head home to Algiers and leave the backstage lunacy of Carnival behind for another year. 

Every year Mardi Gras produces thousands of new stories and new memories, most of them pretty funny. Every New Orleanian has an anecdote about how many beads they caught the year they yelled "Uncle Jawn!" at every float that went by, or the first time they showed Grandpa Tony from back East how to step on a doubloon first before bending over to pick it up, or the first time their own kids were big enough to watch the parades sitting up in the ladder seat that Papa made for them, or the year they had to sneak across the river to the French Quarter without telling their parents because the police went on strike during Mardi Gras and Mom was afraid the National Guard would start shooting if the crowds got crazy.

But for me, my favorite personal story will always be about the year that my mom got to feed Doc Severinsen and I learned how floats pee.

The New Orleans Manifesto.

C.W. CANNON

This manifesto was handed out in leaflet form by costumed revelers during the 2003 Mardi Gras.

In this time of rapid change, of dreams of "progress," of the widespread desire of many of our people to be "regular Americans," let us remind ourselves not to lose the most precious aspects of our more localized identity. Our neighborhoods are the Creole Districts — the French Quarter, Treme, St. John, Marigny and Bywater. Through peculiar circumstances, we have evolved a unique kind of society. Architect Robert Cangelosi has reminded us that the reason our housing is so lovely is "preservation by neglect." Indeed, economic underdevelopment is probably the reason our culture and way of life remain distinct as well. As we look forward hopefully to greater economic opportunity, let us seek to preserve, or to salvage, those social features which also make us beautiful. Let us consider the following four principles as fundamental, as those aspects of our different little world that we wish to preserve for our posterity and for the benefit of all people in the world:
I. PUBLIC HABITATION OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

They say New Orleans is a great place to be poor. Why? Housing costs are still relatively cheap, as are other cost-of-living indices. On the other hand, government-sponsored social services are also comparatively few and poorly administered. But in a city where a third of the population lives below the poverty line, a culture of free and collective amusement has emerged. New Orleanians entertain themselves in the street, often to the chagrin of hapless drivers. It continues to be legal (unlike anywhere else in America) to consume alcoholic beverages on the public ways. The French Quarter is an open-air free family fun park, with live music, magicians, jugglers, minstrels and outrageous freelance paradeurs. Elsewhere in the Creole Districts, on Sundays, the s.o.p. American drive from church to r.v. football is interrupted by funky marching bands followed by Second Line dancers for blocks, under clouds of marijuana smoke—all with a police escort! Today, of course, Giuliani-ism, a northern import, is driving elected officials to “clean up” the French Quarter. The problem is, homeless folks, including our iconic “hobo” are an age-old thread in the fabric of French Quarter life. When I was a kid, the Quarter was much moreshabby, smelly, and stocked with implacable, unmoneyed eccentrics than it is today. Authorities have lately been cracking down on street musicians, tarot readers and, yes, bums (whether the old dark-suitred variety or the new gutter-punk type) to make the Quarter more acceptable, not so much to tourists — whose whole attraction in New Orleans is wild-side flirtation anyway — but to the newando locusts from Dallas, Florida and the plain places beyond. They need to realize that our culture of unauthorized public performance is just as indispensable to our identity as cuisine and architecture. The easy interaction of New Orleanians of all walks of life at streetcar and bus stops, grocery stores, etc., is dedicated on all of us feeling “at home” in the public space. The Second Lines seize control of ugly highway underpasses and dote them to Utopias of Funk, the dancers on people’s cars and storefront awnings, it’s all a symbolic act of occupation of the public space at a time when the rest of America advances toward the total privatization of everything.

II. ANTI-PURITANISM

Let us thank the gods for the generous strains of French, Spanish and, above all, African cultures that have inoculated New Orleans against the body-hating, life-hating Puritanism that brutally curtails the sensual lives of too many Americans. Praise Bacchus, praise Legba. New Orleanians insist on their right to party and recognize that the party-drive is not a frivolous one. The Creole Districts of New Orleans have been historic centers of sexual freedom. That’s why we can boast one of the oldest, outest gay scenes in the country, including America’s oldest continuously open gay bar. Many Gay Americans today are ready to downplay their sexuality in order to stress the commonality they share with other Americans in the many non-sexual aspects of life. They might be surprised to note that the Gay Pride celebrations so dear to gays around the country get comparatively little play in New Orleans. The New Orleans LGBT community saves its energy for the Southern Decadence Festival, a Homo-Con free zone where gay sexuality is openly practiced, performed — in the street — in a way that would be impossible in any other city. But it’s not only gays who are allowed to have a sexuality in New Orleans; straight people are invited to party too! When I was but a wee boy, I witnessed man-on-man action by ecstatic exhibitionists in the public space, but I was able to check out boy-girl play, too. The public display of nudity and sexuality is liberating, an act of revolt against the puritan witch-hangers that want us to lead lives of private, self-loathing shame.

Besides sex, of course, there’s intoxication, and that other realm of Bacchus, masking. We’re proud that New Orleans continues to have the most liberal alcohol laws in the nation — 24/7,
THE NEW ORLEANS MANIFESTO

C.W. CANNON

anywhere. Let me quote the slogan of the Mystick Krew of T.O.K.I.N.: "New Orleans: Proud to Crawl Home." We're proud that we, and only we, host the mother of all parties: Mardi Gras, where literally a million people mask and get wasted, without shame, in the beautiful streets of our Cool Mom city. But we can do better. The one city in the world that New Orleans should look to as a role model is Amsterdam: let's legalize it, y'all. Let the feds come after us; they've never liked us, anyway. They forced us to shut down Storyville (our red-light district), forced us to raise the legal drinking age to twenty-one (we were the last state to give in). But guess what? They still think we're degenerates.

ID. KEEP IT "SLOW-BREWED"

Mardi Gras, Second Lines blocking traffic — isn't this stuff bad for business? Well, yes. Also bad for business is the near Communist pace of service in government offices as well as private commercial establishments. Tell your friends from out of town it's "French-style" service. Nobody seems to be in a rush. Many outsiders pull their hair out over our fabled inefficiency. Clearly the school board and other public agencies should try to pick up the pace and get their act together, but what about rank-and-file citizens? Is the slow pace really that bad for us? Or is it in fact good, a more healthful alternative to the drive-like-hell and live-for-your-boss attitude that so many Americans seem to think is a sane way of life? There was a great deal of local resistance to the placement of a Wal-Mart in the Garden District. Supporters pointed out how convenient it would be to park in the giant lot and pick up your roofing tiles and your lettuce at the same location. But barely hanging on in the Creole Districts is the residue of a former way of life: the bakery, the farmer's market, the hardware store, the drugstore — all in different buildings! It takes a long time to trudge to all these different places. And there's no point in driving because there's never a place to park; many of these little places don't have parking lots. You have to ride your bike or walk. Fast food's hard to come by, too. Apparently most New Orleanians would rather get a po' boy or a plate lunch than a Big Mac, because we have so few national fast-food chains. This means we end up spending more time getting lunch than the go-getters in Houston. Many folks complained about the resurrected streetcar lines because the bus gets downtown much faster. But we want pretty, not fast. And that's ok. We need to convert the slow pace of our daily routines — our eating, transportation practices, pointless street conversation with strangers — from a perceived weakness into ideology. Instead of New Orleans speeding up to "catch up" with America, here's a radical idea: maybe America oughtta slow down and notice the texture of living, what it feels like to walk, for example. Relax baby, have a beer. Take care of that chore tomorrow. The boss can wait. Marx called for a five-hour work day, and that should be the goal. The sad fact today about the work scene in America, and in the "Global Economy" (shudder), is not so much that lazy capitalists don't work, but that workaholics expect everybody to live the insane, destructive way they do. That "work-ethnic" thing is a Puritan pickpocket. Don't believe it.

IV. MISCEGENATION FOREVER

Ask any random tourist (above the frat-boy level) what's special about New Orleans and you'll hear about the Holy Trinity of New Orleans travel marketing: food, music, architecture. They're not wrong, either. But what we need always to remember is that all of these institutions, as well as the attributes I've touched on above, are the products of miscegenation. The term "miscegenation," like "queer," and like the "n" word, started off its career as a derogative. Puritanical Confederate types were scared to death during Reconstruction that black people and white people might start shacking up and making brave new babies that would overturn their evil world. In fact, that did happen, especially in the Creole Districts, where, even before
the Civil War, open "cohabitation" was afoot. A cursory glance at the multifarious hues on New Orleanian faces is testament to those heroic ancestors who did what the hell they wanted despite the threats and punishments of the monsters in power. I'm not pretending that many interracial liaisons were not exploitative, but I am asserting that not all were. I've heard too much oral history from my own people, and from other New Orleanians, to believe that all interracial sex was coerced. Remember, Puritans, even the pseudo-feminists among them, would have us believe that sex is "degrading," therefore always coerced. Anyway, miscegenation, which we believe to be beautiful and good, need not involve actual fucking. It stands as a cultural paradigm, indeed, as an axiom for measuring a special quality in all New World artifacts and social practices: the "quality" of an American work of art is to be judged by the degree of its miscegenation. Also, in this day and age, miscegenation need not be limited to black-white mixing. When I get lunch at my neighborhood po' boy and seafood joint, the Vietnamese proprietors serve me up Creole blue collar Asian Fusion. This fruitful, playful mixing-it-up, designated by the paradigm of miscegenation, need not be limited to racial categories, either. That's why I, a "straight" male, can have a high time with the gay men at the Southern Decadence Festival. At any rate, bi is the orientation most privileged by proud miscegenationists. Bi polygamy, to be exact. How odd that New Orleans, so peripheral among American cities, should supply most elegantly the model for appreciating American culture writ large! It's because the Creole Districts were multicultural before multicultural was cool, to wit, way before the birth of that blond sweetheart, American Pie. Let us end with a shout: miscegenation yesterday, miscegenation today, miscegenation forever!