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New Orleans Data News Weekly

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Xavier Professor Shines the Light on New Orleans Carnival Culture

The New Orleans Baby Dolls are part of the rich tradition of New Orleans Carnival culture and heritage.

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Dr. Kim Vaz-Deville, Professor of Education in Xavier's Division of Education and Counselling, was the keynote speaker for the Women in Carnival Symposium. The Women in Carnival Network is the first international network of female carnival scholars and artists focusing on the changing roles of women in carnivals in the African Diaspora. The symposium's theme, "Mas: Intersections: Exploring Diasporic Carnival and Festival Cultures," explored subversive displays of power, the politics of racialized, sexualized, and nationalized bodies, and trickster folklore.

"It was a privilege and joy to address and dialogue with esteemed scholars, artists, and activists gathering to rectify the fact that there is little research on carnival traditions related to Black women in the African Diaspora," said Dr. Vaz-Deville. "We addressed the carnivalesque, the opportunity for women of African descent for cultural rule-breaking and creative confrontation of oppressive forces through a transnational

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DATA NEWS WEEKLY
P.O. Box 57347, New Orleans, LA 70157-7347 | Phone: (504) 821-7421 | Fax: (504) 821-7622
editorial: datanewseditor@bellsouth.net | advertising: datanewsad@bellsouth.net

Terry B. Jones
CEO/Publisher

Edwin Buggage
Editor

Sharonda Green
Executive Assistant

June Hazeur
Accounting

Contributors
XULA.edu
DNW Staff Writer
Tracee Dundas
New Orleans Agenda
John Merritt
Charlene Crowell

Art Direction & Production
Pubinator.com
Editorial and Advertising Inquiries
datanewsweeklyad@gmail.com
Distribution
by Terrence Lee

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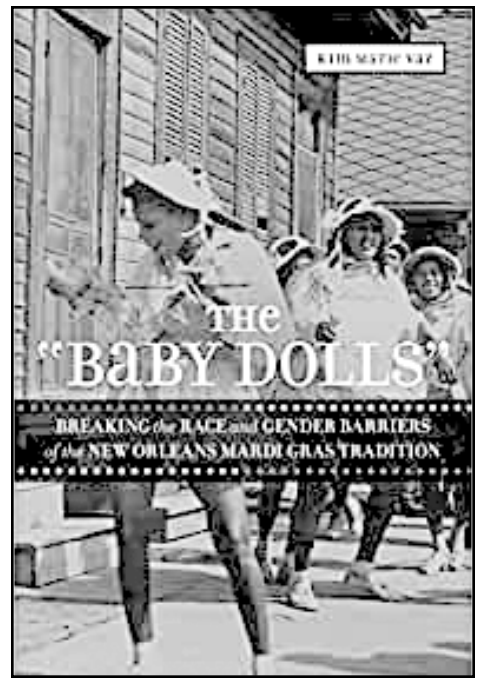
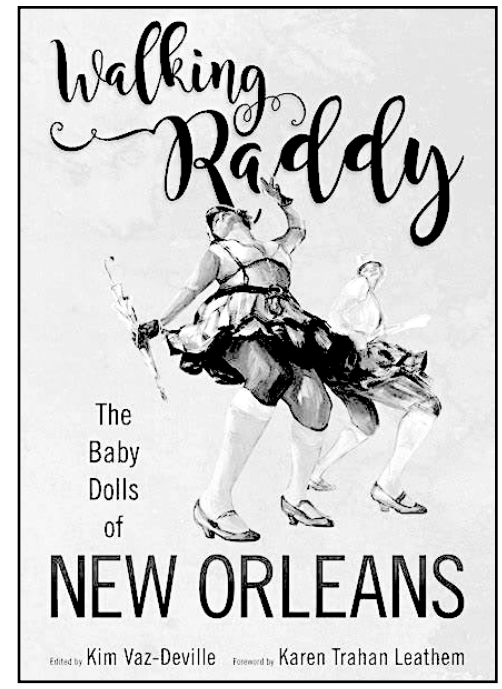
journey from Africa to Peru, Belize, Trinidad, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and the United Kingdom."

In her keynote address, Dr. Vaz-Deville discussed the New Orleans Baby Dolls, a Mardi Gras tradition known for breaking racial and gender barriers. The Baby Dolls are a group of African American women and men carnival maskers who dress up on Mardi Gras day in short satin skirts, bloomers, and garters. During the height of the Baby Dolls era, 1930 – 1950, they challenged stereotypes of African American women.

"At that time, baby dolls were very rare and hard to get. The name 'Baby Dolls' had a double meaning because African American women weren't considered precious or doll-like," said Dr. Vaz-Deville.

The Baby Dolls parading through the streets of New Orleans.





Xavier University of Louisiana Dr. Kim Vaz-Deville is the author of two books on the Baby Dolls.

Historically, women of African descent were pressed to labor erotically, domestically, and reproductively with no recognition or benefits for their strenuous efforts. Carnival and festive occasions began shifting this history and offered opportunities for enslaved women to re-possess themselves. Through carnivalesque, women engaged in re-invention that turned authoritarian norms upside down. These periods of time-out from the everyday world, combined with engagements with fashion, dance, and music, offered opportunities for self-making and critiquing societal standards.

Dr. Kim Vaz-Deville

Symposium Panelists: L-R Emily Zobel Marshal, Chery L. Noralez, Adanna Kai Jones. Cathy Thomas, Kim Vaz-Deville, and Nadia Calmet.

As a feminist scholar, Dr. Vaz-Deville knew it was significant to put the Baby Dolls in context to emphasize their impact on society.

"The New Orleans Baby Dolls tradition is important because it demonstrates the normative fault lines of society. The Baby Dolls were not consciously political, but they did the opposite of what most people expected of 'respectable' women. For example, a woman was not supposed to smoke a cigar, wear a short skirt, or dance erotically," said Dr. Vaz-Deville. "They expose the limits of social norms. Those behaviors are reversals of normative behavior for women of that time. They tell us about what women are not supposed to do or do at significant risk to their safety. Today, women continue the tradition in honor of these fierce, determined foremothers."

In celebration of the symposium's theme, Dr. Vaz-Deville worked with Antoinette de Alteriis, Captain of the Krewe of Joan of Arc, to create an upcycled outfit. They constructed a pair of pants from 20 men's neckties by taking them apart, cutting them in half, and piecing them onto a pattern. They also beaded buttons and sewed the tie labels onto a jacket.

Dr. Vaz Deville and Antoinette intentionally made each element of the upcycled look symbolic: the dismantled neckties symbolize untethering from patriarchy; Patchy knees recall how many Black women worked domestically; The jacket's beaded buttons represent Black Masking traditions, with tie labels signifying consumerism and commodification of Mardi Gras masking traditions; As men labeled women as baby dolls, the tie labels also serve as literal embodiments of men's power to name women.

She is thankful for the symposium experience, having found her intellectual and creative tribe in the symposium's panelists. They discussed themes of Black women's bodies, the threats to Carnival due to their increasing commercialization and commodification, and the Pandemic. She shared that the symposium was also an opportunity to mentor beginning scholars navigating their academics, research, and creative agendas.

The symposium also showcased the importance of studying race and gender through the carnival lens, as Carnival is symbolic worldwide.

"Carnivals and masquerades are ultimate arenas for self-expression through art, craft, music, song, and dance. They are accessible opportunities for Black women, especially those marginalized, to make themselves visible in the world," said Dr. Vaz-Deville.

Women in Carnival Network co-founder Emily Zobel Marshall notes, "Carnival was born in an extremely patriarchal society, yet its cultural forms have replicated some of the gendered binaries at its heart. It also remains a space in which patriarchal rules are turned upside down. Today, the manifestation of feminist activity in Carnival is more explicit than ever."

Dr. Vaz-Deville also expresses the Women in Carnival Network breaks down barriers between scholars and performers and exposes the oppressive forces that keep Black women's bodies denigrated, situate them as economically vulnerable, and negate their artistic creations and performances. She was proud to share with network colleagues the New Orleans Baby Dolls as a cultural tradition that demonstrated strength, power, and courage in the face of social stigma.

"Afro-Peruvian Artist Victoria Santa Cruz's poem, 'They Yelled at Me: 'Black!" stemmed from a racist event but allowed her the chance to discover her authority. In coming to accept her Africanness, she found her power and beauty. The festive mas, masks, and masquerades from Baby Dolls constitute accessible paths to articulating views on self and society," said Dr. Vaz-Deville.

Summer Chic Pink

Fashion With A Purpose

Tracee Dundas
Fashion Stylist

It was the summer fashion soirée of the season, as the Mayor's Office of Cultural Economy and the City of New Orleans rollout the pink carpet to welcome Essence Fest back to NOLA to celebrate music, Black cultural and fashion in person after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19.

The event was sponsored by Ricki Fairley and the Touch Breast Cancer

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Klervaé Stinson, with NOTCF

Shristi Sharma and Malaika Khum

Bold and Beauty

Mayor Cantrell Salute Touch

Data Zone, Continued from page 4.

Foundation, an organization that is working to eradicate breast cancer in Black Women. The theme for the welcome reception was "Essence Chic in Shades of Pink" and with that said the preferred dress code for the soirée was pink attire. Pink is often described as the subdued cousin to the bold and vibrant color red. And although often classified as the sweet and feminine color, it is the perfect shade for New Orleans warm and humid weather; and pairs well with other summer palettes such as white, orange, and green.

Even if pink is not your go-to color, there are so many shades and styles to choose from that there is a shade suitable to match anyone's distinctive style. Whether it is bubblegum, pastel or bright and bold, the options are many. This was evident with the variety of fabulous fashions present as New Orleans Fashion Aficionados welcomed Essence back to New Orleans in full-force being absent from the city for two-years. No one disappointed, including the Honorable Mayor LaToya Cantrell, who wore a one shoulder pink sequins jumpsuit. From oversize pants suits (worn by yours truly) to lace, tie-dye, and dapper dudes; Gallier Hall was beaming in attention getting styles that was a play on volume, proportion, and sultry appeal all that screamed summer chic.

Fashion Editor: Tracee Dundas @fashionablyyoursnola
Photographer: John Merrit @johnmerritphotos
Location: City of New Orleans - Gallier Hall

Tres Chic in Pink.

Alana Harris, Mayors Office of Cultural Economy and patron enjoying the festivities.

Dr. Warren Johnson and Event Designer Hiram Simith CEO of HiramStyle.

Tracee with Natisha Reed of Chic' Nouvelle Modeling

Tracee with Lori Byargeon, with Dress for Success

Breast cancer survivor Arianna Apodaca and Ricki Fairley, CEO of the Touch Breast Cancer Foundation

Mayor Cantrell and Krewe

Backstreet Cultural Museum Reopens

Backstreet Cultural Museum recently re-opened in the historic Treme neighborhood. Its new address is located at 1531 St. Phillip.

Data News Staff Edited Report

It has been nearly a year since Hurricane Ida damaged the cultural jewel that celebrates New Orleans' African American parading culture, the Backstreet Cultural Museum. Now it is reopening sharing the gift of an amazing tradition with the world once again.

In its new location that is smaller than the original space also located in Tremé, not all items to be showcased can be shown at once, said Dominique Dilling-Francis, President of the museum's board and the founder's daughter. She plans to rotate exhibits every few months.

Hurricane Ida left holes in the roof and water inside the original building, a former funeral home, after the storm crashed ashore in August 2021. A powerful Category 4 hurricane at landfall, Ida hit on the same date Hurricane Katrina had ravaged parts of Louisiana and Mississippi 16 years earlier.

Artifacts at the museum include regalia given by Mardi Gras Indians — African Americans who create new elaborately plumed and beaded costumes every year. There are also memorabilia from baby dolls — groups of women who parade and dance in bonnets, garters, and short, ruffled dresses. And there are black sweatsuits painted with white skeletons from the Skull and Bones Gang, which wakes up the neighborhood early on Fat Tuesday with a message that everyone dies and should first have a loving, productive life.

The museum also has photos, films and papers related to such neighborhood traditions and is a place where maskers and merrymakers gather on Mardi Gras. Its founder, Sylvester "Hawk" Francis, created it in 1999 after decades of photographing and filming the neighborhood culture.

Although benefactors paid to have a tarp put on the roof at the first site, it became clear that mold and humidity would eventually ruin the collection even with window air conditioning units cooling the place.

Dilling-Francis and volunteers dried and boxed everything for storage. She said she hopes that donors will not be disappointed that their work cannot be on permanent display.

Dilling-Francis said individual donations and a grant from the New Orleans Tourism and Cultural Fund helped the museum to reopen, but she declined to say how much was given.

The new museum will be open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesdays through Saturdays.

State & Local News

Congressman Carter Introduces Bill to Study and Protect the Integrity of Louis Armstrong Park

New Orleans Agenda

This week, Congressman Troy A. Carter, Sr. introduced legislation to study and protect the culture and integrity of Louis Armstrong Park within the former New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park for future generations. A park at the heart of the New Orleans community, Congressman Carter's bill The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park Study Act of 2022 would authorize a study with meaningful community input to assess the suitability and feasibility of re-establishing an area of Louis Armstrong Park as the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park with federal status under the Department of the Interior.

"The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Act of 2022 would bring together the community, government and stakeholders to collectively study and determine a path forward for this park that protects the integrity of this true treasure of the Crescent City," said Congressman Carter.

"The rich culture of New Orleans is deeply rooted in the places, people, and history of our community, and it must be valued, uplifted and protected for generations to come," said Congressman Carter. "The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park Study Act of 2022 would bring together the community, government, and stakeholders to collectively study and determine a path forward for this park that protects the integrity of this true treasure of the Crescent City."

Congressman Carter continued, "The Tremé is a historically Black and culturally significant neighborhood in the city. We must have the impacted community members not just at the table, but meaningfully involved in these conversations on the future of Louis Armstrong Park to help best preserve the culture and history of this cultural landmark and the city we love."

The study will analyze the assemblage of historic and cultural resources and their best use of management through partnerships among public and private entities that reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folklife that are a valuable part of the story of the United States and Louisiana.

It will fully develop a conceptual plan that outlines the roles of all participants and stakeholders in the park, including the Department of the Interior's National Park Service.

This study for the future of the park will be done in consultation with the Sec. of Interior, State Historic Preservation Officers, State Historical Societies, State Tourism Offices along with local residents, community advocates, organizers, business interests, nonprofit organizations, and State and local governments that—are involved in the planning of the park.

The study must also provide a conceptual boundary map that has demonstrated support by the public for the designation of the park.

Record Inflation Shrinks Housing Affordability, Worsens Racial Wealth Gaps

Many Consumers Pay More for Rent than Others Do for Mortgages

Charlene Crowell
NNPA Newswire Contributor

This summer, temperatures are not the only thing rising above normal.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the nation's consumer price index (CPI) at the end of May was the largest since December 1981, more than 40 years ago. This key economic measure tracks the change in prices paid by consumers for goods and services for about 93 percent of the total U.S. population.

The most recent report released on June 10, showed double-digit CPI increases for fuel, food, utilities, and both new and used vehicles.

Even before this data release, many consumers already adjusted their lives to compensate as best they could for $5 per gallon gas prices, keeping family cars longer, and taking fewer family outings to free up funds for still-rising food prices.

But how much longer can housing remain affordable when prices for both homes and rents are rising even higher?

Homeownership, historically a reliable building block to family wealth, is more of a challenge today for first-time homebuyers. As of 2022's first quarter, the median price of an existing single-family home grew to $368,200, according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR), 15.7 percent higher than a year ago.

Families able to afford a 20 percent down payment on this median-priced home can look forward to a monthly mortgage of approximately $1,383, which is $319 more – 30 percent higher – than a year ago, according to NAR.

For Black America, however, a history replete with systemic discrimination in education, employment, lending, and housing imposes additional harsh realities that have yet to be effectively addressed.

From 2013 to 2019, after adjusting for inflation, the median household income of Black households increased by just $800, compared with about $3,000 for white households and $3,700 for Latinx households, according to research by the National Equity Atlas that analyzed the nation's 100 largest metro areas. Additionally, during these same years, the number of neighborhoods affordable to Black households dropped by 14 percent.

"Shrinking neighborhood affordability and the dearth of affordable neighborhoods that provide the necessary conditions for health, well-being, and economic success in many large metros are reinforcing longstanding patterns of racial segregation and creating new ones," concludes this report.

Other new research from Freddie Mac sought to identify the causes of soaring home prices and where affordable homes might still be found.

What drove home price growth, and can it continue?

Freddie Mac's new report found four factors driving escalating home costs:

Record low mortgage rates in 2020 and 2021 generated a race to beat future rate increases.

Home inventories were limited due to underbuilding on one hand, and below average distressed sales on the other.

The number of first-time homebuyers grew due in part to favorable age demographics; and

Many consumers left high-cost cities for cheaper ones that already had a housing shortage. Where affordable homes can be found, brings to mind an old adage in real estate, 'location, location, location'.

"As of February 2022, migration out of the largest 25 cities remains three times higher than the rate pre-pandemic," states the Freddie Mac report. "The most significant increase in migration has been to midsized metro areas with populations between 500,000 to 1 million, followed by smaller midsized metros and smaller metro areas."

The irony is that today, many consumers are paying more for fair market rent (FMR) than many monthly mortgages that lead to home equity and wealth.

The down payment – rather than the monthly mortgage note – is the primary barrier to homeownership for many renters. With a rising cost of living, few – if any – dollars remain at the end of a month for many families. And even if a family has managed to save a few hundred dollars or more, home down payments on the private market are tens of thousands of dollars.

Some home lenders may offer adjustable-rate mortgages (ARMs) as an alternative to cash-strapped buyers. But the key word in these loans is 'adjustable'. When loan interest resets occur, borrowers should plan for higher interest rates. It would also be prudent to remember that the foreclosure crisis of the early 2000s was fueled by high-cost mortgage loans that left millions of Black and Latino homeowners either without a home or remaining in one with a loan balance larger than its market value.

If this nation really wants to address its affordable housing crisis, then it is time to give Black America a level playing field with access to affordable and sustainable mortgages. It is equally important to diversify new construction housing.

Currently, the vast majority of new construction housing — whether for rent or for purchase – are for higher-income consumers, leaving moderate and low-income families with severely shrinking housing options.

Every family of every income needs a home. Effective housing reforms would offer both access and affordability – not either-or.

Charlene Crowell is a senior fellow with the Center for Responsible Lending. She can be reached at Charlene.crowell@responsiblelending.org.