BOOK ESSAY: Emily Epstein Landau's *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans*

Antebellum Fantasies and Southern Legacies: Memory and Sex in Turn of the Century New Orleans

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At the turn of the twentieth century, "there was at least one red-light district in virtually every American city with a population over 100,000"—and New Orleans was no different.[i] However, neither New Orleans, nor its vice, was a typical American establishment, as Emily Landau's study on New Orleans' mixed-race prostitution in Storyville, the emergent red-light district that encompassed it, argues. Like the city itself—with a long history of colonialism and racial intermixing that "made New Orleans resemble a Caribbean enclave more than a Deep South city"—Storyville was a melting pot.[ii] The district was an interracial sexual laboratory that bred whiteness as Southern white men satisfied sexual fantasies of racial domination and exoticism, while Jim Crow segregationists and Progressive moral reformers fought to restrict the "racially inferior" and rid the United States of moral depravity outside of its confines. But Storyville was not an exception from larger social processes, and it was certainly not a throwback to an era of ethical laxity in New Orleans. Instead, the district was representative of the historical processes that constituted, and altered, American racial, gendered, and sexual identities at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first three chapters situate Storyville's establishment—roughly nineteen blocks outside of New Orleans' French Quarter—within the city's longer history of illicit sex and reputation for wickedness. Additionally, Landau employs a wide array of sources (government documents, jazz lyrics, guide books, and personal reminiscences by the likes of Louis

Armstrong) to trace Storyville's transgressive sexual heritage through New Orleans' antebellum auctions of light-skinned slave women known as "fancy girls" and organized "quadroon balls" where free Creole women could contract with white men as their mistresses. It is no accident that Storyville's opening on New Year's Day, 1898, came almost two years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and amid the flourishing City Beautiful Movement that sought to engender a harmonious social order through beautification and precise urban planning. That is, the same forces that desired racial segregation and city clean-up also demarcated the red-light district from the "legitimate" residential and commercial areas of greater New Orleans. By doing this, the white, reform-minded business classes got perceived civic cleanliness, Democratic machine politicians profited from the bribes of madams and property owners within Storyville, and both attempted to utilize the district's boundaries as "a *cordon sanitaire* around New Orleans' past and its reputation for wickedness, clearing a path for a more respectable future" in other city districts.[iii] City authorities thus relegated prostitution to one small area of the city while they simultaneously benefitted from it.

The following chapters of Landau's study connect Storyville to the modernized American culture of the early twentieth century. For instance, in chapter four, Landau utilizes New Orleans' guidebooks to situate the district in the racial and gendered contexts of American popular culture and the growth of commercialized leisure that is best exemplified by vaudevilles, movie palaces, and pageantry. Then, in a provocative chapter on Lulu White, Storyville's "Diamond Queen of the Demi-Monde," the notorious madam is shown to have forged an image that toyed with turn-of-the-century racial hierarchies: she referred to herself as an "octoroon," meaning seven-eighths white, while simultaneously "denying having even one 'drop' of 'negro blood.'"[iv] White navigated this manipulative line of sexual self-representation successfully and profitably

sold sex with light-skinned women to white men of means. But, as one New Orleans' newspaper proclaimed, "the notorious negro enchantress" was also a threatening character, racially and sexually, to the city's white inhabitants.[v] When Lulu White left the confines of Storyville, she embodied New Orleans' "wicked," miscegenous sexual past and was verbally assaulted as the racial ambiguity of the brothel gave way to the racial binaries of Jim Crow. But do not mistake Lulu White as a signifier of increased black or female equality. As Landau proclaims, "[Lulu White] was a madam who trafficked in the ambiguous body and interracial sex; her success relied on the continued subordination of women of color and the image of the erotic octoroon."[vi]

The most novel part of Landau's study is her analysis of memory and Storyville. At a time of rapid social change, Lost Cause-inspired Southerners produced images of an idealized antebellum civilization and landscape. Southerners thus utilized this nostalgia to memorialize certain elements of antebellum culture and to reinstate Old South social hierarchies. Chief among these were white supremacy and a patriarchy that was organized around white sexual power. Under these hierarchies, both wife and slave were subordinate to the patriarch who, as the master, had the right to have sex with both. Thus, Storyville highlighted "the recollection of white male sexual advantage over black women, [and] fashioned the memory of the exclusive and patriarchal social order of the Old South into a New South sexual theme park."[vii] The bordellos were even complete with antebellum plantation decorum and barred black men from entering. Storyville and the octoroon prostitute were thereby linked to the reimagining of the antebellum past during Jim Crow. Today, they continue to live on as part of the collective memory of New Orleans, but only as symbols of an idealized New Orleans that accommodated skewed narratives of laissez-faire race relations and tolerance. Additionally, "Storyville is remembered to add an element of danger" to jazz music and the prostitutes have been

relegated to the background of a vibrant Creole musical heritage.[viii] The places that they do appear are for marketing purposes: a now defunct lingerie store named Lulu White's and numerous clubs, jazz groups, and a magazine have adopted Storyville as their namesake. Remembering these women, Landau suggests, has become increasingly more difficult as the popular memory of Storyville now obscures the racism, poverty, and gender inequality that overshadowed the material reality of its prostitution.

Landau's study would have been enriched by an analysis of why women, especially women marketed as octoroons, engaged in prostitution in New Orleans. However, her analysis is thorough, exhaustively researched, and will prove useful to scholars of the American South, African American history, and memory studies. Storyville, as a functioning red-light district, was destroyed in a relatively quick passage of time: madams, prostitutes, and the city's expanding rail system eroded its borders by exposing interracial sex and vice to late-Progressive Era Americans. In other words, middle-class white citizens had no tolerance for a visible Storyville in an era that increasingly stressed racial segregation and sexual cleanliness, especially after the onset of the sexual hygiene movement during World War I. Landau's book helps to erode the complex myths surrounding contemporary New Orleans and highlights the city's darker, less carefree history under Jim Crow.

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[i] Emily, Epstein Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness: Sex, Race, and Memory in Storyville, New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 2.
[ii] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 4.
[iii] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 199.
[iv] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 159.
[v] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 153.
[vi] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 154.

[vii] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 9.
[viii] Landau, *Spectacular Wickedness*, 205.