of this mixture and fear that it could be challenged by raising

costs. Elizabeth reflects this, “So you have got a wide range of people, and I think that's what makes the Quarter.”

Diversity is also achieved because of the existence of varied lifestyles. Ulysses says, “We have some of the seediest characters in the world in the French Quarter. That diversity adds to the kind of mystique of the Quarter and, to some sense, to the enjoyment.” Glen refers to the people she meets in local neighborhood meetings; “we have got people in Harley Davison outfits and dread locks up to doctors and lawyers, and you know . . . Yes the diversity of people is one of the most interesting things in the Quarter.”

In so much as the racial and ethnic mixture of the Quarter, over the last fifty years the Black population has decreased in both relative and absolute terms (See CUPA 1992, A-10). Cathy laments; “I think we need all kinds of people, I think we need to appreciate all kinds of people. We know all kinds of people. We don't have any Black people living down here anymore.” However, racial diversity is accepted in a neighborhood with a very heterogeneous working and visiting population. As Danny puts it; “all of us really want to see this place where we can all live, and we can, you know, we can live whether it be for raising children, whether it can be what we could call a relationship out of marriage, or whether..it is just a place where everyone is welcome, regardless of who they are, what their race, and what their economic status.” Perhaps political correctness inhibits a genuine expression of feelings in this respect but Andrew succinctly sums up the generally expressed sentiment. “I don't think it really matters if you are gay, heterosexual, black, white or mixed.”

The result is that the French Quarter for Andres is “filled with the most wonderful eclectic group of people that you could find in a couple of blocks in any place in the world. It's absolutely fantastic.”

*Tolerance of diversity; “you gotta open your mind a little bit.”*

Tolerance is a term that people in the Quarter use frequently to describe their attitude to diversity. Tolerance, in this context, is respect for others opinions, their ways of thinking and acting, their difference (Prieur 1998, 66). It was mentioned 44 times by respondents in this sense.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally the Quarter, during this century, has had a reputation as a bohemian place: “The Quarter meant ease, tolerance and the enjoyment of life” (Wilkenson 1985, 55).

Specific reference is made in this section to tolerance seen as the acceptance of diverse lifestyles or behaviors. As with diverse social groups, there is a tolerance of diversity which could be thought as a special feature of the Quarter and distinguishes it from other areas of New Orleans and suburban areas in general. Peter for example finds it unlike other parts of the city because he sees people in the Quarter as “more open minded, as more tolerant of differences.” As before, this is related to the way people live close together, therefore attracting “a lot of people, people who are tolerant of other people.”

It is a live and let live attitude where people are thought not to meddle in each other's business nor to be judgmental of the other's lifestyles. Previously we have seen the tolerance of different social groups. Also, there is an acceptance of behavior which elsewhere would be aberrant, scandalous, wild, crazy. There is permissiveness. Such behaviors are not thought to be threatening. Andrew, for example, covers a lot of these points: “aberrant behavior here is the norm. There are many things here we wouldn't blink an eye at here.” He compares it with other places where they would find such behavior “scandalous” whereas in the Quarter he thinks there is a “sense of permissiveness, of tolerance, you know about letting people do whatever they do as long as it doesn't affect the public well-being if you will.”

It is interesting to compare this “live and let live,” passive form of tolerance in which

“no judgement,” is made, or simply “people do not take any notice” (Beryl) of the fact that people “look out for each other.” A fairly difficult compromise has to be made between not taking notice and noticing when someone needs help, or something is amiss on the streets. However, the more passive tolerance of just “not seeing” is linked to a more explicit acceptance of diversity and difference. Residents are proud of their tolerance and see it as contributing to a continuing diversity of the Quarter, as something that in fact needs to be defended. For Norman it is the diversity which makes the Quarter as tolerant as it is, because people do not stand out as they would in a more homogeneous place. Using the vocabulary of the theoreticians of diversity he states: “I think the diversity of the Quarter probably makes it more tolerant of any type of difference, including races. They are very tolerant of just about any type of lifestyle . . . Obviously, you get plenty of people walking around and nobody looks out of place . . . like they would be in a more homogeneous neighborhood.” Beryl puts it more graphically. “You have really conventional Junior League types, you have very far out drag queens and you have everything in-between. You have the richest, the poorest, the whitest, the blackest, the..everything, but one common thread that I believe that you have is the people that live here value diversity and don't feel threatened by it.”

Beryl's reference to drag queens is an indication of the tolerance of gay lifestyles in the Quarter. This is a theme that will be developed separately but part of the conversation with Cathy is a good introduction. I asked her how the gay community had come to be tolerated and she referred me back to the fact that she had already mentioned that this was related to “the whole issue of diversity,” and that “people are accepting of difference.” So I again asked her if tolerance of gays was part of this whole issue of accepting diversity and if this had always been the case in the Quarter. I should add that Cathy is a long time resident of the Quarter, and is a

mature woman. She seemed a bit surprised at my insistence but added that she really didn't know because "it had never been an issue." Consequently Ken says of the gay community, "We are comfortable here . . . To make an investment in a piece of property here, for a gay man or a lesbian is to move into paradise."

At the same time, opinions differ considerably about the acceptance of different types of groups. There is a general level of tolerance, toward the gay community whereas others such as the homeless or gutter punks or grungies are often seen with distrust, as not belonging to the Quarter. However, there are differing opinions as the acceptability of all sorts of diversity.

In fact, neighbors feel that tolerance is a requisite for living in the Quarter; "you gotta open your mind a little bit." The question can be posed about whether people who move to the Quarter are already predisposed toward tolerance or they become tolerant through contact with diversity in the Quarter. Frances believes that only tolerant people move in. She says, "It's self-selecting because only people who are open minded can live here." For Ken, knowing that you will be living "next to a drag queen or a transsexual, or whatever" means that you have to be "open to it all." For others such as Wendy, moving to the Quarter is a revelation. "The two gentlemen that sold us our first house, they were two of the gracious gentlemen in the world, dear friends and in a relationship. That was an awakening." As in all, 'what comes first' questions there are no easy answers. A predisposition seems needed, this predisposition is molded by the concrete circumstances that exist, and these circumstances themselves are modified in the process.

What is interesting is that tolerance allows newcomers to find acceptance. Ken speaks of his multiethnic background which is almost a necessary quality in a Quarterite, and that, because of the Quarter's diversity, he feels "acceptance." This is important because it allows people to

develop their own lifestyles. Such a contention is reflected in Danny's remarks; "I do find it a place where I can express myself and I can be involved politically, socially and at the same time be an individual, keep my personal activities back without having it become a topic of discussion."

As usual, there are still limits. We have earlier seen that one of the aspects of diversity is the fact that the area hosts many visitors. Tensions are created by this influx of people from outside. The following comments of Norman regarding tourists introduce another theme where the positive value, this time of tolerance, can be stretched and becomes intolerance. "They feel that it's the place where they can come and do things they wouldn't do in their own neighborhood. I would certainly accept that's true in that the French Quarter is tolerant but we don't get any credit for the tolerance we have already exhibited. We already are hosts to 10 million people a year which is more than any other neighborhood and we do it very graciously. But there are limits."

A comment by David that some Quarterites are displaying a "gated community mentality" suggests that sometimes there are more serious challenges to the vision of tolerance. He goes on to speak of a certain group of more "recent arrivals" who want to convert the Quarter to their vision of life and when they do not succeed become disillusioned. Peter too refers to the decreasing levels of tolerance in the Quarter. He thinks that people are trying make the Quarter the "way they like it." Their model is the "suburban community." He adds; "they like some of the things but they don't want the other stuff that is kind of what has made the Quarter what it is. They come back and as my wife . . . says, it had become a rich man's ghetto. It's unfortunate." He concedes that it is still relatively tolerant but that "it just seems as though it is being sanitized, sort of."

Thus, questions of what is tolerated will have to be addressed. Are only the traits accepted that most approximate those exhibited by the dominant society and are most highly evaluated by them? <sup>4</sup> Observing the attendance at a variety of meetings where the community was involved, I often had the uncomfortable feeling that my contention that the Quarter's organizations are promoting alternative life styles seemed fragile when this looks like a quite conventional group and clearly identifiable with the middle and upper classes. Although tolerance of outsiders is professed by the residents, it is not displayed in the composition of the meetings concerning Quarter affairs.

In fact, it is not always easy to consolidate a vision where, because of diversity, all sorts of people blend in, with a vision like that of Ophelia, who was quoted earlier, as referring to people "looking right." She goes on to say, "I connect with you because you look right, you live here, you're a part of my world. It's really odd, after you are here for a while, you know the difference. Tourists stand out, whether they have a camera or not. It's just amazing. I like to know in my village that I know people."

Such concerns are relevant to the concept of "habitus" and how lifestyle can be expressed in the particular milieu in which contacts are made. "Demeanour is strongly influenced by the pluralisation of the milieu." People are expected to act in certain ways in certain milieu. (Giddens 1991, 100). This raises the problem that those seen not to have similar characteristics are felt to be just **too** different, thus potentially opening the way for exclusion—marginalization. Consciousness of the existence of a certain type of habitus, which is recognized as compatible with the mores of the group, encourages people to adopt those characteristics in a conscious or unconscious way (this does not negate the fact that the actual appearances may be very diverse). Certainly this consciousness implies, as Giddens describes, that the body becomes reflexively

mobilized—it is not just affected by modernity—individuals increasing concern for ‘control’ and ‘construction’ of body—body and lifestyle are integrated (Giddens 1991, 7).

In the concept of habitus developed by Bourdieu, this becomes a key to understanding how society reproduces itself in new ways without there being either a predetermined goal or everything being just a matter of chance. Furthermore, the persons and their physical representations are part of this form of reproduction. Thus the habitus is for Bourdieu (1993, 76) a system of dispositions acquired either consciously or unconsciously that produces forms of action consistent with a person’s goals without these being necessarily explicit. Individuals seek to maximize their “profits” but they may not be conscious of this or may even feel they act in a disinterested way. In other words, for the Quarterites, the reproduction of their privilege can be largely unconscious, but exists in the unquestioned primacy of their values and what is acceptable to them. Thus habitus implies a form of capital, but one which, “because it is embodied, appears as innate” (86). This leaves the question of tolerance open. Is tolerance then just a matter of tolerance based upon the values that I display, and ultimately designed to preserve all the different forms of capital that I possess? Or is there a tolerance that allows other values to develop related to other lifestyles and habitus that could ultimately challenge the dominant values?

*The gay community: “They had the right to their lives as well.”*

To examine the limits to tolerance two groups, the gay<sup>5</sup> and Black<sup>6</sup> communities will be examined. Both are groups for which more tolerance is displayed as opposed to others where there is seemingly less tolerance (homeless, grungies).

Attitudes toward gay people are uniformly tolerant. The responses of the informants vary

according to whether they are openly gay activists (those who identify themselves as gay and indicate their involvement with gay politics without being asked directly), gay non-activists (people who reveal their gayness in the interview or who I know are gay) or represent themselves as not being gay. Overall, respondents show some reservations with the more commercial and extreme gay behaviors—but no prejudice was expressed openly. I observed that respondents were not self-conscious about discussing this subject, their corporal expression did not indicate any distaste and often the subject was brought up spontaneously in conversation.

The gay presence in the Quarter is generally recognized for being important. It has become a center for gay culture similar to concentrations of gay population and social life in other major cities. Lester puts its early origins in the 1920s and sees its growth like other early places of gay concentration such as the North East area of San Francisco, Greenwich Village and West Hollywood. One gay informant speaks of the Quarter as home base, an area that has a special role in the development of the gay community,<sup>7</sup> its historical center, and, most definitely, the center of its social scene, spiritual home and playground. A place where gays feel there is very little prejudice against them. Although the Quarter may only be one of many options for gay people to live, there seems little doubt that the Quarter does have a concentration of gay cultural institutions (Knopp 1989, 1).

The non-gay respondents talk openly about gay people and are universally tolerant. In 1983 Edmund White spoke of his local informant's views that in the Quarter "homosexuality is quite free and accepted even by straights. Gay tourism is undeniably big business (237)." Today, people like Beryl fully accept this sector of the population, and, in her usual expressive way, states that, "I am probably the least anti-gay person that anybody could find, without being gay themselves . . . The only people's sexuality that's of concern, was my husbands." In fact, it is felt

that people who come to live in the Quarter must be prepared to tolerate gays. Victor speaks of people knowing that this is a “major Gay haven,” and it would be unrealistic to come with the attitude that “well I don't want to have anything to do with the Gay community. Because they know that they're moving into one of the most concentrated areas of it.”

The bohemian *live and let live* attitude that we have seen in relation to diversity extends to the gay community, and attitudes vary from those that simply see it as none of their business, considering the behavior of others as a private concern, to those who recognize the role that gay people have played in the preservation of the Quarter and stress the value of the gay community to the area. For many it is just not an issue. For others, the contact with the gay community has been enriching for their own lives.

Thus, some residents appreciate how the presence of the gay community somehow has a positive effect on their lives by introducing them to an unknown diversity or giving them access to different points of view, different experiences. Roberta, who came to the Quarter many years ago, expresses something of her acknowledgment of gay people despite a previous ignorance: “I did not know when I came to New Orleans that there were such people as gay people. It was not long before I began to think that there might be, and then concluded that there were. That was a different time, the early fifties. They were nice people and they had the right to their lives as well.”

This section shows that gay activism seeking greater equality for gay lifestyles, the recognizable efforts of gay people to preserve the Quarter, the establishment of gay social activities together with the investment of gay people in the establishment of business (not necessarily gay-orientated), and the existence of a population which is generally tolerant or learns to be tolerant, all contribute to the formation of a place where gay-lifestyles can be

developed relatively free from the acid gaze of intolerance and from the real dangers of the violence of homophobia. Lawrence Knopp (1989) has indicated that “The French Quarter's long tradition as relatively open center of gay culture afforded New Orleans gays a much greater opportunity to create integrated gay identities and lifestyles than was available in most other U.S. cities” (65, footnote 2). Various authors have pointed to certain urban areas as important for the growth of gay identity.<sup>8</sup> As Ken says they are places where “you can recognize that you're not the only one.” The importance of a sympathetic environment is very important to gay self-identity. Stanley Siegel & Ed Lowe, Jr. (1994), referring to the negative role models often perceived by males who recognize themselves as gay, say that “Contact with the gay subculture usually provides him with the kind of information he needs about homosexuality to challenge the image he receives and has received from the straight world, and he may begin to see more acceptable possibilities for his future self in homosexual personalities that he finds acceptable” (100). In such circumstances, places like the French Quarter can be especially important for development of gay identities, as well as being enriching for non-gay identities.

Nonetheless, there are people who feel there are problems due to the commercialization of gay lifestyles and the behavior of some individuals is offensive. Ken speaks, for example of the fact that “we have reached our peak as far as far as the commercialism of the gay community, both in terms of the numbers of people and in terms of what we can accommodate.” He feels that there are certain problems in areas where there are concentrations of gay bars, exacerbated in the time of festivities which attract gay people from many parts of the country. A neighbor in this area speaks of the “big gay weekends like Gay Pride, Southern Decadence” when the “people are out in Bourbon, into the street, and will not even let cars pass sometimes. People are fornicating on the street. It is so outrageous.”

Finally, at the end, what is the gay culture that is developing in the Quarter? Despite the importance of the Quarter as a symbolic and real center of gay social life and facilitator of the development of gay lifestyles, the question remains, are these lifestyles challenging to dominant values? Clearly they are if the reproduction function is stressed, but certainly as far as consumption is concerned, we must ask as does Browning (1996) if this is just becoming a gay consumer movement. In the aims of certain members of the gay community to sanitize the public displays of gay people, is there not something of withdrawal from the confrontation that was, and is, so important in the gay movement?

*The Black Community; “no disharmony?”*

The reduction of the Black population in the Quarter has already been mentioned. Residents are aware of this and because their numbers are small, they tend to “stand out” and be known by the residents. All of them speak of their Black neighbors with affection, worried that they will be displaced, thus converting the Quarter into a truly White residential ghetto. There is both a fear of losing diversity and of the political consequences of being seen as a “White elite enclave.” Jenny is genuinely affectionate in her comments; “There's some old folks, Black people that live across the street on the corner and probably have been there forever and a day. They are real nice folks. Particularly now on Burgundy you will find some places that look as if they are a little bit run down and frequently they will be inhabited by older Black people who have lived there for years and years.” She blames the reduction of the older Black population on property taxes that force old people out of their homes, and she laments that people like those can be forced out.

Cathy also reminds us of the important role played by the Black population, particularly

Black Creole artisans, in the construction of the Quarter. Not only was the Black population important in the construction, but also owned a good portion of the property in the Quarter. Wendy speaks of doing research and finding a large number of buildings owned by free persons of color. She found it “was unbelievable. I am talking about a very high percentage, of the whole Quarter, even the elite homes.” So for her Black people “did have their niche here.” Roberta finds that she knows of no disharmony between Black and White people living in the Quarter as both have common interests. Lester shows how the presence of Black people is not thought of as a threat when he speaks of the clients of a Black gay bar: “it's just a loud crowd . . . I don't mind that in as much as I feel like if people are out on the sidewalk, they're keeping it safe, and it's not a criminal crowd at all.” In fact, their presence is felt a symbol of security. However, he does make it clear that it is not his “social crowd.” Such a comment intimates that, generally, there still exists a clear division between racial groups in their social activities.

This separation between “us” and “them” remains, though Andrew, for example, feels that tolerance toward unions of mixed race has increased, and, for him, the separation between races is no longer valid. “ I remember a mixed couple of different races, people would look at them funny. In New Orleans I don't think people would even notice. If you ask me if a person was black or white, I would have to think, were they?” For him “we have some of the most beautiful people in the world because some have them have managed to get the genes of all the best. I remember reading something and it's somewhat true that . . . I'm trying to think of the word, the little girls who are both white and black and they are described as having the skin the color of moonlight and people like that are beautiful.” Such comments although clearly sympathetic show a willingness to use ones own values to qualify the others, either favorable or unfavorably, or to invest them with some objectified characteristics. Another familiar argument,

which implicitly seems to defend racism is the labeling of relations between Blacks themselves as racist. Frances for example speaks of “the racial prejudices that pervade the communities and by this I mean not only Whites against Blacks but also Blacks against Whites as well as light skinned Blacks against dark skinned Blacks and against Whites.”

Beryl also wants to see the positive side and states that “despite the politicians there is a great deal of goodwill between the races, don't you think?” However, she can note the hostility that does exist toward her: “Well I do think there are young blacks who have a lot of hostility and I see this mostly in the grocery store, where they are really are not as nice as they should be.” Clearly tensions exist, and the established White population may see young Black men who they do not recognize from the neighborhood as a potential threat. Resentment builds up on both sides. As groups we depend upon our individual characteristics and resent the fact that we too are essentialized as racists at the same time that we essentialize the other. Our defense against racism is our individual tolerance. Betty goes on: “And I think that sometimes I may be perceived by these people to be someone, because of my age, that I am a racist, which is something I have never been at all. I sent my children to public schools in the Mississippi delta which are primarily Black.” She adds that White people live here by choice, and if they hated Black people, they wouldn't be here. Such comments show that racism is seen in terms only of outright hatred and not in the way the dominant culture maintains privilege. She finishes saying it “it's sort of absurd for Black people to see me as an enemy.” It is difficult to remember that we have responsibilities both as a class and as individuals.

Another theme is the need to educate Black people so that they will come to appreciate the same things as the White population, such as the historic value of preservation of the French Quarter. Education sounds more like the desire to instill common cultural values from the

position of those that at present feel they have this knowledge, the White population. This is rather an extreme interpretation, but when remarks are extracted from their context they sound so. For instance, Wendy speaks of “educating Black people about their history and the history of the city,” or to meet with the Treme people “over the children musicians and dancers . . . To give them an education and all, so that they can not be the band from hell. So we have tried.”

With this theme, arriving at conclusions is far more difficult because of the delicate nature of this history of racism in the US and the unwillingness of most people to reveal their feelings. However, when the tolerance of gays is compared with the tolerance of Black people, it would seem that the latter is less unequivocal. While very little open racism is expressed, there is an underlying current of paternalism which indicates that few White people question the underlying assumptions of the dominant culture. That is to say it is the White cultural norms that are adopted in relation to evaluations as to what is acceptable.

Finally, this issue is tied to politics and the fact that local politics is dominated by Black politicians who could represent groups different to those of the predominantly White residents of the Quarter. There is considerable animosity toward the Black political establishment but in the end the cause is probably the distrust of politicians in general. Inevitably, it does introduce racial components into the relations between Black politicians and the predominantly White neighborhood groups.

#### *Points for further discussion*

There seems little doubt that New Orleans French Quarter presents a unique physical environment that neighborhood organizations have diligently sought to preserve during the last sixty years. However, neighbors are conscious that it is far more than the physical environment

which should be preserved. Residents have a strong attachment to place because of the opportunities it offers for communication with a diversity of lifestyle, social and racial groups. It is a nurturing environment that provides concrete rewards. Neighbors are proud of the tolerance displayed toward each other and to strangers. At the same time, there are limits to what is accepted. These limits are determined by the particular histories of the predominantly White affluent population which are the prime force of continuity in the neighborhood movements. This population appears extremely tolerant of minorities, but finally, what is tolerated depends on their values, even though these values are open to a great deal of reflection because this is a relatively open neighborhood subject to a great diversity of people and ideas. Meanwhile, both insiders and outsiders maintain themselves within this (apparently broad) system of values. If the values radically challenge their privilege and the system of values which upholds it, they will not be tolerated. Within these limitations certain groups may find a propitious environment to develop their lifestyles, such as the gay community whilst others such as the Black community may appear as a threat to their privilege either by seeming to wrest political power or by challenging cultural norms. Some of these perceptions focused around identity struggles may harden boundaries in which the insiders represent negatively the behavior of the outsiders and as a consequence tend to reproduce a negative form of difference, a difference of self-esteem and of opportunities (see Mennell 1994, 181).

A fertile manner of extending this analysis through examination of the different forms of capital involved (see Bourdieu 1993, 32-34; Bourdieu 1997, 107-114; Calhoun 1995, 138). As there are many homeowners or business operators, economic capital is clearly important but more relevant to the above discussion is the maintenance of social and symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is generated by affiliation to a cause such as historic preservation that is

generally considered important and transcendent—for future generations. Social capital is associated with the investment in conspicuous consumption for instance that of maintaining historic homes, the investment in the social aspects of the neighborhood movements, and the support for the traditional cultural establishment. Any questioning of the values in which the investment occurs is likely to be set aside rigorously.

As a result of this discussion, the possibility of lifestyle challenges being sufficient to bring about substantial societal change seems more limited.

## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Precedentes in this type of analysis include Lowrey, Adler and Milner 1997, Tauxe 1995, Spain 1993, Forsyth 1997, de Sousa-Briggs.

<sup>2</sup> A total of 33 conversations were realized which included officials who do not live in the Quarter. Pseudonyms are used to identify informants.

<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out that “tolerance” is also used in very different contexts, often by the same respondents, as for instance when they call for the police to enforce “zero tolerance” which is in fact the criminalization of some forms of diversity, when calling for tolerance in respect of zoning and land use regulation, or for the need for intolerance when faced with infractions of such regulations

<sup>4</sup> Prieur (1998) speaks of Bourdieu’s notion of cultural unity, implying common forms of evaluation. The dominant groups traits are those which the dominant group evaluate most highly and dominated groups tend to evaluate with the same criterions used by the dominant groups. (66-7)

<sup>5</sup> I will use gay more usually to include gay men and lesbians except in those instances where the respondents themselves make this distinction. [I am still not sure why this distinction is made?]

<sup>6</sup> I prefer to use the category Black, although in conversation I follow the preference of the person involved so that both Black and African-American are used. Hawkeswood (1996, xix) in a study of gay black men in Harlem retained the use of “black” (without capital) because he felt that the informants themselves use this term to separate “us” from “them,” a factor that is important in the discussion of tolerance. Hawksworth also sees the term black as politically more confrontational. He considers the use of “African-American” as a part of a movement “to replace race as a central issue in civil rights activism” replacing it with claims for ethnic status.

<sup>7</sup> Lestor also points out the need to distinguish between gay men and lesbians because it is much less a center for women. He indicates that there are no lesbian bars in the French Quarter rather the two which exist are located in the Marigny. He again feels that younger lesbians tend to live dispersed for the city. Frances concurs with this opinion saying that, “There doesn’t seem to me to be very many lesbian couples, in the French Quarter. I think they tend to have less money than gay men and so it is a less attractive area for them to live in.” This corresponds to other reports on the location of lesbian women where they were found to favor more dispersed locations, and less expensive property because of generally lower incomes than gay men. See for instance, Valentine (1995) who found that the lesbian community tends to locate in a cluster of homes interspersed with heterosexual homes—without alternative institutions that cater specifically for the lesbians (99). However, other authors while agreeing that lesbians do have lower incomes find that there is evidence of some concentration in “counter culture areas.” (Adler & Brenner 1992, 24, 29).

<sup>8</sup> For example Frank Browning (1996), who points to gayness as a particularly urban phenomena, where there is the possibility of creating, “Gay community” “gay ghetto” “gay space”, “the place gay people have carved out for their survival” (2).

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