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Introduction

Presenting Hollywood South

Bells sounded in 2014 when a prominent service agency for film production in Los Angeles announced a report revealing that Louisiana had surpassed California as the top location for major film production. While the ringing in Southern California tolled the steady decline of the local film economy, it sounded more like wedding chimes in the Louisiana press. Headlines proclaimed that Louisiana had become the “Film Production Capital of the World.”¹ Embedded in the euphoria over the state’s film-production stature was a sense of achievement. Merely twelve years and over \$1 billion in investments had paid off in the making of Hollywood South.

That Louisiana grew to become the third-largest economy for film production in the United States in less than a decade seems curious, if not counterintuitive, given the position of the state in economic terms and in the American popular imagination. In 2013 Louisiana continued to be one of the ten poorest states in the country; about one-fourth of the population resided in the New Orleans metropolitan area, where nearly 30 percent lived below the poverty line.² From 2010 to 2012, the state claimed that the film industry generated over \$1.7 billion in revenues. Meanwhile, it slashed spending for higher education, health care, and social services to cover a little over \$150 million in budget shortfalls.³ A 2014 report by the state Legislative Auditor’s Office found that budget cuts over the past eight years had rendered the Department of Children and Family Services unable to “fulfill their function.” The halving of the state’s higher-education budget from 2008 to 2015 led to the steepest rise in tuition and fee costs for public colleges in the United States, accompanied by exploding student loan debt, while keeping Louisiana at forty-eighth in graduation rates.⁴ During the same period, the state increased funding for film and television

production to more than \$200 million.⁵ These sad financial figures have been reinforced in media images of a region crushed by Hurricane Katrina and successive hurricanes since 2005, the BP oil spill in 2010, and recurring political crises around graft and corruption.⁶ In other words, visuals in the newspaper of red-carpet premieres and star sightings, along with the endless stream of testimonials touting film-project budgets, sales receipts, and job numbers, sat alongside the uncomfortable realities of “crisis ordinariness” that had come to characterize life for the average Louisiana citizen.⁷ How these two realities coexist, and even mutually reinforce each other, is the subject of this book.

From a purely rational standpoint, the growth of Hollywood film and television production in cash-poor states is the result of a supply-side economic strategy, what presidential candidate George H. W. Bush called “voodoo economics” in 1980. In 2012 alone, the film industry received \$1.5 billion in state-based tax breaks.⁸ The tradable film tax credit personified in the Prologue is but one example of welfare for the wealthy because it promises a break for corporations and their richest beneficiaries by minimizing their fiduciary responsibilities to states. Until the 2008 financial meltdown, the primary buyers of film tax credits in states with transferable programs were hedge fund investors, insurance companies, Wall Street banks, and private equity firms.⁹ At a time of general budgetary austerity, states cannot fill the holes in their budgets by simply adding together the incomes and property taxes of film-industry employees. Instead, government officials justify the guaranteed future losses to the state coffers with another promise: a self-sustaining satellite of the Hollywood film economy. From there, any political debates around regional film policy get murkier, full of technocratic details of dueling algorithms and doublespeak jargon. I’ve tried to decode some of the rhetoric typically used by the wonks for the dutiful citizen–reader in the Appendix, but a critical stance must tarry in the irrational as well.

The truth is that the little Hollywoods of the world—whether in the American South or South America—are based less on well-reasoned economic strategies for incentivizing an industry, and more on beautiful projections of what might be. Boosters point to the high costs and time involved in creating twentieth-century Hollywood as a regional growth engine, not only for film and television, but for a wide range of high-tech and creative industries that perpetuate a well-paid, highly skilled labor force in Southern California. The proximity of tourism and entertainment industries in that region further bolsters claims that film economies multiply profits by making desirable places to work, live, and visit. The vision of a carbon-neutral cluster of firms attracting venture capital and bringing back educated workers makes both liberal and conservative politicians smile, especially after years of seeing their budgets unmade by shuttered factories, offshored industries, and a shrinking if not stagnant tax base. Working in tandem with the film studios’ national trade organization, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA),

regional film offices and state economic-development departments frequently stress the same financial indicators that the MPAA has used, first to lobby for Canadian tax breaks in the 1980s and then to respond to critics ever after: “Pure and simple: film and tax incentives create jobs, expand revenue pools, and stimulate local economies.”¹⁰ Even though every one of these assertions has been hotly debated in the corridors of state capitols and some academic enclaves, the public debate has been largely displaced by the dreams of a Hollywood-borne *deus ex machina*.

My modest goal in the chapters that follow is to have that discussion, based not on indicators, multipliers, future visions, or predictions, but on how life in a film economy shapes and is shaped by its location. As we know, location involves both history and geography, but it is also phenomenological, as in a sense of place. Hollywood South in this regard is never quite the same as Hollywood, even as it leverages the latter’s power in transforming New Orleans. The city and the industry influence each other in ways we sense but can’t always name. People frequently say their city is like a state of mind, but beyond the metaphorical, everyday life has temporal and spatial rhythms that are tethered not only to the conscious feelings we have about places, but also to the unconscious structures of governments and institutions, markets and economies. It is the thin line between feeling at home (*heimlich*) and feeling displaced—what Freud termed the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*)—because it reveals what we repress in wanting home.¹¹ *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans* delves into the ways in which the aura of Hollywood film production and the construction of a place called “New Orleans” conflict, disrupt, and disable each other—precisely because they repress their underlying power structures. Put plainly, it’s the annoying little cultural disconnects in particular locations that get most folks riled about film policy and production economics.

In this respect, Louisiana and New Orleans are not unique in their status as places where we locate ourselves—even if New Orleanians may have their own unique contexts for seeing Hollywood at home. For myself, however, New Orleans makes sense as a case study of this dialectical relationship between film economy and location. The city predates Hollywood as a coveted spot for film producers, having piqued the interest of William Selig in 1907, right before he hightailed it to Los Angeles. The reason why he left is a key to both the success of the film economy in Southern California and its failure in Louisiana and elsewhere. For New Orleans continues to inspire cultural exceptionalism even as its policies mimic completely unexceptional schemes for segregating social classes, preserving white wealth and privilege, and profiting from black culture.¹² These factors also underline the rebirth of the regional film dreams that Louisiana would pioneer as an economic policy in the United States. By continually being first in offering among the most generous payouts around the globe, Louisiana catapulted the City of New Orleans into the spotlight as a low-cost leader for shooting Hollywood film and television. This happened soon after I had relocated to the city, and so I bore

witness to the ways in which film production colluded with the worst horrors of the city's transformations in the past decade—even as it stood on its own stage as a protagonist for economic recovery. Before I tell the paradoxical tale of Hollywood South, though, let's return to Selig's story in the making of Hollywood.

HOLLYWOOD AS INDUSTRY AND AURA

The question of why Hollywood succeeded in Southern California, while other locations failed to gain traction as film capitals, has plagued historians across academic disciplines.¹³ Despite the various hypotheses, however, one thing is certain. Once established, Hollywood became a self-perpetuating cluster of movie companies and film workers. Before that time, Selig found an arid brushscape lacking electricity, water, or any other infrastructure needed to grow any industry, creative or not.¹⁴ The threat of fire and the unpredictability of earthquakes also lobbied against building an industry based on highly flammable celluloid. The hills of Edendale were about as far from financial resources and raw materials for filming as one could get in the continental United States. What the region did have was plenty of free land, cheap labor, and a municipal government and business community eager for a white, Protestant migration. Taxes were low, and wages were reportedly 25–50 percent lower in Los Angeles than in New York.¹⁵ The Southern Railroad, in cahoots with the city, had just commissioned the Edison Company to shoot promotional reels targeting new migrants with sun, beaches, and virgin land for development.¹⁶ It may be easy to forget that early independent producers in California favored the Western genre because they didn't need studio space to shoot it, but once studios dominated the landscape, shooting in house was more efficient. Time trumped space in the budget.¹⁷ Selig's love of jungle movies did not send him packing to the tropics. He simply built a zoo on his studio grounds to house the monkeys and tigers.¹⁸ Shooting on his own land, Selig had perfected the jungle film genre, recreating the subtropical place he had just fled, but for a fraction of the cost.

As settings could be increasingly fabricated, Southern California and the film industry became indivisible as a place of power called Hollywood. For most of the twentieth century, the metropolitan region was where film studios located and their employees resided, where distribution deals were made and projects took shape before production. In fact, nearly all of these financial operations and creative decisions still happen in Hollywood.¹⁹ Film and media workers continue to flock to Los Angeles, drawn perhaps by the aura of film production. Once there, they find that their steady employment and their location are codependent. Whether in the skilled trades or in the creative arts, film workers find they must be close to the production hub to build both their credit sheets and the cultural bonds that communicate their dedication to new projects and their fellow crew

members.²⁰ Yet, by the 1990s, the number of production hubs for Hollywood had multiplied across both state and national borders. It turns out that the economic values of the land and labor that drove the film industry to Southern California in the first place were as artificial as Selig's jungle movie sets.

Supported by Wall Street and protected by the Feds, Hollywood's concentration of resources was fueled by government policies that shielded competition abroad and allowed national oligopolies to form. During his first decade in California, Selig's business relied on the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), which excluded foreign film companies and monopolized raw film stock and technologies. Known as the Edison Trust, MPPC was replaced by an even more potent, verticalized studio system that sought to dominate film production, distribution, and exhibition. The industry's trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), worked hand in hand with the state to stave off censors and competition with their own Production Code. Even after the U.S. Department of Justice began targeting the trust-like activities of the largest studios, Congress still ensured that a cartel controlled foreign distribution and U.S. exports.²¹ The MPPDA meanwhile grew a managerial class of investors based in Wall Street finance, while keeping the creative workforce in place, both literally and figuratively. The real "genius of the system," in the words of film historian Thomas Schatz, was the studios' use of assembly-line production to create film art.²² Super profits from movie theaters were guaranteed by the block booking and the blind buying of cheap stock stories, enabling bigger budgets for expenditures elsewhere, generally on the copyrights for first-run films and the A-list stars that raised Hollywood's prestige. Selig also imagined that the production lots themselves could be a third line of income, for example by bringing in visitors to see the zoo as an attraction. Selig's dream never was realized personally. When his company was consumed by another one, he made a living selling the rights to stories he had bought cheaply from others and hoarded over the years.²³ His legacy lives on, instead, through a politics that benefits the industry, as much with regard to its famous moniker as to its infamous profits.

RETURN OF THE ZOMBIES

Associated with glamour and status, creativity and entrepreneurship, Hollywood now personified a protagonist in its own story, even as its doppelgangers in New York provided the crucial financial foundation. Throughout the golden age of cinema, the studios recreated low-budget jungles, castles, and other faraway lands, while a fantastic force of mummies, vampires, and zombies departed hallowed Hollywood in a scheme to dominate all media entertainment. The guaranteed double booking of these cheap filler films with their stock settings and characters offset any financial risks for their creators.²⁴ Having dominated the land, Hollywood mastered the labor

power of the workers who made film art into an industry. Not so unlike the namesake in the golden-age B movie of the same name, Hollywood had become the *King of the Zombies* (1941), with its crew of faithful laborers contained and protected on the same island. Then the zombies got loose.

The U.S. Supreme Court's 1948 decision to break up the vertical integration of the industry, combined with the growth of state-regulated national cinemas abroad and an upstart new broadcast medium, pushed Hollywood film production to new locales. Popularly called the *Paramount* decision, the ruling meant Hollywood's investors could no longer bank on guaranteed screenings at home or abroad, and instead they made distribution king across all entertainment media. The studios opted increasingly for fewer and flashier titles—and, later, branded properties that could tie together sales of film, television, music, games, and other amusements.²⁵ Meanwhile, the rebuilding of national cinemas in postwar locations, regulated public-service broadcasting, and new state financing models at least challenged Hollywood's colonization of all global screens. Seeing that the economic risks were greatest in making content, film studios thus withheld their largesse with production expenditures. In turn, producers struck out in search of ways to winnow their costs.

In setting the stage for the new regime in film economics, *King of the Zombies* was itself a pioneer of independent budget busting. Made by an outfit so underfunded that its kin were said to live in Hollywood's Poverty Row, *King* undercut even the cheapest of studio-made filler films for its theaters' double bills. The production house Monogram lacked the credit line of bigger studios. It was excluded from the majors' distribution networks and thus relied on unaffiliated movie theaters, generally in small towns or among second-rate chains.²⁶ So producers assumed all the risks of production up front. Avoiding payment for original content rights and drawing on a familiar roster of freelance workers, *King* was shot and finished in two weeks for a fraction of the cost of an average studio film.²⁷ By adding new themes and changing the setting, the film became the first of a series of zombie genre movies.²⁸ Monogram survived, just barely, by eating away at the margins of the studio film economy and by seizing on the antitrust pressures that slowly allowed Monogram to compete for second billings. The company reportedly made 10 percent of American films in the mid-1940s but only netted about \$2,000 in profits per film.²⁹ Yet the company modeled how to be a low-price leader in production when the studios stood in the way of all other capital circuits.

The term *runaway production* sums up the results of the economic reorganization over the second half of the twentieth century. Cast outward from Hollywood with only a project contract in hand, film producers fled to places where they could find tangible benefits: stages and studios, professional trade workers, crew lodging and locational services.³⁰ Outside the United States, producers could build out the budget with foreign coproduction funds. Inside the country, hundreds of

film commissions stood at the ready to offer producers free goods and services for projects that would shine a positive light on their regions. Riffing on the outsourcing waves in other industries, cultural scholar Toby Miller blames Hollywood for a New International Division of Cultural Labor, one in which producers leveraged places against each other in an effort to keep labor costs down and union power under control.³¹ Balancing scheduling efficiencies and the clustering of film professionals with the lowest-cost locations and labor, independent producers by the late-1990s were flocking to a new model for financing location shooting, one that yoked the prospects of the producers to those of regions that hosted Hollywood projects.

Perhaps it was prescient that *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), the sequel to *King*, was set in Louisiana. Looking and sounding almost exactly like its predecessor, *Revenge* adds a typecast collection of a mammy, a buffoon, and a creole spitfire along with sprinkled references to voodoo, the swamps, and the metropolis of New Orleans. Together, these locate the film's setting in a place.

HOME OF THE ZOMBIES

Of course, the idea that there is a force so dark that it feeds off the bodies of the powerless in a quest for immortality has been a motif in contemporary popular culture and fiscal policy. Both owe a debt to Hollywood and its *modus operandi*, which, in turn, owes a debt to a city that inspired an imaginative essayist by way of Cincinnati. Lafcadio Hearn, fan of occult and fable alike, came to New Orleans in 1876 seeking good stories and national audiences. He found both through his creative depictions of voodoo, a hybrid of various black religious rituals with colorful tropes born straight from the writer's desire for a place that was unlike all others. His tales of funerals, ghosts, and the undead conjured a potent image of an American city that was completely distinct—neither North nor South, neither East nor West—inventing “the notion of Louisiana, more specifically New Orleans, as idea and symbol.”³² It would seem logical that the first travelers seeking out authentic voodoo rituals soon followed.³³

Along with George Washington Cable, Hearn, and other professional romantics of the place, the late-nineteenth-century chroniclers of New Orleans created the basis for a cultural economy built on the labors of authors and artists, playwrights and performers, as well as the industrial organization of publishers, printers, and publicists. That the first Vitagraph film-exhibition hall in the United States would be located in 1896 at the foot of Canal Street, which was an artery of the city's commercial heart, should be no surprise given the already thriving pulse of the theatrical sector there.³⁴ Sponsored by an elite class of philanthropic patrons, and with the backing of the largest newspaper chains, New Orleans's arts scene produced visions of an authentically distinct city that sold pottery and papers

worldwide.³⁵ New Orleans's cultural economy succeeded in branding the city as a place where residual culture propelled its financial future. The geography of the city transformed to accommodate a residential boom driven by a white, middle-class exodus to new neighborhoods and new waves of white ethnic migrants who rented near the Central Business District and the French Quarter, the respective centers for commerce and culture.³⁶ By the 1940s, even the political and business leaders who shunned the mythologized creole culture concocted by writers and artists now wagered on "a nineteenth century urban fabric that could propel a tourism-based economy."³⁷

At that juncture, *Revenge of the Zombies* appropriately brought together the mutable folk creature for tourists with an irrational love for the film industry. According to newspaper advertising, it played in New Orleans's movie theaters for eight months after its release, sometimes with top billing. Local critics seemed aware that the headlining star, John Carradine, had a theatrical career in New Orleans long before. More than that, the typecast characters and stereotypical tropes in *Revenge* seemed not so remote from those purveyed in the iconography of the tourism industry. Both Hollywood and the city itself trafficked in racialized images of "voodoo, jazz, Creole culture, decadence, sexual permissiveness, and exoticism" that mystified blackness for mass audiences while ignoring the contemporary realities of African-Americans.³⁸ They promoted a mental image of the place while concentrating profits among geographically distant elites. *Revenge* was one of some sixty films set in Louisiana during the height of the golden age of Hollywood.³⁹ For most of the movies, *Revenge* included, the production crews never stepped foot in the state, until state officials and Hollywood joined forces.

LEGISLATING HOLLYWOOD SOUTH

Although Louisiana had followed other states in using financial incentives for select place-based film projects, the 2002 Louisiana Motion Picture Incentive Act was the first statewide law in the nation crafted to satiate the needs of Hollywood's itinerant producers. It offered them guaranteed tax rebates for entire projects, based solely on production location and labor. The policy cribbed the language used by British Columbia, a Canadian hub for big-budget Hollywood film and television production, and set off a competition for domestic runaway production. Apart from this, what made the Louisiana law unique was its aspiration to grow a new permanent industry, one that would sustain a job cluster and spark an economic renaissance.

The path from Southern California back to Louisiana was paved by Lonny Kaufman. A former Hollywood executive, Kaufman came to head the newly formed arts-and-entertainment wing of the state's Department of Economic Development. In 2001, the state's economic development strategy still placed film

alongside—of all things—coastal restoration as part of its vision: “To preserve, develop, promote, and celebrate Louisiana’s natural and cultural assets for their recreation and aesthetic values.”⁴⁰ That same year, the state appointed the Los Angeles–based Kaufman, who was then vice president of the second-largest payroll company for U.S. film workers and an ardent defender of the film industry. Joined by the obvious mutual interest in bringing Hollywood payrolls back within the national territory, Kaufman was charged with creating an arts-and-entertainment economic cluster that would drive development for years to come.⁴¹

His model for this endeavor was a new type of regional film economy that had transformed metropolitan Vancouver into “Hollywood North.” Propped up by a low Canadian dollar and a fully refundable tax credit for a percentage of production services, Canada had opened the gateway for Hollywood producers to cut their costs in the late 1990s. By adding a local-labor tax credit, publicly subsidized infrastructure, and cheap transport routes, British Columbia had quickly surpassed other Canadian provinces that historically had more production facilities and crews. The credits, which were fully refundable at the end of the shoot, were the equivalent of outright grants to producers, who could then bank on them in finding loans. Vancouver experienced an economic boom as film projects lured both public and private investors in building a new home for the industry.⁴²

In the wake of widespread layoffs and factory closures, Louisiana officials saw the potential for a film economy as a rising ship. Like many other states, Louisiana faced the challenge of paying for more with a stagnant, if not shrinking, tax base. The writ-large deregulation of federal social-welfare programs, beginning in the 1980s, pushed more economic responsibilities onto states and private citizens, incurring the greatest costs for those regions that had the least capacity to pay during tough economic downturns. Add to this the large-scale shuttering and offshoring of industrial firms, and suddenly, Los Angeles–based companies looked like attractive replacements.⁴³ The period following 9/11 was the high-water mark of a recession in Louisiana, which depended heavily on high oil prices and petrochemical industries.⁴⁴ Eyeing a new Hollywood hub, the state’s then film commissioner, Mark Smith, glowed: “This industry has everything we want. Good pay. Advanced technology. It’s a clean industry. It could stop the outmigration of talent from the state.”⁴⁵ Over the objections of those involved in the state’s indigenous music industry, these now commonplace arguments to seed a local film economy prevailed. Months later, a congressional special session put Kaufman’s plans into motion in Louisiana.

The first iteration of Louisiana’s transferable film tax-credit program beat the Canadians and set the standards for the ante in an incentives race. Unlike previous tax incentives, which targeted specific productions with place-friendly plotlines or cheap labor, Louisiana subsidized the *entire* production budget, from the first location-scout survey to the catered wrap party. The phrase “local labor” had a

special cachet, not only for the extra earnings it awarded film producers, but also for the way it curried favor with national film-worker unions that were protesting foreign scabs. Plus, the credits were transferable, meaning the free money could be spread around the state to those who had nothing to do with the film industry (for examples, see the Prologue). With the support of the creative arts and fronting tax rebates for the rich, Louisiana liberals and conservatives lined up to support the measure.

On the surface, the careful alignment of external conditions with good governance seemed to produce a win-win for Hollywood and these other localities. Soon, states and municipalities across the country, many with little or no history of film production, followed suit. Before the 2009 economic crisis, forty-seven U.S. states offered substantial film-industry subsidies, either as a direct refund or as part of a brokered market.⁴⁶ The way each package worked was unique to the state, reflecting the political deals that each region negotiated to sustain the overall policy. Producers could use other states' programs as leverage for what they wanted to pay; for producers who would film in a particular location anyway, the money was pure windfall.⁴⁷ Statewide programs have been further enhanced by county and municipal tax programs aimed to lure locational shooting away from the obvious metro areas. Today, more than thirty-five states still compete in a race to the bottom for a film economy. The top contenders have been among the poorest U.S. territories: Georgia, New Mexico, Mississippi, Puerto Rico, and, of course, Louisiana. From 2008 to 2011, Michigan, with its notorious budget shortfalls, had the most generous tax-break program in the United States, using the state pension fund to pay back debt on a film-studio bond until the whole program was canceled out of financial exigency.⁴⁸

The bidding war has meant that Louisiana had to dig deeper into the till to compete. In any given year, film tax incentives mean an overall loss of state revenues.⁴⁹ In the first eight years, Louisiana's "temporary" incentive expanded until it eventually became a permanent feature of the tax code. Legislators then succumbed to pressures from the music industry to extend credits to sound production and live performances. The film program is now one spoke in a wheel of entertainment tax credits that covers everything from video games and Broadway musicals to phone apps and human resources videos. On the local level, smaller cities and rural towns have posted giveaways for producers willing to ignore either New Orleans's dominant size and resources or Shreveport's proximity to Texas, where film crews have been based largely in the Austin-Houston-Dallas triangle. The size and scope of Hollywood giveaways made them vulnerable during the 2008 financial crash, when the national press raised concern about all state payouts for film production. The *New York Times* called the more than \$27 million Louisiana refunded to the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* "one of the most shocking bills" in light of

the Wall Street bailouts.⁵⁰ The state responded by rescinding the sunset date for the policy.

New Orleans, meanwhile, looked further inward. Spurred by a federal initiative to better privatize the arts, and issued by the state's Lieutenant Governor's Office, the zombie economic plan, appropriately titled "Where Culture Means Business," directed the city to direct its biggest cultural tourism assets toward a future film economy. The report states: "Louisiana's tradition of spoken word lives on in traditional storytelling and contemporary coffee house poetry gatherings. The history of literary publications includes the 18th century *Les Ceneles*, published by Louisiana's free people of color. Louisiana continues to produce and attract writers whose work is celebrated at festivals named after William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, or just, *The Book. Literature, in turn, underwrites a film industry* that has produced nearly 500 films in Louisiana."⁵¹ Released one month before Katrina, the strategy became the city's wholesale when the waters receded and the lieutenant governor became New Orleans's mayor.

According to Chris Stelly, the current executive director of the state's Office of Entertainment Industry Development, 2011 marked the bellwether for the film economy, surpassing \$1 billion in film project investment. Stelly touted that the industry is finally "stabilizing" in the region and showing "signs of being a consistent mainstay in the economy."⁵² Along the way, the aspirations of the policy have been modified significantly. Statewide strategic plans no longer sought a permanent economic cluster by 2009. Shifting "pro" arguments from stable jobs to ephemeral status, the champion of public-private partnerships Louisiana Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) lumped film production together with industries that would spur the "creative class," a neologism that articulates the tastes and lifestyle habits of the urban, hip, youthful, and relatively affluent.⁵³ In the pretty but unsubstantive words of the LEDC, "A community with a strong creative class is a community with a future."⁵⁴ One of the devilish details, of course, is when the future will arrive. Supporters of the Louisiana program say that their "historic" advantage—two decades in 2018—will eventually prevail. And if we ever do get to that promised place, we should ask: What would be the costs?

That is the *raison d'être* of this book.

CLOSE-UP ON NEW ORLEANS'S FILM ECONOMY

In summary, the paradoxical story of Hollywood South is based on three realities that transcend Louisiana at the current moment. First, despite the claims around preserving what is distinctive about locations, the cultural economies rewrite local histories and their geographies to suit industrial aims. Second, cultural industries use the aura of their operations and products as leverage to reduce their economic costs in those same locations. Third, many people feel ambivalent about the first



FIGURE 1. A grocery clerk sports a photoplay-camera hairstyle to promote his aspirations to be a director in Hollywood South. Photo by Vicki Mayer.

two conditions for exploitation, based on the ways they see themselves and those around them participate in a local cultural economy, consenting to its systems of power in order to make do in increasingly crisis-ordinary times. Together, these realities have made Hollywood South another example of how “creative economy” strategies further allowed the extreme concentration of wealth under the twin banners of economic and cultural renewal—a point now admitted by the consultants to such claims.⁵⁵

Yet, even if Louisiana’s creative economy strategies are common in any global analysis, their unsurprising outcomes have been clouded by the stories of an exceptional New Orleans. The tensions between cultural policy, cultural industries, and

the local culture where they are located bring us back to the first time New Orleans flirted with building a film economy. In the city, politicians have largely regarded the film industry as a salve, not a parasite. After Hurricane Katrina, the national press pithily predicted that the storm had “washed away” film production in the state. Following the first responders, Hollywood executives were among the first line of defenders of the city, calling for more investment, resources, and “commitment” to recovery.⁵⁶ Within a year, the number of film projects in the city surpassed those in the year before the storm. State leaders trumpeted the figure as a sign of an industry that was indefatigable in the city. Stelly boasted, “What couldn’t kill it made it stronger in a way.”⁵⁷ Like the zombies on the screen, the schemes to capture land and labor in the name of Hollywood seem ageless, even as their forms mutate.

What follows are three chapters that meditate on the strong pull of a film economy and its ability to transform the urban landscape while also mediating a sense of place. In other words, what is most compelling to me about the political economy of media production is its cultural impacts. From the halcyon boosterism that frames Hollywood projects in other locations, to the queasy uncanniness that subsequently infiltrates our sense of place, understanding film economies as cultural phenomena is no doubt both socially informed by my own status and subjectively interpreted through my own particular neuroses. Yet it seems to me that the absence of public debate around film tax incentives, especially in the wake of Occupy-like outcries, is precisely due to the lack of these more visceral linkages between public financing and the transformed feel of one’s hometown or adopted location.

Chapter 1 examines the deep cultural origins of Hollywood South by looking back at the period when the fantasies associated with film economies first took hold. Recalling the filmmaker Selig and a host of those who followed him to New Orleans from 1900 to 1920 is a textbook lesson in how the film industry seeks market exclusivity, cheap production and labor costs, and a favorable political climate with plenty of public concessions. While political and economic conditions seemed promising to the producers and their boosters, it was ultimately not to be, for a number of reasons that give insight into the classic conundrum as to why Hollywood took root in Southern California and not anywhere else. In the case of New Orleans, the local politics of race, labor, and class staved off the efforts of the early film colonizers. The circulating visions of creolized paradise or peril constrained creative workers; or, in the words of one early-twentieth-century critic, the “local-color damnation of New Orleans was so complete it was virtually impossible for the imagination to transcend it.”⁵⁸ In their push onward to Los Angeles, the filmmakers left the local ruling elites in charge of an economic strategy based mostly around land deals, wildcat speculation, and pyramid schemes. This historical cast, along with their tales of heroic entrepreneurialism and local boosterism, as well as greed and graft, might be considered allegories for Hollywood South today.

Since those early days, the switch from limited place-based film incentives to a universal schema for all major Hollywood production did not eliminate the industry's colonial ambitions over territory. Rather, it reoriented local space to more flexibly suit the needs of the professional managerial class more broadly. What emerges is a cultural geography for Hollywood South, which is the subject of chapter 2. Many of the requisite demands for a film economy are embedded in public-private partnerships, making them largely invisible to citizens, at least in the short term.⁵⁹ Hollywood studios' film production has reorganized the landscape of New Orleans through constant and yet ephemeral uses of public space. What citizens cannot witness, however, they can sense, in their movements around the city and their everyday routines. These sometimes strange or fleeting feelings, I would argue, highlight a critical ambivalence about film economies, one that needs to be elucidated as a first step toward political awareness. This chapter tracks these seemingly random patterns to show the ways in which Hollywood concentrates its capital in geographic clusters in the city through location shooting and housing. My data, including maps and photographs of film signs, demonstrate visually the unintended consequences of the film economy's success in terms of local neighborhoods and cultures. From this evidence, I argue that Hollywood South contributes to the governmental practice of privatizing public space.

This brings me to a deeper introspection about what the film economy means to ordinary citizens who live in its scope. Although my research has led me to believe that the current structuring of film incentives does more harm than good in New Orleans, I also understand the ambivalence that many feel, particularly those of us who see ourselves as creative or cultural workers in the city. Cultural economies are always double edged for cultural producers. We are drawn to preserve culture and place, even as our experiences and relationships there collude in their transformation. Film production operates according to the same logic. The ways in which film production appropriates local culture create an uncanny place that is both highly desirable and alienating. Chapter 3 relates the results of a three-year study of the local viewers of a television series that was produced in New Orleans and, to a large extent, for New Orleanians. *Treme* was an HBO production that addressed local cultural production and local creative producers. Set in post-Katrina New Orleans and shot concurrently with the rise of the film economy, the show drew many in the audience to do free or underpaid labor on the production's behalf. This chapter relates the diverse reactions of New Orleanians to the series, which is still held up as the best of what Hollywood South has to offer. By exploring notions of being and longing embedded in our sense of New Orleans as a place, this chapter exemplifies how we embrace, negotiate, and struggle with the aura of Hollywood South in our own ways.

Given this embeddedness, it is unclear how Louisiana can wean itself from dreams of a stable film economy. *Revenge of the Zombies* is perhaps not an

authoritative source on this matter, but it does give a hint about how to stand up for ourselves. The obedient zombie wife turns on her master, leading to a denouement in which two of the African-American extras are leaving Louisiana and its crazy zombie culture behind. The chauffeur packs the car and tells the beautiful housemaid, "When I get you to Harlem I'm gonna get you a good job, a swell job. And if you save your money, aha, you and me we're gonna get married." To which she quips, "If I get the swell job, honey, I don't need to get married." The message for me is clear: if you can't beat the zombie master, you can at least find a better way out. For many people, the sticking proposition is the idea that film policy is a jobs policy. Like the housemaid, though, if we had good jobs independently, we wouldn't need a master.

This story of Hollywood South wraps with a more recent glimpse into the nature of regional film-policy politics, by discussing the state budget negotiations in the spring and summer of 2015. While there's been almost no public discussion of the zombie incentives, in Louisiana or anywhere else, pro-policy lobbyists hoped to curry favor by creating a high-pitched furor around jobs and creative opportunities. Their efforts demonstrate how hard it is to engage people seriously around media policy in the United States, especially when our feelings about who we are and how we want to live are pitted against the opaque and obscure language of a policy from which hope springs eternal. In response to this deep ambivalence, I ask whether it's not better to imagine alternative futures and creative economies with the potential to achieve the goals we seek for all citizens.

