

Digging the Digital Crates

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“Digging the crates” generally refers to a practice where hip hop and electronic dance music DJs and record collectors search through bins of vinyl and compact disc recordings for rare music often obscured by time and limited availability. As Ahmed Ahmed, Steve Benford, and Andy Crabtree observed in their ethnography of club djs, crate digging is an essential part of building a collection, “very much an exploratory practice, as the value of a record can lie in anything from a particular vocal sample or small selection of a melody, to a specific drum break or sound.” (2012, 1806) In this setting, the practice of crate digging raises tension points between recordings that collectors have in their possession and the “next beat” needing to be found in caches of records in shops, flea markets, second hand stores, and swap meets.

In the paper that follow, the practice of crate digging is appropriated as a metaphor for sifting through extensive quantities of information artifacts of expressive culture capturing the experiences of diverse cultures and communities. Libraries and other organizations devoted to cultural memory are especially challenged to preserve and make accessible cultural experiences that are not so easily captured in print. The need to broaden the landscape of information is especially compelling for new and emerging forms of scholarship and learning in the context of culturally diverse communities, where expressions of cultural and community life are recorded in sound and video recordings, artistic performances, through storytelling, and in published primary and secondary resources. The project reported here uses a general framework that integrates Andy Bennett and Richard

A. Peterson’s (2004) distinctions between local, trans-local, and virtual music scenes by following Second Line parades as indigenous cultural and musical performances (Lewis, 2009; Turner, 2009) as captured by local New Orleans videographers. A growing number of amateur videographers, including local residents and tourists, are recording weekly Second Line parades hosted by New Orleans’ numerous Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs and supported by brass bands. Often shot in clips as short as thirty seconds, these video recordings are often shared on Web video hosting sites. Through their Web access, these recordings are not only easily shared within local communities, but also have the potential to be sources for creating translocal and virtual communities of viewers with little or no contextual knowledge or understanding of the nature and significance of their contents.

It is argued that the ability to discover artifacts of expressive culture accessible from marginally or unmonitored Web sources may require an orientation to information seeking and use that is analogous to crate digging by music DJs and other enthusiasts if those works are to deliver an authentic representation of the recorded performance. As a result of users’ needs to determine authenticity in substance when relying on videography and other documentation of expressive culture produced by casual observers, it can also be argued that libraries and other cultural memory organizations are well positioned to strengthen the intersectionality of information literacy and access to “digital crates” if information resources to aid in determining both authenticity and utility of content drawn from unmediated or marginally reviewed content.

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Digging the Crates for Information Artifacts

The imagery of “crate digging” illuminates an analogous set of circumstances faced in research seeking to document and analyze diverse cultures and communities. For the researcher, similar tension points exist between access to collections and artifacts of cultural information that exist outside of the boundaries of the collection. The late Ross Atkinson once referred to the “universe of publication as bifurcated into the local collection and what we might call the anti-collection, i.e., the set of all publications not held in the local collection.” (1994, 97) The idea of further defining and evaluating the concept of anti-collection, which Atkinson suggested as a basis for library collection management, has been given greater attention by Betsy Van der Veer Martens, who extended the concept to other cultural memory organizations such as archives and museums. Martens suggested that the term *core collection* may have explanatory value as a way of aggregating “local collections represented by the digital interfaces of those academic, public, and special libraries, archives, and museums normally considered part of the LAM (library, archive, and museum) community,” while anti-collection represented “the aggregation of digital interfaces of those content providers not normally considered members of the LAM community.” (2011, 569-70) Her extension of Atkinson’s original concept suggested that boundaries between what libraries and other cultural memory organizations hold in their collections and the existence of information artifacts in the anti-collection have blurred even more by digital access to information as physical location loses importance.

There are two dimensions to associating core collections and anti-collections to a search for information artifacts that document diversity through various forms of expressive culture for which the metaphor of crate digging might apply. First, *digital* crates as a metaphor signifies the random or less organized ways that social and cultural phenomena of diverse cultures and communities are now documented. The ubiquity of cameras and mobile devices, whose files are easily and sometimes instantaneously transferred and shared on video hosting and social networking sites as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, and Facebook, has encouraged casual postings and recordings of cultural performances, often by inexpert observers of cultural phenomena. Although marginally mediated and not subject to review beyond viewers’ comments, casual documentalists’ work using inexpensive digital equipment has greatly expanded the universe

of self-created, self-posted information artifacts made outside of conventional media and publications systems.

Second, the practice of digging digital crates raises significant questions about the capacity to judge authenticity in unmediated information environments. Social and cultural researchers who pursue artifactual evidence are also faced with multiple tests of authenticity. In addition to technical authenticity—whether or not the event found actually occurred or was accurately recorded and described—researchers must also understand the social or cultural authenticity of work contributed to unmediated sites. As David Grazian observed in his studies of authenticity in the Chicago blues music scene, “The search for authenticity is rarely a quest for some actual material thing, but rather for what consumers in a particular social milieu imagine the symbols of authenticity to be.” (2004, 36) Determining authenticity may be affected not only by how phenomena are understood by researchers but also by their motivation to resort to using to sources outside of collections and ancillary streams of source material such as documentary films, sound recordings, or scholarly books.

Given the propagation of self-published, self-posted and casual observations of social and cultural phenomena and subsequent need to authenticate them, a search for socially and culturally relevant information artifacts outside of library, archival, and museum collections poses possibilities and accompanying challenges to relevance and worth in better understanding those phenomena. It is plausible that interconnectedness between collections and the anti-collection form a framework for using unmediated work effectively in analyzing representations of expressive culture and social phenomena in a manner parallel to crate diggers search for new music to match their own collections in support of their own performance work. To explore this interconnected relationship, videography of New Orleans’ renowned Second Line Parades will be examined in their digital crates.

“You Better Second Line”: Videography and Street Parades in New Orleans

When I die, you better second line.

When I die, you better second line.

*You better strike up the band, ev’ry day of the week,
Parade my soul up and down the street,*

When I die, you better second line.

—New Orleans trumpeter Kermit Ruffins

“You Better Second Line”

The Second Line Parade is as strong as any image on the cultural landscape of New Orleans. A descendant of African and indigenous rituals and practices, it is a staple of the tradition of the jazz funeral, where mourners formed a second line behind a hearse and brass band and, following internment, would march in dance style and parade through the streets of black New Orleans. The occurrence of Second Line Parades has transcended the jazz funeral to become a form of cultural expression aligned with other community-based celebrations and cultural activities. As Richard Brett Turner observed in his study of jazz religion in New Orleans,

“For some participants, a second line was ‘nothin’ but a party goin’ on’; for others, however, it was a profound expression of New Orleans’ African diaspora past, an experience of communal meditation or even trance that re-created the historic nineteenth-century performances in Congo Square, where black New Orleanians had reinterpreted the sacred music and dances of Vodou in weekly public African festivals every Sunday until the Civil War.” (2009, 3)

On most Sundays between September and June, the city’s Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs parade through communities for four hours at a time—as long as city-issued permits will allow—accompanied by brass

bands and onlookers. Since Hurricane Katrina, the parades have received more attention from tourists, who have been uploading short video clips to video hosting sites. Among these video recordings of Second Line parades, most often made by tourists and reflecting what John Urry famously referred to as the “tourist’s gaze,”¹ is a subset of recordings uploaded to YouTube and other video hosting sites by residents of New Orleans. With names like The real Gottigirl, davidkoolman, Lisa Pal, and Big Red Cotton, these videographers seem to possess a much greater attachment to their subjects and to the cultural life of the Crescent City, perhaps due to friendships or an enduring love for the culture of black New Orleans.

Digging the Digital Crates of Big Red Cotton

In the present study Big Red Cotton’s work as a videographer of Second Line parades is explored in greater detail, given the number and consistency of her postings on YouTube since 2008 and her understanding of New Orleans as reflected in her writings for the local press. Big Red Cotton, whose real name is Deborah Cotton, describes herself as a writer and filmmaker.² Between November 2008 and December 2012, Cotton uploaded 635 video recordings to YouTube, of which 535 featured Second Line parades and related events

FIGURE 1
Social Aid & Pleasure Club Appearances in Second Line Parade Videorecordings by Name, 2008-2012

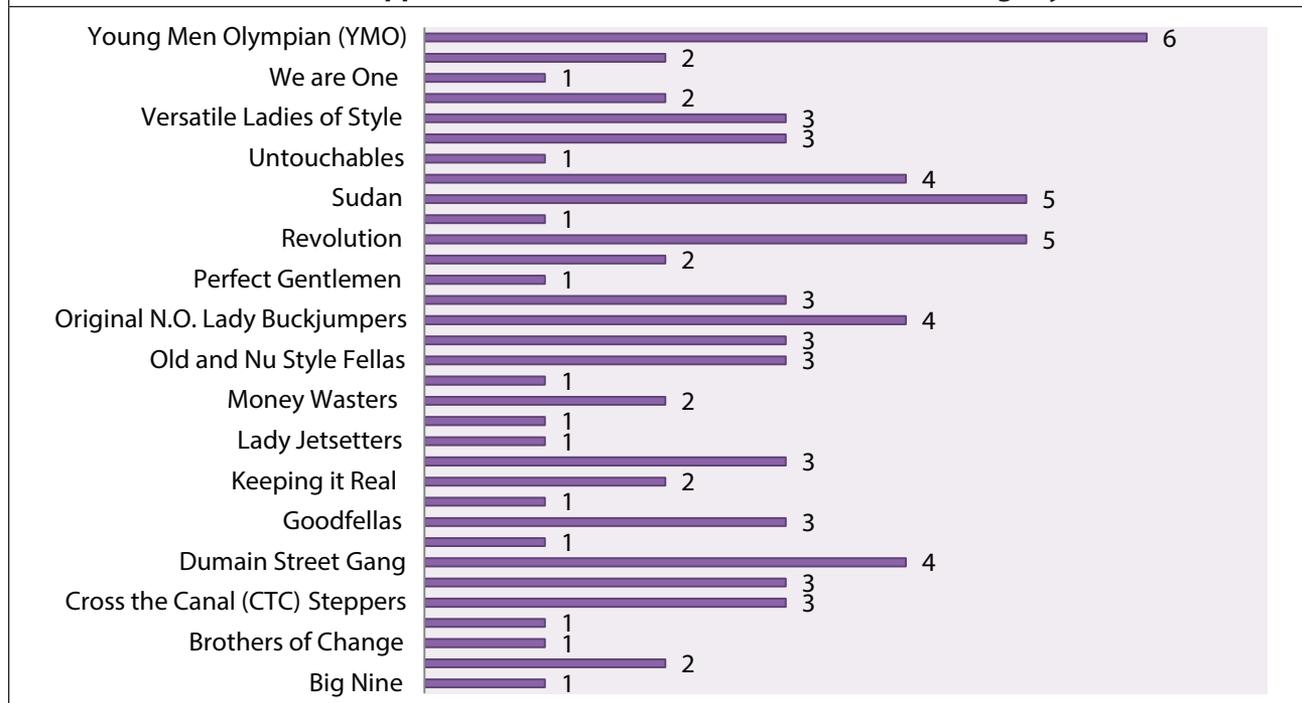
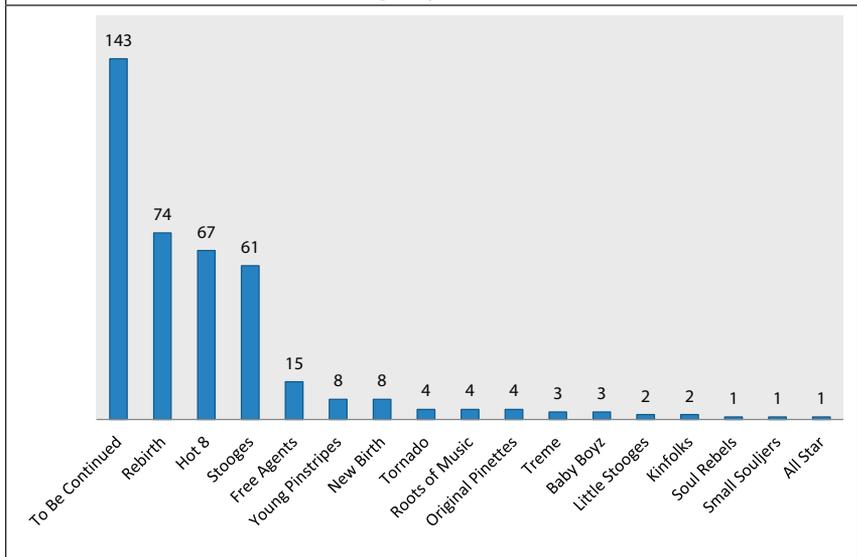


FIGURE 2
Social Aid & Pleasure Club Appearances in Second Line Parade
Videorecordings by Name, 2008-2012



that include funerals and memorial celebrations and city council meetings concerning parade permits. Most of Cotton’s video recordings emphasize Second Line parades sponsored by Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs from various neighborhoods dispersed all over the city. Cotton is native of Los Angeles who moved to New Orleans in 2005, “just three months shy of Hurricane Katrina.”³ In addition to writing for the local New Orleans press, Cotton uses her website, blog and social networking tools Facebook and Twitter to track community and cultural development, never shying away from commentary on issues ranging from local government to acts of violence. She also uses social networking tools to post and tweet announcements about upcoming Second Line parades, many of which she subsequently records and uploads to YouTube.

Among 535 video clips that Cotton has uploaded to YouTube, 33 different Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs across 79 different parades are identified or recognizable by their banners and regalia (Figure 1). Additionally, 401 clips identify any one of 17 local brass bands, most frequently of the To Be Continued (TBC), ReBirth, Hot 8, and Stooges Brass Bands (Figure 2). The To Be Continued Brass Band is featured in approximately one third of the video clips, due to various recordings of different band members at single events. The frequency and average length of Cotton’s postings have changed between 2008 and 2012 (Table 1). The increase in the number of her uploads

indicates that she is showing more footage and greater detail of each parade, including clips of individual club members, band members, and Second Line paraders. Rather than taking one or two short videos of a single parade, the number has not only increased but the length has as well from 2:25 minutes in 2008 to 5:11 minutes in 2012. It is also not uncommon to find that some video clips range from 8:00 to 14:00 minutes or more. As a consequence, her more recent videos are considerably more substantive in content.

Drawing a sample of 108 (20%) of the video clips⁴ (see Table 2), YouTube data were considered in an effort to better understand aspects of use. Despite possible shortcomings

in YouTube data as they rely on self-reported information from users, there are several interesting trends in usage of Cotton’s video uploads. First, the number of views of earlier video uploads remains high relative to more recent uploads. Seventeen of the video clips uploaded in 2008 received 25,106 views by the end of 2012, while 178 video clips uploaded in 2012 have been viewed 26,690 (12% of all views). These data do not necessarily represent a decline in interest in Cotton’s uploads over previous years; rather, they suggest some degree of interest retained in earlier video clips. One might speculate on the reasons. For one, the most popular video clips viewed include the ReBirth Brass Band, arguably the best known among New Orleans’s performing brass bands. Also, since the April 2010 launch of the HBO series, *Treme*, the name Treme has emerged as one of the best known among the city’s

TABLE 1
Number and Average Length of Second Line
Parade Video Clips, 2008-2012

Year	Number	Average Length
2008	17	2.26
2009	74	4.40
2010	137	4.32
2011	129	5.23
2012	178	5.11
Total	535	4.27

neighborhoods for African American culture. Keywords such as Treme become entry points for the pursuit of cultural performances in New Orleans. Second, in examining top reported view geographic areas (see Figure 3) some interest in viewing Second Line Parade video recordings comes from other parts of the world, including Europe, the Caribbean, East Asia, Sub Saharan Africa and Latin America. The disproportionate interest from the Caribbean, given the geographic and population size of the region, may likely reflect common interests in celebrations and street parades common to the African diaspora in the Caribbean and cross-cultural fertilizations between Caribbean islands and New Orleans (Abrahams, 2006).

Third, in analyzing key discovery points (see Table 2), YouTube users appear to have been directed to Cotton's uploaded video clips from related video clips, many of which are clustered video recordings of single parades. Links from related videos follow a similar pattern of interest to the overall number of views. What is more significant is an increase in the number and percentage of access from mobile devices as a key discovery point, due likely to an increase in smartphone ownership. Conversely, discovery of uploaded videos from YouTube searches or as embedded on websites,

blogs, or Facebook constitute a substantially smaller percentage (8%) of key discovery points. A trend to watch in these data is the increase in the proportion of initial views from mobile devices, up from 9.26% of the views in 2008 to 41.65% in 2012. This last observation warrants further investigation. It is clear that the increased availability of smartphones that stream video may account for this significant increase. It is also plausible that the abundance of cell phones in keeping displaced communities together following Hurricane Katrina may have created new a new reliance among community members in using mobile devices for social networking and sharing information. This is also

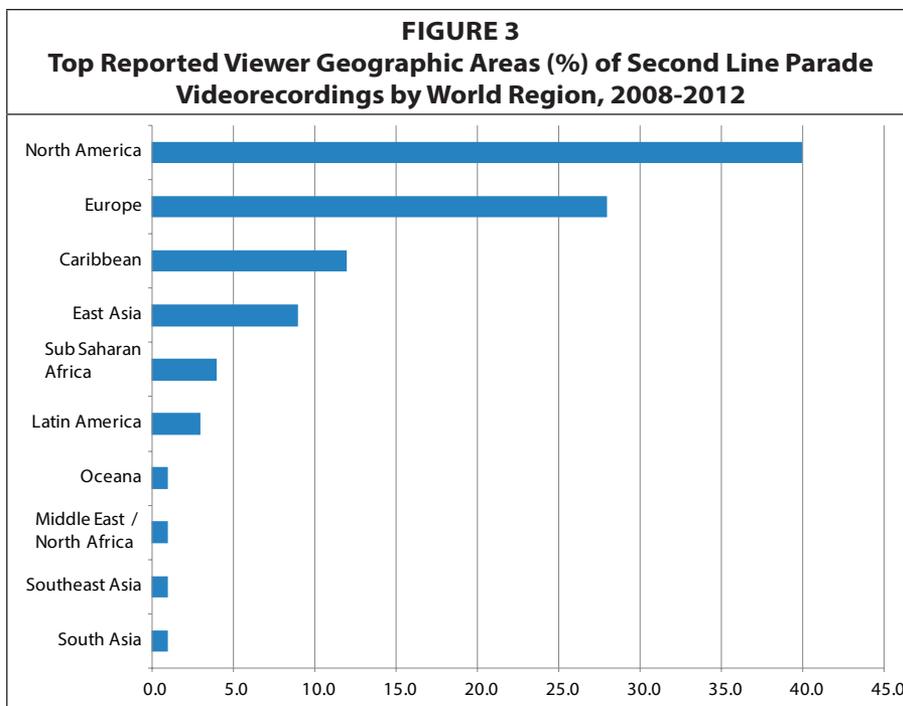


TABLE 2
Number of Views and Key Discovery Points of Second Line Parade Videos Recorded, 2008-2012*

Number Views:		Key Discovery Points:							
	Number of Views	Related Videos	As % of Views	Mobile Devices	As % of Views	YouTube Searches	As % of Views	Embedded Videos**	As % of Views
2008	25,106	9,882	39.36	2,324	9.26	686	2.73	533	2.12
2009	69,100	18,462	26.72	9,702	14.04	2806	4.06	3,215	4.65
2010	59,403	15,425	25.97	10,985	18.49	1,878	3.16	3,123	5.26
2011	42,122	8,142	19.33	12,667	30.07	1,203	2.86	1,768	4.20
2012	26,690	2,868	10.75	11,116	41.65	1,163	4.36	1,190	4.46
Total	222,421	54,779	24.63	46,794	21.04	7,736	3.48	9,829	4.42

*Sample size = 108 (20%)
**Embedded on websites, blogs, and Facebook

suggested in Figure 4, where the largest numbers of viewers of Cotton's video recordings are respectively, women 45-54, men 55-64, and men 55-64. Although these demographic data may be less reliable as age is self-reported on YouTube, they do suggest a middle aged population corresponding roughly to club membership. If this observation were to hold up to further analysis, then it would suggest that sharing videos on mobile devices together with the discovery of videos from links to related videos either fosters or creates community among primary viewers.

Although YouTube data provide a marginal and perhaps less reliable glimpse into the use of Big Red Cotton's uploaded video clips of Second Line Parades, the sheer quantity of video recordings and consistency of their appearance following scheduled parades suggests that Cotton has contributed a number of information artifacts to the digital crates of video clips and recordings. This preliminary analysis of Cotton's videos found her immersed in the events that she records. As a participant observer, Cotton's video clips capture all phases and angles of parades, from the initial "Coming Out the Door" ceremonies through parade grand marshals "shredding" their suits at parade's end. Through her video clips, viewers get glimpses of the footwork and stunting (flashy dance moves) of club members, sidewalk steppers, and Second Liners. As her videography evolves, not

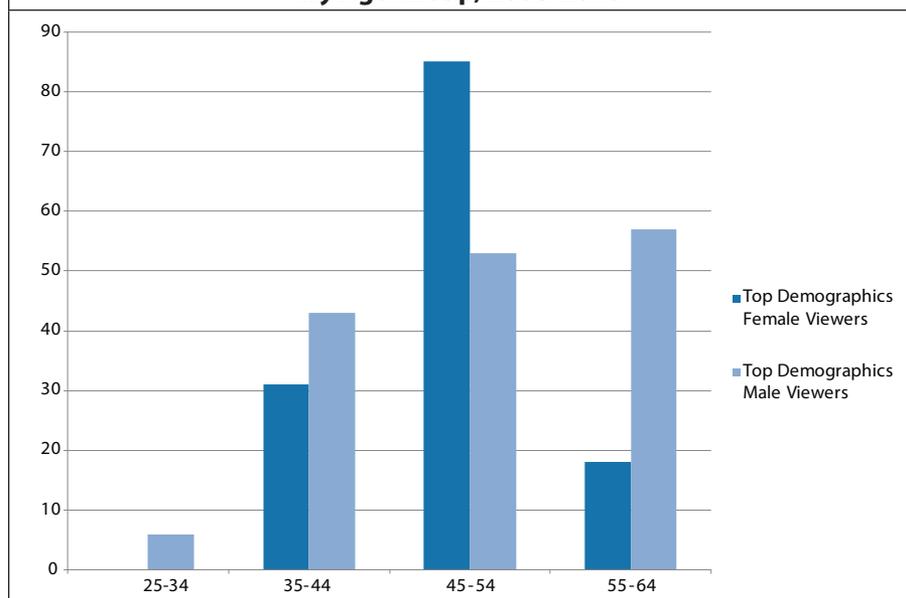
only does the length of her clips expand but the focus shifts to capture more broadly the flavor of the events around her the ethos of the rolling community of the Second Line Parade.

What it Means to "Second Line"

Viewing Cotton's video recordings intertextually with published ethnographies and personal narratives about Second Line parades presents a way for researchers to consider various meanings of "second line." As an adjective, second line depicts a type of cultural event, a specific kind of parade among parades in New Orleans differing from the grand parades on Mardi Gras⁵ as well as from those of the Mardi Gras Indians. In this instance, a Second Line parade is distinguished by both purpose and internal organization. Parades begin with the ritual of "Coming Out of the Door," in which one by one parading club members emerge from a common location (house, community center, or local lounge) highly stylized and stepping through crowds of onlookers to the music of an accompanying brass band. The parade proceeds on through a designated route with stops scheduled along the way, before disbanding at a designated end point. Parade participants typically include club royalty and officers, and men, women, and children and children of members.

There is also an intentional organization to a Second Line parade that follows the customs of jazz funerals. Social Aid & Pleasure Club members are positioned in the First Line, the front of the parade in a space roped off demarcating their territory on the parade route from "sidewalk steppers," or crowds of people walking and dancing alongside them. They are joined in the First Line by a hired brass that provides a continuous march of music drawn from a repertoire of traditional and contemporary songs.⁶ Still more paraders and onlookers fall into the Second Line behind the band to dance and show their skills

FIGURE 4
Female and Male Viewers of Second Line Parade Videorecordings,
by Age Group, 2008-2010



at footwork. The antics of sidewalk steppers are not limited to sidewalks, as some follow the flow of the parade buckjumping⁷ on porches, balconies, and on occasion rooftops.

Second Line parades are not only associated with funerals and the annual celebrations of Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs, but are formed around other festivities and events. A second usage of the term “Second Line” stands as a metaphor for community and community organizing. In the spirit of the jazz funeral, Second Line parades have also been formed for purposes of public demonstration. For example, in 2009 community members formed a Second Line parade to publicly protest efforts by local government to close the city’s Charity Hospital, a locus of public health history in New Orleans that since Katrina had been placed on a list of the nation’s most endangered buildings. Also, the Second Line itself draws communities together. In this regard, the Second Line as metaphor for community has been observed in the ethnographic work of Regis (1999), Bruenlin and Regis (2006), Dinerstein (2009), and Sakakeeny (2010). The community organizes what appears to be a rolling street party that in actuality is a reservoir of living memory, unpacking the history of Afro-creolization and engagement between African, Native, Caribbean, and European cultures in New Orleans. As a part of the infrastructure of community life, the Second Line encapsulates ongoing strife in maintaining communal engagement during cultural and economic transitions in the city. In other words, the Second Line signals the importance of people and their expressions of social and cultural practices that are essential to understanding the fabric of what makes up their communities. As members of the Nine Time Social and Pleasure Club put it,

“Bringing some pride back to the community is a job for someone, and you never know who it is or what it is. It doesn’t have to be a super speaker on black history all the time. We established Nine Time Social and Pleasure Club in 1998 as a second line club with togetherness, familyhood, and fun. . . The first year we paraded, spirits awoke and we had some fun in that might Desire. You can imagine, then, how much it hurt us as former tenants, and now club members of Nine Times, when the project was torn down with no future plans on what would be done with the village.”⁸ (2006, 8)

A third usage of second line describes various types of movement, as in the motion of celebration whether in commemoration over life or death. In this

context, to second line is to be in motion, feel the spirit, to dance, to buckjump or show your footwork, to “roll with it or get the hell out the way.” Footwork and “stuntin” give meaning to the performance of the sponsoring club. Dressed in brightly colored regalia and carrying banners, baskets, streamers, sashes, umbrellas and fans, club members perform elaborate dance routines throughout the parade route (Lewis, 159-173). It is in the motions of the Second Line that evoke an African diaspora kinship not unlike street parades throughout the Caribbean and, in particularly in Haiti and other Francophone islands and in Cuba.⁹ (Abrahams, 2006)

Using the example of Big Red Cotton’s attempts to cover New Orleans’ Second Line Parades in the years after Hurricane Katrina, one is able to begin to unpack the problems and pitfalls of digital crate digging. It is evident from an exploratory view of her video clips that Big Red Cotton’s role as a videographer is to plant her feet in the middle of the Second Line experience and cultivate her relationship with Social Aid and Pleasure Club members, Second Liners, and brass band members. Her written notations and accompanying comments from viewers identify individuals marching along parade route, familiar songs, and the rituals of club sponsored parades. But the question of authenticity still looms large for locating and using any such information artifacts found in the anti-collection. In her ethnographic work in the 1990s on Second Lines and the “contested landscapes of New Orleans,” Regis (1999, 472-3) had noted that serious scholarship was hampered by images of Second Line performances in popular culture and the entertainment industry manifested in “staged performances” in and around the French Quarter and other tourist areas that did little more than extend imagery drawn from minstrelsy. What Regis called a “(mis)appropriation of the Second Line Idiom” continues to be a factor in rebuilding communities and reestablishing culture in New Orleans. Post-Katrina it can be argued that the return to the Crescent City has also ushered in resurgent interest in authentic New Orleans culture and community as tourists begin to venture beyond the French Quarter and the grounds of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival to other venues, including Second Line Parades.

Conclusion

The late sociologist Richard A. Peterson (1997) suggested the phrase “fabricating authenticity” to “highlight the fact that authenticity is not inherent in the

object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered.” Because authenticity is a product of “tailoring collective memory to serve the needs of the present,” authenticity “is continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image.” (1997, 5-6) While Peterson was referring to Country Music, his observations are relevant elsewhere where communities constantly revise their own experiences in reaction to situations within and beyond their control. In effect, it is that community that forms the audience that seeks out relevant signifiers in music and performance that the performers are “keeping it real” with their progenitors.

For those researchers who are or will engage in digital crate digging, these questions of authenticity form the basis for the interconnectedness and interaction between the collection at hand, complete with its ethnographies, ethnomusicologies, histories, and cultural analyses, and those information artifacts in the anti-collection. For libraries, archives, museums and other cultural memory organizations, possibly the strongest distinction specifically in working with digital resources entails the way that information resources are standardized. As Martens concluded, “The standardized forms, however, are distinctive: there is much more metadata describing content of the core collection than in the anti-collection. Whatever metadata appears within the anti-collection is often supplied by authors or readers rather than by the collection maintainers, while metadata for the core collection is normally supplied by collection maintainers.” This is a crucial distinction for the practice of digital crate digging. Digging the digital crates for information artifacts among those that represent or even fabricate the authenticity of experience among diverse cultures and communities serves as a signifier of the difficulties of both locating and identifying useful information in the anti-collection and discerning its utility when found.

Implications for Libraries

Part of the premise of Atkinson’s dichotomy of collection and anti-collection is that libraries and other cultural memory organizations have neither capacity, ability, nor desire to collect everything. Given the fluid nature of what has been described here as “digital crates,” the methodology that emerges from the

present study extends current notions of information literacy into uncharted territories of information artifacts. The present discussion borrows loosely and liberally from intertextuality in literary studies, where in this case even the most rudimentary observations of cultural practices may be studied and related to extant scholarly work to derive meaning.

Notes

1. See John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, 2011)
2. (<https://twitter.com/DebCotton>) Last accessed February 1, 2013.
3. (http://www.notesfromneworleans.com/Notes_From_New_Orleans/About.html) Last accessed February 1, 2013
4. Stratified by year uploaded.
5. Roger D. Abrahams and his colleagues noted that until the Civil Rights Era, “African Americans were prohibited from enjoying the greatest free show on earth—Mardi Gras.” The Social Aid & Pleasure Clubs filled the void with neighborhood parades. See: Roger D. Abrahams, et. al. *Blues for New Orleans*: 70-1.
6. For examples of Second Line music, see “Mardi Gras Medley,” ReBirth Jazz Band, “Here to Stay,” (Arhoolie CD 9002, 1989) and “The Main Event,” ReBirth Brass Band (Louisiana Red Hot Records, 1999)
7. A dance involving full body jerks
8. This refers to the closing of the Desire Housing Project in the Desire neighborhood of New Orleans. Note that members refer to the housing project as their “village.”
9. Several forthcoming film documentaries draw comparisons between the Second Line parades of New Orleans and cultural celebrations in Haiti and Cuba. See: “A Cultural Odyssey: New Orleans to Santiago de Cuba” <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/195785113/a-cultural-odyssey-from-new-orleans-to-santiago-de> and “Uprising Drums Voice of Resistance” <http://www.bluthroatproductions.com/documentaries/uprising-drums-voice-of-resistance/> (last accessed February 12, 2013)

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