



AFRICAN HISTORIES
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Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora

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New Orleans: America's Creative Crescent

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Creativity is ephemeral, mysterious, and impossible to quantify. Or is it?

Embedded in common societal belief about creativity is the concept that it is located in the mind, and is the purview of the lone genius who needs only the proper moment of inspiration for the magic (idea, object, solution) to be released from the brain. This traditional idea has been challenged in recent years by many leading authors (Csikszentmihalyi, Sir Ken Robinson, and Howard Gardner among them) as ignoring the reality of the physical work that precedes and follows the innovative breakthrough, and the need for collaboration, competition and a knowledgeable audience to perceive its creative worth.¹ What these authors have not discussed is that creativity is also vitally located within the active body, and when these bodies are geographically positioned in highly creative places, amazing creative events occur.

Through the phenomenological lens of Merleau Ponty and Dylan Trigg, supported by the vibrant observations of Rebecca Solnit, we will examine the nature of creative spaces, New Orleans, Louisiana in particular, to illuminate the effects of place upon the generative body. Indeed, the invention of Jazz and the practices of Mardi Gras Indians in select African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans will bring forth

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intriguing complications for arts education and practice. The visual culture of the streets offers a wealth of costume, dance, and song inspired by individuals with new ideas who are motivated by the joy of sharing their original creations with a receptive audience. Their organic creativity, unique in the invention of identity supported by handmade visual objects, offers a tantalizing contrast to the corporate effort to quantify and commodify creativity in society and in our schools.

I bring to this examination two decades of experience in education, more than half of that time specifically in visual art education, where I have often heard my colleagues express the belief that creativity cannot be taught. The phrase "either you have it or you don't" is a common refrain among teachers. Although arts educators seem more optimistic, many continue to express a belief that creativity cannot be taught to students who do not arrive in their classrooms already brandishing an innovative spirit like a brightly colored battle flag. Yet Csikszentmihalyi, Beghetto, Gardner, and others propose that creativity is an inherent quality of all humans, and that we all possess the ability to innovate and create on various levels. Let us examine this proposal more closely.

The need and desire for more creativity in education is clear² yet definitions of creativity can be difficult to pin down. This one provided by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) is suitable for a starting point: "We define creativity as imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value."³ The NACCCE report states that they consider creativity to be "a basic capacity of human intelligence,"⁴ something all people, and therefore all students, are able to exhibit to some degree. This idea of a universal, or democratic, demonstration of creativity is widely supported. Anna Craft states that creativity is a human practice available to all: "I have come to use the phrase 'lifewide' creativity to describe the application of creativity to the breadth of contexts in everyday life."⁵

Ronald Beghetto defines creativity as "the interaction among aptitude, process and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context."⁶ He also promotes the idea of "pedestrian or everyday creativity" as the kind of creative productivity in which all people can engage.⁷ The suggestion of democratic creativity begins with simple problem-solving and life's daily decisions and blooms quickly into building upon the innovations of others, overcoming immensely challenging obstacles, and embracing change with confidence.⁸

In *Five Minds for the Future* Howard Gardner looks towards upcoming societal needs, speculating about "the directions in which our society and our planet are headed," wherein "political and economic considerations loom large."⁹ He believes "the world of the future will demand capacities that until now have been mere options. To meet this new world on its own terms, we should begin to cultivate these capacities now."¹⁰ The NACCCE reinforces the call for greater creative skills in socio-economic terms: "Creative abilities are being seen as fundamental in meeting the challenges of economic development. This process should begin in school."¹¹ These authors and commissions are all dedicated to the study of creativity, and they do not hesitate to expect creativity to be taught and cultivated in schools.

How can the ephemeral, oft presumed mental act of creativity be taught and observed by these writers, the market, the teacher or the public? Because *creativity happens when a person's body acts*. Without action, without movement and production in some form, ideas remain locked up as neurological impulses in gray matter. Csikszentmihalyi reminds us: "Creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context."¹² Ideas must be freed, enacted and performed, spoken or written, *physically made* into something that others can perceive, before creativity can be acknowledged as having happened. One might argue that thoughts should count, in some way, as creativity. The desire to value human thinking is high, and I do not disclaim the possibility that remarkably unique thoughts are racing through our minds. However, the limitation of labeling thoughts alone is problematic. Thoughts that are never manifested in any way cannot be identified as creative nor put to any valuable use,¹³ and I include as valuable the enjoyment of art, music and dance as well as a new cell phone app or surgical procedure. But are we ready to accept that *anyone* can demonstrate creativity?

Consider the experience of walking down a long hallway, perhaps in a busy school, when a drink is suddenly spilled on the floor. A large puddle appears upon a once clear walkway. What happens? Students and teachers alike will step around the puddle, often without even breaking their pace to carefully ponder the event, or to consider and weigh out the options before acting. Rather, *their bodies shift direction and stride* to avoid the spill. Rerouting takes place without delay.

This is a phenomenon of creativity. It is surely a simplified example, yet every person can identify with it from lived experience. A problem

is observed, options considered, innovation occurs, solutions are decided, actions result. Our bodies, experienced as they are in maneuvering through space, incline towards innovation on a continuous basis. Merleau-Ponty, the father of modern Phenomenology, describes this kinetic innovation: "I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a body schema."¹⁴ This body schema is presented as a way to understand the complexity of how our bodies operate and understand themselves in the world.

[Body schema] was assumed to provide me with the change of position of the parts of my body for each movement of one of them, the position of each local stimulus in the body as a whole, an assessment of the movements accomplished at each moment of a complex gesture, and finally a perpetual translation into visual language of the momentary kinesthetic and articular impressions.¹⁵

Thus, through these complex bodily gestures, humans all appear to carry at least an essential creative capacity.

World-renowned scholar of psychology Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has developed a "systems" approach for identifying creativity that is defined by three key elements: the *Individual*, who has mastered a discipline or domain of practice and is generating possibly creative innovations; the *Domain*, a category of expertise in which the individual is working; and the *Field*, the fellow experts in the domain who are knowledgeable enough to judge when in fact a domain-changing creative leap has occurred.¹⁶ The need for a *community* to appreciate the creative production is often forgotten in the romanticized ideal of the deviant genius or creative giant (da Vinci, Dante, Galileo...the list of cinquecento Florentine geniuses is long). In reality, it seems to be surprisingly more common for field-altering creative leaps to occur within a *community* of experts, whether the group gets credit or only the star genius, such as Alexander Graham Bell's glory and assistant Watson's relative obscurity.¹⁷ This observation is indeed supported by that list of Florentine giants from the emerging Renaissance, where many competitive experts eagerly critiqued each new achievement in art and architecture. Gardner's observations dovetail with Csikszentmihalyi's position that creativity by definition can only be achieved when it is possible for the relevant field to observe and recognize that an innovation has taken place.¹⁸

If creativity is an action, an outward expression of idea, discovery or invention, then creativity *is in the active body*. This move, once established, must acknowledge that bodies are geographically located in the world, and that these bodies are impacted by their surroundings. Scholar of phenomenology Dylan Trigg has explored the essence of places, and the influences that spaces can have upon embodied experiences. He observes: "As bodily subjects, we necessarily have a relationship with the places that surround us. At any given moment, we are located within a place, be it in the hallways of universities, the cockpits of airplanes, or lost in the forest at night. Over time, these places define and structure our sense of self."¹⁹ Whether we are attuned at a given moment to our location, or if it momentarily fades into the background, it remains present as our bodies continuously operate within the physical environment.

Csikszentmihalyi agrees: "Even the most abstract mind is affected by the surroundings of the body. No one is immune to the impressions that impinge on the senses from the outside."²⁰ Where should people go, then, if they seek to cultivate creativity? I doubt that there is one definitive answer. Creative places are personal, communal, and above all generative of creative expression and output. Seeking a fruitful example, then, let us consider the fertile land of creativity in the predominantly African-American neighborhoods of the Tremé (the Sixth Ward) and Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

New Orleans has been the site of origin for many thousands of creative works, attracting writers, musicians, visual artists, innovative chefs, actors, and street performers for three centuries. It is a place, a *place*, rich with deep, intense and vibrant history. And it is a place that continues to attract creative people from across the globe. It is not the purview of this writing to provide a broad review of that history, for many volumes have already been written,²¹ utilizing many lenses, seeking to provide a snapshot of the people and events of the Crescent City.²² Central to this discussion, however, is the awareness that New Orleans was the site of a massive convergence of diverse cultures from 1698 onward.²³ Native Americans were joined by Spanish and French colonists in a succession of land trades over the next century and a half.²⁴ New Orleans was also host to an unending stream of explorers and pioneers, and benefited from commerce of all kinds that flowed up and down the Mississippi River. Africans were brought to the Americas immediately, but unique to New Orleans was the emergence of *gens du colour libre*, free people of color, as wave upon wave of self-emancipated Africans were entitled to own property and run

businesses.²⁵ Early generations of African-Americans, including many from the Caribbean and Mississippi Delta, cultivated a thriving community in New Orleans. Understanding *why* was in New Orleans reveals the broad range of cultural practices at play by the late 1800s, laying the foundation for America's first new art form: Jazz music.²⁶

Jazz music is widely understood to be a powerful synthesis of African rhythms and European classical music, yet it is also specifically tied to African-American ragtime music, Blues from the Mississippi Delta, and the gospel music from churches throughout the south.²⁷ What was different about the specific place and time, in all of human history, that brought Jazz music into the world? There are other places (Gibraltar or Malta, for example) where the proximity of European and African music might have merged into a new sound. The creativity of the African-American people of New Orleans in the decades of 1890 through 1910 impacted music the world over in an entirely new way. Jazz could not have been born anywhere other than New Orleans, in the 1890s, and it was specifically the defiant and triumphant voice of the Tremé—a place fertile with creative frenzy.

The Tremé is the oldest African-American neighborhood in the United States, and is home to St. Augustine Church, the oldest continuously operating Black church in the nation. Louis Armstrong grew up quite literally on these streets, where Jazz music was born through his instrument in tandem with many other musicians playing in public, both formal and informal outdoor venues.²⁸ In 1890, all the elements were in place for a creative explosion, a view we can now bring into focus with the lens Csikszentmihalyi provides. Thousands of individual musicians were performing on a daily basis, experts in the domain of music composition, improvisation and performance. They comprised the Field, the community of knowledgeable experts, well-equipped to analyze the performances and compositions of their competitors. They could identify in one another when a truly new innovation had occurred, and would soon work to achieve something even greater. Collaboration is also inherent in this Field, as the performers were most often performing and improvising in groups. Soon recordings were made that fostered collaborative roles and generated uncountable creative achievements.

Considering the global impact that Jazz music has had upon the world, the Tremé neighborhood is a tiny place—less than one square mile. How did the vital elements for such impactful creativity appear in this small place?

The story of Jazz begins at Congo Square where Sundays were market day for the African-American community from the 1700s through the mid 1800s.²⁹ Under these ancient oak trees, slaves in New Orleans were allowed to sell goods that they made or food that they raised and keep the profits—a rare privilege in that era.³⁰ From these profits, many people were able to buy their freedom and that of their families, leading to a large population of free blacks in the city, the *gens de couleur libre*. After the markets ended on Sundays, a tradition of celebration through music and dance emerged and became a regular event.³¹ Although these festive gatherings were banned in Congo Square by 1850,³² the practice simply moved into homes and private corners of the Tremé neighborhood, which wraps around Congo Square even to this day.

Uptempo Ragtime was popular in this era, and the influence of Gospel hymns and the Blues from the Mississippi Delta were almost immediately incorporated into the music we now call Jazz. A wealthy Creole population, Black and White descendants of early European colonists, educated their children in the arts as well as shrewd business management, and sent their children to Europe for the Grand Tour. The shock of the Jim Crow laws during post-reconstruction was profoundly devastating for many of these families, who found themselves stripped of their wealth and scrambling for jobs for the first time in many generations.³³

The fertile ground of individual knowledge and community expertise are well established, and now the problem emerges. Classically trained African-American musicians who were put out of work by Jim Crow hired themselves out to any band that would take them, finding work all over town in many venues.³⁴ Street parades were already a popular event, and as the competition for jobs became fierce the musicians were driven to greater and greater levels of achievement. Further, the nature of group performance requires collaboration. Each musician must listen to what the others are playing, and responds with body and soul. Whether the group is a classical symphony or a heavy metal rock band, a successful performance requires that the musicians hear each other for tuning and tempo. That simple act generates a synthesis of sound, often inspired by one player who might produce a few notes that are more expressive, more festive, angry or mournful, than usual. The other musicians hear and respond, their bodies already vibrant with emotion as they seek to express it through breath, hand or horn. These events speak to the moment of performance, yet they nurture and empower the community: "In these frequent celebrations, New Orleanians renew their ties to tradition, place and each other."³⁵

In the Tremé, Jazz music was born just as the nineteenth Century closed, a great shout of joy to celebrate newly won freedom—a freedom that would continue to be challenged in every forthcoming generation. Music played on the streets of New Orleans was and is received by a knowledgeable audience, equally eager to enjoy their favorite songs performed in a new way or to hear newly crafted tunes. This spirit of innovation and freedom is born from a people in the first decades after Emancipation, who could imagine for themselves a life free of bondage and injustice. Perhaps it is not surprising that the events of Plessy v. Ferguson happened there, and the fight for justice continues.

IDENTITY: THE ESSENCE OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The peculiarity of truly human life is that man has to create himself by his own voluntary efforts; he has to make himself a truly moral, rational, and free being. This creative effort is carried on by the educational activities of slow generations.³⁶

It began in the swamps. Mardi Gras Indian ties to Black Hawk, a Fox and Sauk Indian, thread through secretive communities spanning two centuries although most of the history available to outsiders reaches back only about one hundred years.³⁷ Acts of resistance to tyranny and protection of their tribes and families are essential to their practice, in addition to the amazing bead and feather costumes and music that are integral to Mardi Gras Indian life.³⁸ Two centuries ago, the mysterious bayous of the Mississippi Delta welcomed wanderers and self-emancipated slaves with a plentiful food supply and a myriad of hiding places.³⁹ Native tribes, well established in the region, interacted freely with Africans and others who were seeking refuge or preferred to live outside the city.⁴⁰ The tradition of the groups we now call Mardi Gras Indians sprang from this cultural marriage. These Black and Native Indians and their descendants eventually returned to the neighborhoods of New Orleans spiritually, linguistically, and musically changed.⁴¹

Over the decades of the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, the Mardi Gras Indians evolved into dozens of different tribes with different languages, practices, and signature visual cues.⁴² Many tribes were founded in neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, made somewhat famous in the last decade due to the sweeping devastation

of the 'Lower Ninth' following Hurricane Katrina. After the flood, the houses were swept away and vast swaths of the Ninth Ward were destroyed (Fig. 10.1).

Some tribes are lost forever in the diaspora, while others have regrouped in new neighborhoods. Due to new city ordinances, the abandoned streets of the Lower Ninth, near the levees, have been captured through immanent domain laws, and those neighborhoods will never be restored. Yet the Indians resist elimination, and refuse to give up their cultural practices or ownership of the streets on Mardi Gras morning.

Often elusive, the Indian tribes are distinctively recognized to outsiders by their elaborate costumes of feathers, magnificent bold colors, fierce masks, and panels of beaded designs or portraits (Fig. 10.2).

The Indian suit⁴³ is hand sewn by the men who wear them, and new suits are devised and created each year to be worn only on a few sacred days. Weighing more than a hundred pounds and reaching upwards of



Fig. 10.1 The Ninth Ward in New Orleans, July 2006. Photo by Lucy Bartholomée

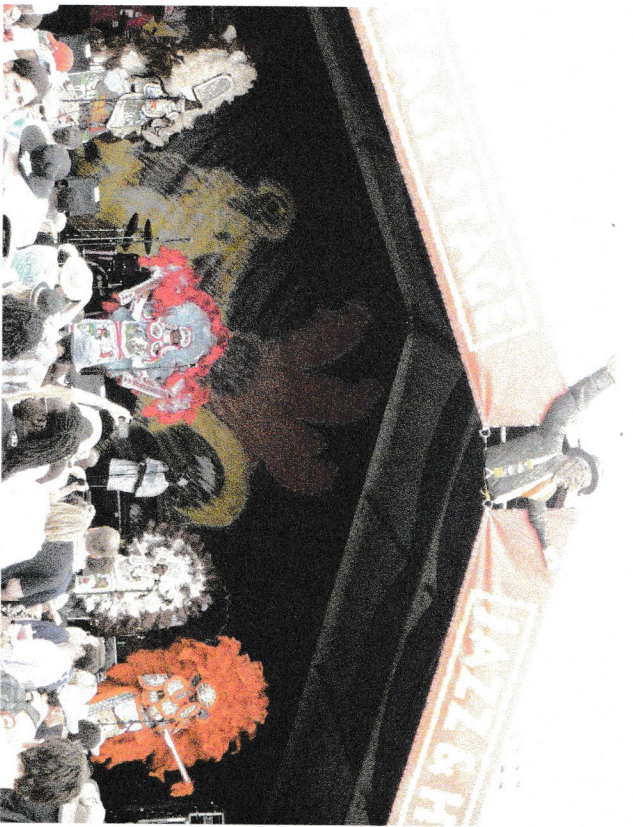


Fig. 10.2 Mardi Gras Indians perform at Jazz Fest, New Orleans, 2013. Photo by Lucy Bartholomée

eight feet tall, the apparition of the Indian tribe on Mardi Gras morning is a truly awe inspiring sight.⁴⁴ The men in each tribe meet on Sunday nights to practice songs (mostly voice, drum, and tambourine) enacting dance and movement with spiritual reverence.⁴⁵ As a cultural group, they have many unique practices, including distinctive death rituals, music, and language.

Identifying the costume and music making as a creative practice lends itself readily to this examination. Certainly the Indian suits are products of creative endeavor and have evolved over the decades from much simpler costumes. Csikszentmihalyi's systems approach to creativity is fully evident here. The Indians innovate on a continuous basis, performing for others in their domain who are experts in their fields. Competition and collaboration are present as well, as the tribes meet on select occasions to compete with other groups for music, costume, performance, and dance. Yet this creativity has far greater depth than the spectacular material

culture of the suits. The Indians are creating their identity *through* these objects and practices, through resistance to outside cultural norms, and through a continued resistance to police harassment. The tribes are known by warrior-like names such as Congo Nation, Creole Wild West, Seminole Hunters, or Wild Tchoupitoulas. The Big Chief of any tribe holds the respect of the community year round, including the esteem of the majority of New Orleanians, who are not part of any Indian tribe.

Why do they do it? Why spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on costumes for an event that might last at most a few hours, and be worn only a few times that year? New Orleans inspires, and the active practice of creativity is the outward expression of the influence the place has upon the body. As Trigg explains, "Place is at the heart not only of who we are, but also of the culture in which we find ourselves. As invested with cultural, ecological and political ramifications, place does not simply designate a patch of land without value."⁴⁶ The communities are deep, bonded with blood as much as geography. New Orleanians have an intense love of a place, and a sense of belonging that is rare in the twenty-first century.

A lot of people, rich and poor, live in the neighborhood, or on the street, or in the house where they were born and have a deep sense of belonging, to their networks of people and to the city itself—as though they had broad branches in the social present and deep and spreading roots in the historical past...many live in a forest of cousins, aunts, uncles, and ties of blood and of people they grew up with and presumed they would know forever, along with places, institutions, rites, foods, music and the other threads of the fabric of New Orleans.⁴⁷

The visual culture of the street inspires each successive event, costume, show, and song. This living inspiration is fully organic, welling up from the heart of each individual with new ideas, motivated by the pleasure of sharing new creations with an audience of neighbors, friends, and competitors. The body moves to collect materials, sew and construct the costumes and props or build ever more fabulous parade floats—sculptures on wheels. Further, these visual objects *are made for movement*, to be worn while dancing or in procession through the space of the streets, neighborhoods, parks, boulevards, and most importantly through gatherings of other people.

The visual expressions of the Mardi Gras Indians are deeply tied to the local audience. The second line umbrella, the spy boy and big chief, are embedded visually in the culture of the Crescent City. Removed to another location, they are a mystery, a shocking puzzle, baffling to an audience that cannot decipher the visual cues. Thus these particular acts of creativity are inspired by New Orleans in New Orleans; the creative act generates objects that are displayed and used in New Orleans for a local audience that understands the meanings and takes pleasure in the spectacle. One could paradoxically say that New Orleans creates New Orleans: "Experience, affectivity, and particularity are at the heart of place...that places have the power to disarm our memories and electrify our imaginations is due not only to the supposed centrality of human experience...[but also] from the human values that are coated upon the world."⁴⁸

The Crescent City continues to generate a wealth of creative expression with a continuous stream of musical festivals, new generations of musicians, and the productivity of writers and artists of all kinds who are born and raised there. Creative practitioners from all over the world still visit, stay for a time to work, and some settle in permanently. The magnetic draw of this creativity has also pulled me back again and again, capturing my imagination and providing a haven for my creative spirit.

Yet many challenges continue to threaten this fertile culture. The horrific devastation of Hurricane Katrina, known locally as the Federal Flood, triggered a new diaspora as the citizens of the city, especially the citizens of color, were scattered throughout the United States.⁴⁹ Demographic studies reveal that the African-American population has not returned to the city at the same rate as the White population, and in particular the Tremé and Ninth Ward neighborhoods have not been restored to the previous population levels.⁵⁰ The impact of the creative practices and the presence of Mardi Gras Indians in those areas is forever changed, and in some cases lost, yet the resilience of the community is evident in the new Indian groups that have founded in recent years.

The Twentieth Century's homogenization of America, negating the identity of place and re-placing it with a landscape of commerce, has not overlooked New Orleans. Outsiders exploit the unique cultural elements of the city, often without the consent of the practitioners. Unlike Michael P. Smith, many photographers and other media unabashedly capture and sell the images of Mardi Gras Indians, musicians, and other performers without a dime of compensation. Poverty and crime continue while residential property costs increase, rerouting even dedicated New

Orleanians into the outlying suburban sprawl, weakening cultural and creative communities. Such conditions are depleting the framework of society, further eroded by the rather famously impoverished educational system. Charter schools have offered some relief for elementary and secondary schools, but the long-term success of that system is highly questionable. The privatization of schools is nearly complete. Only three public elementary schools remain,⁵¹ erasing the communities that once formed around neighborhood schools.

Like the slow erosion of the Mississippi Delta, these elements tear at the hard won social structure of New Orleans neighborhoods that both support and are supported by the social aid and pleasure clubs, Mardi Gras Indian tribes, brass band and traditional jazz bands, churches and methods. In a word: *communities*. Indeed, it is a testament to the strength of the remaining communities that all of the creative practices previously discussed continue, in some form, with gritty and joyous persistence.

The organic creativity that springs up from the streets of New Orleans cultivates and nourishes the inventive impulse. Could it be that a genetic anomaly causes so many people who "have it" to be found in this small city? The argument could be made that several generations of creative types have migrated and settled there, skewing what would otherwise be only average statistics. The phenomenology of place offers another perspective, that "some places transgress the weight of their own history, ascending beyond the bulk of their materiality, and thus [serve] as a beacon of something essential behind the flux of the world."⁵² The aura of creativity calls to the body—any body—to be creative, to take creative action. As Solnit observes: "making and working [have] that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world."⁵³ Location matters, and a sense of place in tune with creative practice can have an enormous impact.

What does this mean for our schools in the United States? Schools are often un-places, neutralized by uniformity and the strictures of scheduling, assigned seats and confining repetition. Trigg describes un-places as "a homogenous landscape of supermodernity, characterized by temporally compressed, indistinguishable and transient spaces."⁵⁴ While our teachers strive to "engage the learner," many students pass their confinement in crowded, dismal classrooms with mental absence; school is an un-place punctuated by the shout of freedom heard each year with the opening bell of summer. Dylan Trigg pushes back against

this homogenization, the un-place of schools and other institutions: "Phenomenological geography and architecture have tended to reproach aspects of modernity such as mass communication, global capitalism, and consumerist culture, all of which engender the production of homogenous and atemporal flatscapes."⁵⁵ Arts education then seeks to awaken the students to their surroundings, inviting them to participate in a vibrant and living learning experience as they become practitioners of emotive and meaningful art.

What if school learning environments were unique sites of creative stimulation? Imagine a classroom where the "aura of the localized place...was distinguished by its irreproducibility"⁵⁶ and teachers cultivated fertile environments where students felt an embodied welcoming of their presence and their contribution to the learning: "where belonging means contributing to the enduring character of an environment."⁵⁷ If creative places can stimulate creativity, then a re-evaluation of the places of education is in high order.

WHAT MAKES A PLACE CREATIVE?

Abundant stimulation—an answer open enough to allow numerous elements for differing fields, and the variations needed for every individual. Access to the tools of one's trade, along with the time and space in which to experiment and cultivate ideas, are necessary. But time and tools will not inherently generate inspiration and innovation.

For the artist, any artist, poet, painter, musician, time in plenty and an abundance of ideas are the necessary basics of creativity. By dreaming and idleness and then by intense self-discipline does the artist live. The artist cannot perform between 9 and 6, five days a week, or if she sometimes does she cannot guarantee to do so. Money culture hates that.⁵⁸

For the visual artist, a profusion of visual stimulation can generate the mood, the ambiance of creativity. Sites rich with historical significance may also stimulate creativity. Locating oneself in the geographical center of past events or achievements related to your field can open powerful connections that are intangible yet vibrant with energy; the creative mood generated by the creativity that has already happened in that place.

Collaboration and a knowledgeable audience can be accessed by setting into locations of an active community for your field. Universities are

often such sites, bringing together experts from distant arenas into close contact, ripe with possibilities for collaboration and often thick with competition. Conferences, think tanks, and dedicated internet sites can generate authentic collaboration. Such specialized communities are also privy to the newest innovations in their fields, and understand the context in which these innovations occurred. They also provide the first and most knowledgeable audience, highly interested and receptive to new developments but also the most qualified to challenge the limitations and champion the breakthroughs.

Many creative people seek isolation for creative work, and this can be a valuable geographic choice as well, for a time. Freedom to work long hours without distraction is vital, and a very different experience from the dramatic "Eureka" moments of popular culture. For me, this isolation is relative. Rather than absolute hermitage, I prefer good coffee and a quiet café.

I would argue, too, that after a long period of work, a place with great distractions can enhance creativity. When you need to come away from the work and engage your body with a different activity, distraction allows the fermentation phase to occur. For me, this includes great music, great wine, and a visual feast—lingering in a museum, a slow walk through Roman ruins, and yes, a second line parade in New Orleans. Once I am positioned in a creative place, I find not just Czjzchzetmahaly's flow but an abundant overflow, my body engaged and busily active, striving to *create* at a pace to keep up with my ideas.

A few months ago my family moved across town. The process of packing, sifting through the debris of our lives, and the physical demands of moving every *thing* from one place to another, became an enormous obstacle to my creative activities. After we arrived, all the tools of my creative life—paintbrushes, sketchbooks, canvases, writing supplies—were buried in boxes. My creativity was effectively packed away with them.

As I began to unpack into my assigned studio space, the feeling of disorientation only grew. Dylan Trigg discusses the ways our bodies open themselves to certain experiences that are phenomenological in nature: "We can phenomenologically attend to the space in which the body becomes the site of an experience that is independent from and at odds with our abstract assessment of that same experience." Trigg calls this motion "transitional memory." "Transitional memory is a memory that, while originating in the body, has nevertheless yet to be formally registered as becoming part of the self as a unified whole."⁵⁹

As I read this one afternoon, I was surprised to find tears on my face. I was flooded with transitional memories: I could picture my old studio so vividly: the bookcases, the easel, the heavy wooden table I use for metalworking, the sensation of sitting at my desk to write, the long wall of sliding glass doors. How many paintings did I paint standing right there, over the last 14 years? I wrote a novel and many essays sitting at the pine desk handcrafted by my grandfather long before I was born. At arm's reach are postcards, trinkets from travel, surrounding my paintings and journals. A little green plastic table, rarely piled up with books, used to invite my preschool sons to sit beside me to draw and paint.

This space is gone. It no longer exists. Another family lives there now, and the objects that once crowded my studio are mostly still with me, but are disarranged. Never again will I watch gray squirrels chasing each other across the grass and into those giant oak trees, nor will I enjoy the family of blue jays who discovered that the leaky faucet outside is always good for a drink of water.

Yet I grieve not only for the physical space, but for the access to creativity itself. The space was creative *because I created things there*. My whole body came to know, kinesthetically and primordially, that creativity happens in that space. I vividly recall the movement of taking that single step into my studio as delivering me into another world, where my body was inclined towards creative actions. The rest of the world fell away as I moved into that space, and the gears of my creative mechanism shifted into place.

In conjunction with the activity of the body, the surroundings of place gain a greater sense of their very presence. Contrary to the view that habit dulls our sensible experience, considered from the perspective of experiencing place through time...the taken-for-granted consistency of place allows for both surroundings and body to suffuse one another: The result is that the experience of place is heightened as the body, through its active but tacit engagement, literally absorbs the contours and textures of an environment.⁶⁰

The artist's studio has a long-standing aura of creativity. Even opening da Vinci's notebooks evokes the sensation of peering into his mind, where a wealth of ideas lived.

Now, as I unpack, I am conscious of the need to access as much of that past creative gearing as possible. Familiar objects re-orient my senses, where access to my tools and sitting at my desk are more than

mechanical practicalities. These actions will reconnect my "experience of place and memory of place."⁶¹ Most importantly, I must create in this space; my body must come to know the actions and full experiences—the heights and the depths—of creation in this place. There is more than one reason that Picasso went to the same Montmartre cafés day after day, or why Monet poured a fortune into crafting his lovely home, studio and gardens at Giverny. These artists sought to create a space in which to create, or to access a place in which creativity had happened, and then they intentionally located their bodies geographically in those spaces for further creative acts.

The nature of creativity has historically been treated as an elusive mystery. Muses, tortured minds and the isolated genius are characters that loom large in popular culture. Yet geography is far more than numeric coordinates, and the body, engaged in creative activity, is profoundly influenced by its environment. The influence of creative places is felt by those who are open to the essence of the experience. Indeed, it is these bodies, busy creating things, who fuel the creative aura, tangible yet so evident in places like the Tremé and the Ninth Ward, art classrooms and my studio.

New Orleans is a place that inspires creativity for me, within me, and from me—in this I am not alone. The list of the city's authors, visual artists, dancers, chefs, and actors is enormous, and yet is dwarfed by the incredible quantity and range of musicians who still spring forth from the Crescent City. The aura of creativity abounds, drawing us ever closer to a phenomenologically whole experience, and a life well lived.

NOTES

1. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (London, England: Rider Books, 1996), 1–2.
2. Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2008).
3. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE), *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* (London, England: Department for Education and Employment, 1999), 4.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Anna Craft, "The Limits to Creativity in Education: Dilemmas for the Educator," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 51, no. 2 (2003): 114.
6. Ronald Beghetto, "Does Assessment Kill Student Creativity?" *The Educational Forum* 69 (2005): 255.

7. Ibid.
8. Howard Gardner, *Five Minds for the Future*, 1.
9. Ibid., 2.
10. Ibid.
11. National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE), *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*, 3.
12. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity, Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (London, England: Rider Books, 1996), 23.
13. Ibid.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2012), 101.
15. Ibid.
16. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1988 and Howard Gardner, 2008.
17. Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011).
18. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity, Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, 23.
19. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 1.
20. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008), 127.
21. See Reference List for writings on New Orleans.
22. The Crescent City, one of many nicknames for New Orleans, emerged from the wide curve of the Mississippi River where the French and Spanish founded and cultivated their colonies.
23. Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2008), 37.
24. Ibid., 28–33.
25. Ibid., 5.
26. Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America's Music* (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 2005), vii.
27. Ibid., 13–15.
28. Ibid., 14–18.
29. Jerah Johnson, *Congo Square in New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Louisiana Landmarks Society, 2000), 2.
30. Ibid., 6.
31. Ibid., 35.
32. Ibid., 46.
33. Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America's Music*, 16.
34. Ibid.

35. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009), 271.
36. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Kindle Edition, 2012), 102.
37. Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 298–299.
38. For an example of the costumes, song and performance, the following video link is provided: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjFUBlv-hQ&e=A_NyP_xKqGBSFNHsAdL_o7E3w3Dg_ZYcO2upR4W_dDDYgIT8BZakthjHLM5zFgzv-TMhkNMYIng44k4Qkhrman8wZ9Jk39841Lg
39. Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2005), 13.
40. Ibid., 23.
41. Ibid., 24.
42. Ibid., 129.
43. New Orleansians call these unique tribes Indians or Mardi Gras Indians, and their elaborate costumes are rather sublimely called suits.
44. Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans*, 294.
45. Ibid.
46. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, 1.
47. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009), 270.
48. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, 6.
49. Kimberly Geaghan, *Forced to Move: An Analysis of Hurricane Katrina Movers* (SEHSD Working Paper Number 2011–17, US Census Bureau Social, Economic and Housing Statistics Division, June 2011), 2, 3, 11.
50. Ibid.
51. <http://opsb.us/schools/>.
52. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, 131.
53. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2000), 29.
54. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, 120.
55. Ibid., 131.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Jeanette Winderson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1997), 138.
59. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, 107.
60. Ibid., 113.
61. Ibid., 106.