

NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW ORLEANS AND A CARNIVAL OF WOMEN

By

RAGAN WICKER

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Ragan Wicker

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Chair: Matt Gallman
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The Carnival in New Orleans is historically the largest and longest annual public ritual in the country. Celebrated often for months at a time throughout the city since the eighteenth century, the Carnival serves as an essential part of New Orleans's cultural heritage. Unlike other civic rituals celebrated around the United States, the traditions at the heart of the Carnival historically provided an atmosphere to explore normally off-limit behaviors, such as easy social and sexual mixing between races and classes, and a "topsy-turvy" inversion of social roles, ultimately providing a leveling tool among the people that had lasting effects well after the celebration ended. During the city's colonial and antebellum periods, all women benefited from the loosened social restrictions and role inversions experienced through masquerading by their active participation in social events on an equal footing with men.

When analyzing the Carnival through the paradigmatic lens of the public versus private distinction often associated with gender studies, it becomes clear that gender had less to do with a person's social parameters than did class and race. While it is often

asserted by modern scholars that nineteenth-century women were passive spectators during public events, this paper argues the opposite in the case of the New Orleans Carnival. Not only did women participate in the many activities transpiring over the long Carnival season, they were essential to their success. Until 1857, the year that officially transformed the Carnival into what it is today, a woman was never forbidden to attend a parade, fete, or casual gathering because of her sex; it was only because of her class or race. The same was true for men. Legally sanctioned privatization of Carnival groups and events did not occur until after the Civil War, and even then, the restrictions did not affect the masses, but rather the elites of society whose men privately wanted to control the social currents of the city by controlling the influential Carnival.

CHAPTER 1 THE OPENING

All the mischief of the city is alive and wide awake in active operation . . . Men, boys, women, and girls, bond and free, white and black, yellow and brown, exert themselves to invent and appear in grotesque, quizzical, diabolical, horrible, strange masks and disguises. --Major James Creecy, 1835¹

Throughout the history of New Orleans, women always have openly participated in the customs associated with the Carnival season. Due to the unique colonial history of the city which was ruled under French and Spanish crowns for over one hundred years before the Louisiana Purchase, the involvement of its citizens in cultural and socio-political matters naturally differed greatly from the rest of the nation. The women of New Orleans have always played direct and integral roles in maintaining the true essence of the celebratory Carnival festivities. The popular and historic public ritual, still much alive in New Orleans today, would not be possible without women's direct contributions.

The one hundred years of history that this paper is based on provides a compelling argument that the public versus private distinction often utilized in academic gender studies applies more to race and class, rather than gender, in the analysis of New Orleans Carnival rituals. In other words, participatory options available to women during the long Carnival season had much more to do with their race and socio-cultural status than their gender. A man could find himself as easily included in or ostracized from any

¹ James R. Creecy, *Scenes In the South and Other Miscellaneous Pieces* (Washington, D.C.: T. McGill, 1860), 43.

particular event as a woman. Gender counted for much less than class and race when accounting for an individual's, or often a group's, social calendar.

Historian Mary Ryan attempts to draw parallels between San Francisco, New York City, and New Orleans during the nineteenth century in order to explore the roles available to women in the creation of public culture. Contrary to her assertion that women's public involvement in nineteenth century civic rituals was nominal and peripheral, direct public involvement in New Orleans Carnival was inclusive of all social groups, more or less, depending on the social and political atmosphere of the time period in question.² Given that New Orleans at the time of its founding in 1718 began with a tri-racial population consisting of French, African, and Native American peoples, further diversifying as 550,000 immigrants poured through the port between 1820 and 1860, it becomes apparent that all local women cannot be examined as one inclusive body of people.³ Similarly, the public versus private distinction often applied to gender studies cannot be applied as ontological categories directly correlating with male and female experiences. As race and class divisions continued to grow and diversify throughout the 1800s, women found themselves in a wider variety of public roles and contexts than may be expected, and these roles depended far more on their social status than their gender.

² Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). Ryan explains women's roles in antebellum public rituals "not as participants, but as audience and symbol," (Ryan, 31). She claims that "Prior to the 1840s, celebrations were either rowdy male encounters or the manufactured products of the city fathers," (Ryan, 23). Ryan cites New Years Eve visits as the one exception to her rule of men dominating antebellum ceremonial life in New Orleans. The longer and more broadly celebrated Carnival season is not mentioned. (Ryan, 29-30). For more historiographic examples of modern historians viewing women as audience, rather than participants in antebellum public rituals, see Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

³ *Records of the Cabildo*, <http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/cabildo/cab6.htm> (last accessed June 6, 2006).

Mary Ryan states that women in nineteenth-century public rituals were acknowledged to be mostly bystanders and audience, rarely participants, and were occasionally publicly displayed in idealized forms representing upper-class men's imagined role they played as such civic archetypes as justice, liberty, and peace. If Ryan is correct that "public ceremonies provide the occasion to ferret out the cultural meaning attributed to sexual difference in the course of widely attended and festive conventions of the public," adding that, "[t]his is the site where public meaning is created and displayed," then an analysis of nineteenth-century New Orleans's Carnival will send an academic reeling with its mixed messages.⁴ In reality, Carnival in New Orleans functioned as a safety valve, a pressure release for a person to escape daily routines and societal expectations and become someone wholly different within the time boundaries of the celebration. Women of all stations took advantage of this opportunity by reveling on the streets, fully changing their identities through costumes, and engaging in debaucherous behavior and impromptu parades. Elizabeth Varon takes issue with Ryan for suggesting passivity among women, imagining them as "audience and symbol," rather than "political actors." Varon thinks "that to characterize women's partisanship as passive is to obscure the transformation in women's civic roles."⁵ The main theme in Varon's article is to try to recover the extent and degree to which white women participated in antebellum political history, but her observation aimed at Ryan is applicable to all female participation in nineteenth-century civic rituals, regardless of the woman's class or color. In other words, the activity of women on the streets in New

⁴ Ryan, *Women in Public*, 16.

⁵ Elizabeth Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 82, No.2 (Sep., 1995).

Orleans should not be discounted as mere ambulation or promenading in pretty dresses along the banquettes and levees. Women had places to go, people to see, opinions to offer, and business to take care of, all in the public sphere, just like the men. They participated in the manifold ways available to them, and all the more during the Carnival season.

There are two main problems with the traditional academic analysis of women in nineteenth-century public rituals. First, when considering nineteenth-century America, there is too often no clear designation between the “ladies” that are often referred to in scholarly writings and the many other women that deserve their own paradigms of analysis. In Alecia Long’s recent book focusing on the mixing of sex and race in New Orleans, she suggests that the term “southern lady” was not applicable to non-white women.⁶ In the case of New Orleans, the women who would then not be considered southern ladies comprised the numerical majority of females in the city. These other women were responsible for introducing myriad social etiquettes and customs that greatly contributed to the renowned heterogeneous nature of the area. The legitimate social differences among all women were generally less well documented and often denigrated by the elite’s of the period, and therefore are less accessible in their true form to the modern scholar. For example, “public women” is often used in connection with prostitutes, yet the term does not differentiate between the real “streetwalkers” and the many other women that lived the majority of their lives on the public streets. This is exactly what Christine Stansell’s work on the lower-class women of New York City attempts to shed light on; many respectable women who were not prostitutes lived a

⁶ Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 14.

public life, yet would never attain the elite “lady” status of the upper classes. Instead, they represented social categories all their own.⁷ The majority of public market and street vendors in New Orleans were women, yet historians too often overlook them as the important contributors to the city’s culture and economy that they were.⁸

Second, there exists a tendency amongst historians to focus their analyses of nineteenth-century public ceremonies on parades. Especially in the case of urban centers, it is unrealistic to think that civic rituals or ceremonies began and ended in synchronization with the timing of parades. Since city-wide celebrations often meant a break from work, the ceremony arguably began with the anticipation of the people and did not end until the crowds dispersed and ceased to collectively process what the event offered in terms of social messages and signals. Public gathering places, saloons, and parties likely functioned as spaces where the people continued to communicate and assimilate the meanings conveyed by the holiday, and the presence of women at these places was assured.

Prior to 1857, because organized parades did not exist as part of New Orleans’s Carnival traditions, they cannot serve as a gauge for the social undercurrents being processed by the community, a performative function often attributed to organized processions. One must look into other modes of celebration in order to find how the public was contextualizing and transferring the information offered by the event. A typical antebellum Carnival procession in New Orleans often consisted of an impromptu gathering of mixed company, including maskers and revelers of all types, colors, classes,

⁷ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

⁸ *Records of the Cabildo*, <http://lsm.crt.state.la.us/cabildo/cab6.htm> (last accessed June 5, 2006).

of both men and women of all ages, marching through the streets accompanied by a musical racket. Imagining the main public thoroughfares as arteries clogged with multitudes of people all dressed up in costumes, talking, yelling, throwing bon-bons and flour, and heading in the same direction may provide a more accurate picture of antebellum Carnival parades. In postbellum New Orleans, parades became more organized and thematic, but they accounted for far less than ten percent of the Carnival season's activities, thereby hardly serving as a true mirror for the variety of social signals that the long, participatory festival conveyed, such as gender norms, political and national affiliations, and social prejudices. In most other cities, class, race, and gender separation between performers and audience characterized organized processions. In New Orleans, however, isolation between participants and observers could not be guaranteed, especially during Carnival.

Consistent with the rest of the nation, women in postbellum New Orleans did not typically march in the organized Carnival crews, or krewes, as they are referred to in the local parlance, but it is equally true that the majority of women did not sit as complacent bystanders blankly watching the parade pass beneath their balcony perches. Women in New Orleans reveled on the ground with the rest of the heterogeneous crowd that gathered to cheer on the rolling theatrical presentations, essentially crossing the line that historians often imagine existed between active participants and passive audience.⁹ Professor and author Marie-Helene Huet points out that there always exists the possibility of the audience members reenacting a performance, as opposed to simply observing it. To her, the content of the message is not as important as the transmissibility of it.

⁹ Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Transmission of words or symbols generates interpretations in the audience, causing them to react and affect the meaning of the original message and how they remember and utilize it later. She explains that a woman's subsequent portrayal of what she has seen may transmute into feelings and actions that could be justified as her own theatrics.¹⁰ Customarily, in the case of Carnival festivities, mimicry, mockery, and theatrical representations are pervading aspects of the experience.

It is difficult to draw parallels between Carnival in New Orleans and public ceremonies in other American cities during the nineteenth-century due to the unique and deeply performative nature of the Carnival and the long-lasting democratizing effects it has on the social interactions between the people. The Carnival traditions of role inversion and publicly sanctioned exploration of taboos and otherwise illegal behaviors tend to serve as a lesson in the contingent nature of social positions. For instance, in the case of New Orleans, slaves could be freed and buy slaves of their own, a woman could shift from a life of dependence on her husbands to a life of financial and social independence if she made successful business decisions or if her spouse died and left her assets, and politically important men could be deposed anytime the colony changed hands. Although this is true, more or less, in any society, the people of New Orleans ritually acted out a society of contrariety every Carnival season, ensuring that everyone remembered that life is fraught with precariousness.

In her work on nineteenth-century public life, which includes a detailed treatment of New Orleans, Mary Ryan describes the public in terms of people openly interacting in places of natural social gathering, such as the well used streets, taverns, theaters, markets,

¹⁰ Marie-Helene Huet, qtd. in Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 166.

and promenades. “The first marker of the public is within the domain of everyday sociability, face-to-face or shoulder-to-shoulder encounters between city residents.”¹¹

The Carnival celebration, when considered in its broader unabridged form, provided an atmosphere that fostered a sense of public belonging, discourse, and meaning, and at the same time served as a venue to perpetuate social prejudices between groups, ultimately offering the people far more opportunity for pursuing public relations and engaging in demonstrations than any ordinary passing parade. Interactions between people during Carnival at once revealed social boundaries and challenged them.

Since the focus of this study revolves around women’s roles in nineteenth century Carnival festivities, it is necessary to present a historical summary of the origins of New Orleans’s Carnival. An understanding of the history of New Orleans’ early settlers and their relationship to the celebration will undoubtedly shed light on the ancient and ongoing Carnival customs annually celebrated since the time of the city’s colonial birth. At the core of these customs is a tradition of pushing social limits, inverting social roles, and the paradox of exclusivity in a situation of inclusiveness. If there exists a tendency among scholars to envision men as the public actors during nineteenth-century civic rituals and women as the passive audience, then there exists a failure to consider New Orleans Carnival time.

¹¹ Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 14.

CHAPTER 2 AN OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINS OF THE NEW ORLEANS CARNIVAL

The Presbytere is a historic building located in the French Quarter. It was constructed in the late 1700s during the Spanish colonial period to house an order of Capuchin monks. Today, The Presbytere functions as the city's official Mardi Gras museum. In the opinion of today's curators of The Presbytere, the exact origins of the Carnival celebrated in New Orleans are unknown. They surmise that the ancient Roman Saturnalia, a yearly ritual marking the winter solstice, is the most direct connection to the nearly 300 year-old custom of celebrating Carnival in New Orleans. Their permanent exhibit on Carnival's origins explains that the Saturnalia served as a time to halt all commerce, for people to masquerade and feast, for masters to wait on servants, and for couples to be designated mock kings and queens.¹ Historian and photographer Alexander Orloff also traces the origins of modern Carnival to the pre-Christian Saturnalia, a holiday honoring Saturnus, the beneficent King of Latium, considered the civilizer of man and law-giver to the people of Italy. The festival of the Saturnalia was a ritual re-enactment of an idyllic time when nature was bountiful, work was unnecessary, and equality existed among people. In order to evoke a true sense of parity during the holiday, role inversion was necessary. The metaphoric coin was flipped and the world was tuned upside down. Slaves were set free in their master's clothes for the time of the festival and servants were waited on by their masters. Mock kings were elected from

¹ Courtesy of The Presbytere, New Orleans, Louisiana.

among the commoners, issuing ridiculous rules to the host of reveling masqueraders, pranksters, and dancing, drunken fools.²

In contrast, a number of New Orleans historians including James Gill, John William Koolsbergen, and Henri Schindler, hypothesize that the origins of Carnival go back to the ancient Roman Lupercalia, a fertility ritual celebrated during the month of February.³ Orloff explains that it is historically understood that, in ancient times, naked youths, both girls and boys, ran around wrapped in the skins of sacrificed animals, with the women receiving lashes from the februa, or long strips of hide cut from skins of the sacrificed creatures, indicating that women had always been involved in this ancient celebration as ceremonial participants.⁴

As centuries passed, the Christian Church found pagan celebrations offensive, yet could not eradicate them, so slowly began infusing them with Christian symbolism and overtones. In approximately 600 C.E., Pope Gregory the Great transformed the seemingly ineradicable pagan holiday into Mardi Gras, an official Catholic holiday, and a movable feast, immediately preceding the Lenten period of fasting and abstinence before Easter, in what would appear to be an act to mitigate the celebration's pagan

² Alexander Orloff, *Carnival: Myth and Cult* (Worgl, Austria: Perlinger, 1980), 26-27.

³ For further information about the Roman Lupercalia, see T.C. DeLeon, *Creole Carnivals, 1830-1890* (1881; repr., Mobile: Bienville Books, 2004); John Williams Koolsbergen, *A Study in Popular Culture, The New Orleans Mardi Gras: Formation of the Mystick Krewe of Comus and the Krewe of Rex*. Doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 1989; Robert Tallant, *Mardi Gras . . . As It Was*, 4th ed. (Tallant: New Orleans, 1947; Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1994); Henri Schindler, *Mardi Gras and New Orleans* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).

⁴ Orloff, *Carnival: Myth and Cult*, 25.

associations.⁵ Each year since the seventh century, the holiday period commences on the twelfth night of Christmas, the sixth of January, and lasts until the eve of Ash Wednesday, ending anywhere from February third through March eighth. However, throughout at least the first half of the nineteenth century, the French settlers in New Orleans mimicked the Venetian Carnival calendar that lasted six months a year, with masked balls commencing in November and lasting until May.

Regardless of how hard the church tried, no matter that it made the dates of Carnival conform to the Christian calendar, it could not rid the celebration of its pagan core; however, it did manage to Christianize it to the point that few people know that it is not a holiday initiated by the Catholic Church, as can be assumed from the words *Carnavale*, or *Carnelevamen*, a Latin translation of a farewell or a consolation to the flesh, respectively. Catholic doctrine asserts that eating meat during the forty-day Lenten period is considered a sin, so this is something to indulge in before the period of abstinence, hence the time of overindulgence associated with Carnival.

The celebrations with roots in Saturnalia and Lupercalia were not all fun and games. Often the people displayed more than just debaucherous behavior, including the settling of vendettas, holding public hangings, and committing general violence. Most crimes were not punished, especially during the climax of the festivities, because it was common knowledge that all rules, laws, and taboos were suspended for the holiday. In 1890, James Frazer wrote of the darker side of the Saturnalia in his master work, *The Golden Bough*. He found proof in ancient texts that Roman citizens or soldiers would choose a man among them, usually the least capable, to rule throughout the week's

⁵ University of Cincinnati Web Site Search, http://libraries.uc.edu/libraries/arb/ger_american/traditions.html (last accessed June 6, 2006).

festivities, and when the last day ended, the temporary king was put to death as a sacrifice for the betterment of the people. Frazer spoke of the Saturnalia as a period of license where the moral degeneration of the people led to “wild orgies of lust and crime.”⁶ As the Church gained more control of the festival, criminals suffered consequences for their transgressions. Death by hanging was often performed in the midst of the festival in the public squares. Even with the Church, or later the police, monitoring and chaperoning the festival, observing the laws ultimately rested with the people. A law is only as effective as an authority’s ability to enforce it, and during the Carnival season in New Orleans, laws were often not enforced. Instead, unruly revelry, inversion of social roles, and half-mock, half-real usurpation of authority ran wild, and still do, although to a much lesser degree today. Violence, as well as elated celebration, has always found a venue during the New Orleans Carnival.⁷

Henri Schindler explains that the Bourbon King of France embraced the Carnival styles of Venice and Rome to such a point that “entire courts of allegorical aristocracy were created, and under Louis XIV Mardi Gras itself became a symbolic prince.”⁸ The last day of the festival, known as Fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, was often characterized by parties and burial rituals enacted in the day’s honor. Louisiana was claimed as a colony of France under the legendarily decadent Sun King, Louis XIV.

⁶ Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1890; Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation, 1994), chap. 58, pg. 1.

⁷ For further information regarding violence associated with Carnival festivities, see Samuel Kinser, *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (New York: George Braziller, 1979); Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁸ Schindler, *Mardi Gras and New Orleans*, 14.

When French explorers Iberville and Bienville found the mouth of the Mississippi River on Mardi Gras day in 1699, the coincidence did not escape them. The campsite was immediately christened “Point du Mardi Gras,” heralding the first celebration of the festival in the newest French colony.

Subsequently, the first settlers in New Orleans were a mixture of Canadian frontiersmen, company militiamen, slaves, and a variety of indigents, prostitutes, and convicts forced to relocate from France to the New World. The 1721 census counted 470 people in the three-year-old city.⁹ Storyville historian Al Rose asserts that the first shipment of people from France consisted of not only “women of bad repute, but thieves, vagabonds, gypsies, and other social unwanted.”¹⁰ The interests of Rose, as well as author Stephen Longstreet, lie mainly in the history of New Orleans prostitution, and the latter believes that with the first shipment of people from France the “Sporting House history of the town begins.”¹¹ Longstreet makes the point that a love of danger and debauchery have characterized the citizens of New Orleans since the moment of its founding and that women played full participatory roles in creating the culture of the city, from carrying muskets and axes, to growing crops, to openly displaying their sexuality in public, and it is from this first batch of degenerate people that the subsequent Creoles and their colonial customs were born.¹²

⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, <http://britannica.com/eb/article-11811> (last accessed June 6, 2006).

¹⁰ Al Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans: Being an Authentic Illustrated Account of the Notorious Red Light District* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 5.

¹¹ Stephen Longstreet, *Sportin' House: A History of the New Orleans Sinners and the Birth of Jazz*, (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1965).

¹² The term Creole throughout this paper designates people of pure foreign blood born on Louisiana's soil, referring in this case to the original French or Spanish settlers. Throughout the nineteenth century, rarely were locally born Africans or Anglo-Americans considered Creole in New Orleans, although they

No extant records speak of New Orleans's Carnival celebrations under French rule. Even so, there is a long-standing legend that says Mardi Gras was first celebrated by Bienville's successor as governor, the Marquis De Vaudreuil, who threw elegant and elite society balls in the spirit of the French Carnival tradition practiced by Louis XIV. Grace King, a renowned late nineteenth-century New Orleans writer, called herself "a southern woman of letters." She wrote several personal and historically based accounts of New Orleans life resounding with early notes of feminism. She tells of the legend of the Marquis De Vaudreuil and reminisces on hearing about his Carnival society balls from the old women in the city. In a book published in 1895, she refers to the women of the city as "enthusiastic converts to the higher standard of the newer and more fascinating gay world," introduced by the Marquis, and makes a point of women's participation in the city's earliest Carnival celebrations.¹³

When the Spanish assumed ownership of the colony in 1763, it took them six years to assert any control over the French Creoles. In fact, the rowdy French exiled the first Spanish governor, Don Antonio de Ulloa. It was not until the next governor, Alejandro O'Reilly, executed six French men responsible for the coup to keep the Spanish out of French New Orleans that Spain gained any say in New Orleans's local affairs. It is at that point, after the Spanish wrested control of the colony from the French Creoles, that the historical records begin to tell the tale of Carnival celebrations and the problems associated with them.

technically would inherit the same designation. This is the most common use of the word in virtually all Louisiana history books.

¹³ Grace King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People* (1895; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 79. For further information on the legend of the Marquis, see George W. Cable, *The Granddissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880), 31.

The first tangible piece of historic evidence related to New Orleans Carnival is a decree issued in 1781 and recorded in the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo, the meeting place of the City Council. Governor Francisco Luis Carondelet is quoted as saying “Because of the great multitude of troops and crews from the ships, (due to the state of war between Spain and England), and the great number of free Negroes and slaves in the city, the Attorney General recommends that all kinds of masking and public dancing by the Negroes be prohibited during the Carnival Season.”¹⁴ The Spanish prohibition on masking began in 1781 and lasted through the first two decades of the new American government, officially ending in 1823. The laws apparently were never enforced with any consistency, because in 1792 the La Salle Conde Theatre was built to house the growing numbers of masquerade balls. It was the first public ballroom recorded in the city and within fifty years there were over 80 locations devoted to dancing.

Carnival historian Perry Young referred to the ban on masking between the years 1806-1821 as “soft-pedaled.” He notes finding advertisements for masquerade balls between those years, yet the newspaper records available from that time do not support Young’s claim.¹⁵ Between the years 1807 and 1823 *The Louisiana Gazette* carried advertisements for “Grand Balls” at the Orleans Ball Room, the Jefferson Ball Room, and the Conde Ball Room during the final days of the Carnival seasons, and on only one occasion is anything mentioned about a dress code. The Orleans Ball Room hosted a public ball on Mardi Gras Day in 1820 and felt obliged to mention in the paper that no boots, surtouts, or canes would be admitted into the dance. In over seventeen years of

¹⁴ *Digest of the Acts and Deliberations of the Cabildo*, (Jan., 1781), book 2, pg. 47.

¹⁵ Perry Young, *Carnival and Mardi Gras in New Orleans* (New Orleans: Harmanson’s, 1939), 15.

publications, during a time of official prohibition on masking, not once was a cautionary word mentioned by *The Louisiana Gazette* about arriving in disguise. The same is true for the advertisements in the *Louisiana Courier* between 1813 and 1816.¹⁶ Did the people know that masking was prohibited and act according to the law, or did they disregard the law and mask anyway, not fearing penalty and connoting that the law was indeed as soft-pedaled after the Louisiana Purchase as it was when the La Salle Conde Ball Room was built in 1792?

When the Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach visited the city in 1822, the final year of the official ban, he mentioned that the French Theatre hosted a great masked gala, and that all of the ladies in attendance donned a costume, “and intrigued as well as they were able.”¹⁷ Historians John Koolsbergen and Karen Leathem both speculate that fear of sexual promiscuity between the races lay at the bottom of the legal decrees against interracial mixing at balls and prohibitions on masking that surfaced from time to time during nineteenth-century Carnival seasons.¹⁸ Regardless of what particular class or race a ball was billed for, masquerading was always a pleasure and a concern. A popular New Orleans newspaper, *L’Abeille*, the French edition of *The Bee*, ran an advertisement during the 1828 Carnival season for a costume store owned by Mlle. Lise Douvillier, enticing customers to find a costume and dress in the privacy of her facilities without “curious

¹⁶ Advertisements, *Louisiana Gazette*, 1807-1823; *Louisiana Courier*, 1813-1816.

¹⁷ Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, *Travels through North America, During the Years 1825 and 1826* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1828): qtd. in Albert E. Fossier, *New-Orleans: The Glamour Period, 1800-1840: A History of the Conflicts of Nationalities, Languages, Religion, Morals, Cultures, Laws, Politics, and Economics during the Formative Period of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing House, 1957), 459.

¹⁸ Koolsbergen, *A Study in Popular Culture*, 42; Karen Leathem, *A Carnival According to Their Own Desires: Gender and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, 1870-1941*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1994), 200.

eyes penetrating.”¹⁹ Once people were covered from head to toe, they could pass for virtually anyone, and all races, classes, and genders tended to dress in fully disguising costumes, adding an element of equality, as well as mystery, to the already chaotic celebration.

¹⁹ Advertisement, *L'Abeille*, February 1828.

CHAPTER 3 RACE AND THE CARNIVAL IN NEW ORLEANS

From the founding of New Orleans until after the Civil War, in the minds of the Creoles, the free people of color were potential social agitators and a threat to the slaveholder mentality and power, yet the Creoles could not help but interact with them in intimate ways. There had always been free blacks in New Orleans due to the favorable French and Spanish laws concerning the rights of slaves. According to the African American Resource Center, part of the New Orleans Public Library, during the Spanish period, “slaves could buy their freedom, be loaned money to purchase their freedom, have their freedom purchased by a relative or friend or be given their freedom,” regardless of their master’s disapproval, allowing the free black population to grow in size and importance, often holding positions as skilled laborers, merchants, land owners, and even slave owners themselves.¹ Free people of color existed as a class of their own; too free and often too socially significant to be grouped together with the slaves, but unable to vote or find a niche in white society. Their strong presence, combined with their monetary and business success, made their middling existence a threat to the southern slave ideology that clung to the concept that all blacks should be subjugated to whites. Miscegenation was a common occurrence in New Orleans, as evidenced by the large number of mulattos born each year, adding to the already numerically significant

¹ African American Resource Center, Emancipation Records, New Orleans Public Library Online, <http://nutrias.org/~nopl/info/aarcinfo/guide/emancipations.htm> (last accessed June 6, 2006).

class of people more free than slaves, yet less free than whites, with internal social stratifications all their own. The census records for Louisiana in the nineteenth century do not distinguish between whites and free people of color in the category of births. However, in 1850, free people of color in Orleans Parish made up ten percent of the overall population. There were approximately twice as many free women of color than men, and twice as many white men as women.²

Karen Leathem posits that, in the 1850s, “gender became the overarching rubric for unofficial masking regulations.”³ More likely, all previous masking regulations, whether official or not, had existed for the same white, fear-based reasons. Ease of association among all races of residents, combined with an unequal ratio of men to women, ironically made room for and implicitly encouraged the generally frowned-upon practice of interracial sexual intercourse. Late historian Kimberly Hanger wrote in her 1991 PhD dissertation concerning free people of color in Spanish New Orleans that “with few exceptions . . . persons of all colors and classes worked and played together by choice and necessity.” She continued by stating, “New Orleans refused to function in accord with any strict social stratifications based on race, class, or legal status.”⁴ Alecia Long relates several historical cases of “sex across the color line,” using them as aids to explain how the city went from having a dubious reputation for decadence and racial diversity before the Civil War to exploiting that decadence by creating a tourist market around the sex trade that encouraged indulgence in prostitution, including miscegenation, for

² Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/censusbin/census/cen.pl?year=860> (last accessed June 6, 2006).

³ Leathem, *A Carnival According to Their Own Desires*, 38.

⁴ Kimberly Hanger, *Personas de Varias Clases y Colores: Free People of Color in Spanish New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 1991), 243.

government profit after the war. In 1898, the notorious Storyville district was born, composed of several city blocks set aside by local officials for the sole purpose of enticing tourists to luxuriate in a sanctioned erotic environment of sex and, later, local jazz music.⁵

The free people of color in New Orleans were not subjected to the same social etiquette that the French and Spanish Creole elites enforced. The free colored people had their own set of social standards and, for those women deemed quadroons and octoroons, persons one-fourth and one-eighth black respectively, they had standards that both seduced and appalled Creole men and incensed many Creole women. To illustrate, in 1810 a woman named Lucinda Sparkle published a letter addressed to the City Council in the *Louisiana Gazette*. Her concern clearly shows just how important the Carnival season was for women of her era, and just what a threat the Creole women considered the female quadroons. She petitioned for the following:

[that a] suitable genteel, tree-shaded promenade be established to foster “the best female society” who were losing out to the quadroons who promenaded the levees and ensnared the eligible gentlemen of the city. During the Carnival, when our young gentlemen from custom and the pleasures of dancing are frequently in the company with our belles, feelings of the most pure and tender nature are often excited; but, time passes, the Carnival ends, and the period of female seclusion again returns, and there remains nothing to counteract the baneful voices complained of by your petitioner. [She envisioned that a proper public promenade would be a place where] the favorable and honorable impressions made during the Carnival might be renewed and new conquests might be made.⁶

Historically, in New Orleans quadroon women were distinguished for their exemplary educations and financial solvency, qualities often thought of as unusual for

⁵ Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

⁶ Lucinda Sparkle, letter to City Council, *Louisiana Gazette*, Sep. 18, 1810.

women of their time. Due to the promise of limited legal rights extended to free people of color, the quadroon women benefited as legal landowners and merchants, and were often socially independent. Grace King left behind her a wealth of information about New Orleans and its distinctive local culture in the many books she wrote, including a reproduction of an unpublished manuscript written in the mid-nineteenth century by Charles Gayarre, the grandson of Etienne de Borre, New Orleans's first mayor, and a lawyer and fellow-writer friend of King. Gayarre's manuscript resounds with respect for the free colored women. He pleasantly reminisces about the comfortable living quadroon women afforded white men by catering to their every need, their affability, and their "proverbial" honesty, yet in the same breath he complains that the women "monopolized the renting, at high prices, of furnished rooms to white gentlemen," sounding more like he had a personal gripe than was stating an absolute fact. In contrast, King's opinions are much more severe than Gayarre's. In regard to family peace and purity, she considers the women "the most insidious and the deadliest of foes a community ever possessed."⁷ Given the contents of this quote, it is tempting to imagine the name Lucinda Sparkle serving as a pen name for King if the latter had been alive in 1810. The respective contrasting opinions of Gayarre and King echo the stereotypical responses held by white men and white women, respectively, in response to the unusual social position quadroon women occupied. After all, white men tended to benefit from the unusual social position of the quadroon women, while white women did not. More importantly, however, the opinions of King and Gayarre reflect the quandary in which the free women of color found themselves and dealt with daily, living in a reality somewhere between freedom

⁷ King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, 347; Charles Gayarre, unpublished manuscript, qtd. in King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, 347.

and servitude, and in a world between the white and black cultures, a world often fraught with hostility.

One of the most noted reasons for the quadroon women's independence, financial solvency, and resented position in society sprang from the peculiar, yet common placage system, borrowed from the French West Indies. In the placage system, the mother of a free young quadroon woman would offer her as the mistress of a socially desirable young and unmarried white man. When a suitable match was made, the women became known as a "placee." The legendary quadroon Carnival balls that occurred in New Orleans from some time in the 1700s until the Civil War, documented in the countless travelogues left by North American and European travelers, involved more than just dancing the French quadrille until dawn.⁸ First and foremost, for the love of music and Carnival, free colored people held balls where technically no whites were allowed to attend. However, the quadroon balls represented a glaring double standard. Quadroon mothers, acting as brokers and often placees themselves, would accompany their daughter to the quadroon balls in attempt to strike a bargain with an interested white man in attendance in order to place their daughter in that man's care for life. These balls were well known and in operation specifically for the purpose of inter-racial relations. They served as the courting ground of young white men of means looking for exotic darker skinned mistresses.

⁸ For further information on quadroon balls in travelogues, see Thomas Ashe, *Golden Petticoats: Travels in America* (London: printed for R. Phillips, 1808), qtd. in *The World from Jackson Square: A New Orleans Reader*, ed. Etolia S. Basso (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1948), 87-91; Isidore Lowenstern, (1837), Harriet Martineau, (1830), The Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, (1825), James Stuart, (1829), Mrs. Trollope (1827), qtd. in Albert E. Fossier, *New-Orleans The Glamour Period*, 1957; John H.B. Latrobe, *Southern Travels: Journal of John H.B. Latrobe, 1834*, ed. Samuel Wilson Jr. (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1986).

Thomas Ashe, in his 1808 travels to New Orleans from London, took a great interest in the placage system and the quadroon women it involved. As one of the men captivated by the beautiful mixed-race ladies, he considered the women of color socially equal, if only in grace and elegance, to the white society women. He noted that, “The mothers regulate the terms and make the bargain . . . generally fifty dollars a month; during which time the lover has the exclusive right to the house, where fruit, coffee, and refreshments may at any time be had, or where he may entirely live with the utmost safety and tranquility.”⁹ In a similar vein, in 1859, Fredrick Law Olmstead, the noted landscape architect and designer of New York’s Central Park, mused that living under the placage arrangement cost less money than renting hotel rooms that did not come with the cooking and laundry services that the quadroon placees provided. Olmstead guessed that a man could live a better life for less money in New Orleans with a quadroon mistress than a man with a salary could in New York City.¹⁰ If a white man of means desired to take part in the placage system to secure himself the services mentioned above, the place to institute the relationship would have been the famous quadroon balls.

Similar to all Carnival galas, the quadroon balls varied in quality, depending on the class of people in attendance, something likely determined by the elegance and entrance fee of the particular ballroom. In 1834, John Latrobe visited New Orleans from Baltimore. The son of the New Orleans architect and commentator Benjamin Latrobe is notable in having spearheaded the African recolonization movement, an effort to send manumitted slaves back to a newly established African colony, Liberia, named by the

⁹ Ashe, *Golden Petticoats*, qtd. in *The World from Jackson Square*, ed. Basso, 91.

¹⁰ Fredrick Law Olmstead, *Men and Manners*, qtd. in *The World from Jackson Square*, ed. Basso, 160.

American Colonization Society to imply liberation.¹¹ On the night of his arrival, he was escorted by his host to a quadron ball. This first ball Latrobe attended was at the Washington Ball Room and required guests to come masked. He paid a one dollar entrance fee into the “gorgeous building,” commenting that, “it far exceeds anything of the sort that we have in the North.” Not surprisingly, Latrobe left his wife Charlotte in their temporary quarters while he enjoyed an event she socially could not attend.

Latrobe’s writings reveal inconsistencies in his opinions regarding people of color. On the one hand, he worked for the abolition of slavery, desiring to rid the nation of its racial problems by shipping all blacks back to Africa, yet on the other hand, he notes several times his fixation with the feet and ankles of unescorted colored women around Jackson Square, inquiring about their identities in an effort to make their acquaintance. It is likely that the same women he saw in the square during the day starred in the quadron balls at night. He commented with repugnance that the quadron belles pass their lives in prostitution, only made worse by the fact that New Orleans citizens, more or less, condone their behavior. Disgusted from the heat and smell of sweat, Latrobe left the first quadron ball around midnight, yet he apparently could not fight the temptation to attend another ball of lesser quality that he coincidentally stumbled upon moments later. The second quadron ball he attended was advertised in the November nineteenth issue of *The Bee*. There he found colored women and “white women of the lowest order, and nearly all of the women in the same sort of costume.” Once again offended by the odor and the lack of lighting, he left the ball, but what is of importance are the descriptions of

¹¹ Latrobe, *Southern Travels*, 2.

the evening Latrobe left behind, demonstrating that societal rules of the time concerning the mixing of races were inconsistently adhered to, at best.¹²

The elite white society women, often the victims of cheating husbands, often enough used the quadron Carnival balls to gain proof of their partners' affairs and to aggravate the event's other attendees. For instance, in 1835, yet another debate ensued over masquerading, because many white women were donning masks and entering the quadron balls. The public spotlight cast upon the elite white women from the Cabildo most likely served to warn them that their social status could be undermined, especially if they were accused of acting improperly at a ball by committing an act of adultery with any man, or worse, miscegenation with black men who easily could have gained entry as well under cover of a costume.

Historian Laurraine Goreau cites Alderman Allard in an 1835 debate defending married white women caught accessing a realm customarily prohibited to them. The Alderman supported their incognito passage into the balls suspecting that their intentions were solely to surprise their adulterous husbands openly consorting with their quadron mistresses.¹³ Historian and author Albert Emile Fossier, in his early twentieth century book, *New Orleans, the Glamour Period, 1800-1840*, quotes an unnamed "prominent" English author from the nineteenth century who further attests to white women infiltrating the quadron balls of their own volition, but he suspects that their reasons varied more than Alderman Allard assumed.

¹² Latrobe, *Southern Travels*, 76-81; *The Bee*, November 19, 1834.

¹³ Alderman Allard, City Council Debate, November 20, 1835, qtd. by Laurraine Goreau, *The Past as Prelude: New Orleans, 1718-1968*, ed. Hodding Carter (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1968), 346.

In the twenties and even in the early thirties, these balls were strictly limited to [quadroon] women and their white admirers. No white women would risk the opprobrium for attending them, even disguised with a mask. The fear of apprehension was too great, but in the marvelous thirties when the population both males and females, grew to tremendous proportions, white women, either because of curiosity, for amusement, or to confirm their suspicions as to the whereabouts of their husbands, would attend these balls, where they were not welcome, in incredible numbers . . . at first carefully disguised, then flaunting all conventions by not attempting to hide their identity.¹⁴

The acting mayor, Culbertson, in a letter to the same City Council meeting in 1835, showed great concern that white ladies were attending these balls, events that he considered an ongoing custom promoting infidelity. Mixed feelings in the white male population between wanting their freedom to live a dual sexual life with a socially downcast, though desirable, race, and not wanting their wives to know, confront them, or, especially, take revenge by committing the same act with willing black males, was common. Culbertson complained of the white women attending the quadroon balls, explaining that, “the spectacle of their abominations is constantly offered to the public gaze.” In a seemingly offended tone, Culbertson continued that these white women in attendance, often married, felt comfortable enough to bring with them as escorts, “unprincipled men who have been expelled from other sates, and who find here, in consequence of the disguise they are allowed to assume, and the protection of these females, every opportunity to follow their swindling career.”¹⁵ Ten days later, *The Bee* commented in an editorial that “however disposed we may be to esteem ladies and to gratify their curiosity, etc., we did not like to see them disguised in liquor or dress. What they may be permitted to do at a fancy ball respectably ‘got up’ can scarcely afford a

¹⁴ A “Prominent English Author” qtd. in Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period*, 362.

¹⁵ Mayor Culbertson, City Council November 20, 1835, qtd. in Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period*, 362-363.

precedent to unrestrained freedom at masked balls for colored people two or three times a week.”¹⁶ All of this implies nothing less than women, even ones considered high society, fully participating in the rituals associated with the Carnival season, and they did so with much less compunction than many historians suspect.

In 1834, Englishmen Charles Augustus Murray commented on the gaiety and ease of the Creole women at their Carnival balls. He fondly remembered that he “was privileged to address and to dance with any young lady in company without going through the ceremonial ordeal of introduction.” He continued by saying, “it is impossible to conceive an assembly with more agreement and with less restraint, than this Creole coterie.”¹⁷ He likely found himself in the company of well behaved Creole citizens at an extravagant fete, a privilege not extended to all whites, or even all Creoles in the city. There is no doubt that there existed palpable qualitative differences among Carnival balls and their attendees.

It is important to note that Creole society had its class stratifications, as well. Not all Creoles had access to money, resources, or even homes. The Creole balls ran the gamut from decadent and very socially restrictive “subscription” or “society balls,” where the Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach claims, “none but good society were admitted,” likely prohibited to most by their entrance fee, to the inexpensive and easily accessible “public balls,” advertised in every newspaper, with women often admitted for free.¹⁸ Women were not only conspicuously present at all of these parties both in costume and

¹⁶ *The Bee*, November 30, 1835.

¹⁷ Charles Augustus Murray, qtd. in Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period*, 455.

¹⁸ Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach, qtd. in King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, 266.

spirit, they were absolutely necessary to their success, especially if the male attendants desired dancing until dawn. Class and race determined admittance to the balls, especially admittance to the elite private sphere of the invitation-only galas, gender did not, yet there existed the promise of a good fete for everyone, usually six months out of the year and several times a week. All classes and colors of society had their bacchanals and the women were ever-present, participating in the celebrations.

In the atmosphere of New Orleans's antebellum Carnival, white southern womanhood and its reputation for delicacy and sacred virtue deserves reconsideration. It is apparent that New Orleans challenges the perspective of a monolithic Southern culture as evidenced by the social complexities of the city, which at Carnival time were brought to the surface in full public force. In theory, among the upper classes, there existed a stigma associated with the public balls due to the balls' socially heterogeneous attendees, which offered no guarantee of whose company in which people might find themselves. Under the guise of masking, social trespass occurred regularly. John Williams Koolsbergen comments that, "In a broader sense the inversion of status is at the core of Mardi Gras because the central theme of New Orleans Carnival is the fantasy of becoming anything one desires for a day."¹⁹ People often disguised themselves as other races, classes, and genders in order to gain access, if only psychologically, into social spheres with which they were less well acquainted.

In 1952, Mardi Gras historian, Arthur Burton LaCour, commented that the public balls of the nineteenth century created an atmosphere of offensiveness and immorality. Using women as the measuring stick for determining immoral behavior, he wrote, "Self-

¹⁹ Koolsbergen, *A Study in Popular Culture*, 26.

styled ladies wore masks but all other parts of their bodies were delineated. Hostility towards masking was renewed and the laxity of the public balls were severely criticized as Bacchanalian revelries.”²⁰ It seems LaCour assumed that the women would not have dressed so promiscuously were they not masked, and the fact that they did display themselves in a sexually provocative way led him to conclude that masking was the cause of, or excuse for female transgression, as opposed to the overall lax nature of Carnival sociability.

In a similar vein to LaCour, local New Orleans author Robert Tallant felt that the public balls of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries possessed “varying degrees of respectability [and] which were open to everyone who could purchase a ticket, and some of these were helping to give New Orleans a reputation as a city as evil and as dangerous as Marseille, a city which was in time to earn the appellation of ‘hell on earth.’”²¹ Tallant blames the reputation of the city on the debauched persons who attended Carnival balls, but, in reality, New Orleans gained its hellacious reputation for a variety of reasons, many having nothing to do with the Carnival. Historically, the city was no stranger to widespread bouts of epidemics, warring with local Amerindians, slave insurrections, pirate attacks, annual flooding of the city streets, hurricanes, delinquents, dueling, gang fights, and prostitution.

In truth, there existed no specific limits to open female sexuality and provocative behavior and this seemed to bother men much more than the majority of women who used Carnival as an excuse to display their bodies, act coquettishly, and behave in ways

²⁰ Arthur Burton LaCour, *New Orleans Masquerade: Chronicles of Carnival*, in collaboration with Stuart Omer Landry (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1952), 10.

²¹ Tallant, *New Orleans . . . As It Was*, 97.

often not normally accessible to them, challenging men's perceptions of their virtuousness. Since the social guidelines people publicly adhered to greatly depended on their class, the anonymity of Carnival offered everyone an opportunity to explore other social realms. Even the upper-class women who frowned on the quadroon balls, with all the implicit and illicit sexuality associated with them, still attended disguised enough to hide their personal identity, perhaps even their class, but not their gender.

CHAPTER 4 PROSTITUTES ON PARADE

Among the common people, or *gens du commun*, it can be inferred that the prostitutes so commonly referred to in New Orleans history were often the lower-class white Creole women, although they were not alone in this profession. Many immigrant women arriving in the city with no resources or family support also turned to the illicit sex trade for money. In fact, Al Rose, an expert on Storyville, New Orleans's red light district, uncovered much evidence of women traveling from different cities to New Orleans to make quick earnings by engaging in prostitution, and all the more during the Carnival season. Robert Tallant claimed, "Mardi Gras was a paradise for whores . . . They'd take over the streets, go into the best neighborhoods in carriages and on foot, shouting obscenities and dressed in the most daring costumes; behaving in the most brazen fashion."¹

During the antebellum period of Carnival, prostitutes, both black and white, owned the streets as much as men. They dominated many areas of the public sphere, openly inviting, in Alecia Long's words, "sex across the color line" in bars and concert saloons across the city, from the most dangerous of neighborhoods to the most wealthy and refined. Social stigmas associated with promiscuous costuming and bawdy behavior only encouraged them to rebel more. Karen Leathem notes that since the mid-nineteenth century prostitutes commonly cross-dressed as men for Mardi Gras. To Leathem, cross-

¹ Tallant, *New Orleans . . . As It Was*, 108.

dressing represented a challenge to Victorian ideas of gender immutability.² Her position is in direct conflict with Mary Ryan's assertion that "Like the sexual reversals of European Carnival . . . the cross-dressing of Mardi Gras did not challenge gender hierarchies."³ Given these contradictory voices concerning the nature of cross-dressing, why women chose to costume in that fashion must be considered.

It is likely that one reason prostitutes cross-dressed was to penetrate and undermine men's socially superior position over women. Costumes often signified political ideals and social mores of the day, letting people play with new information and find new ways to assimilate and express it, while simultaneously reflecting and challenging the world as the costumers knew it. For instance, women cross-dressing as men could thwart sexual double standards that men used to their advantage, such as the placage system, and costumes of inversion could be made into tools used by the oppressed to temporarily assume the privileges of their oppressors.

Upper-class men regularly cross-dressed for Carnival, often playing the part of females in the organized postbellum parades, parades that women, along with the rest of the city's citizens, were excluded from. Role inversion was as much a part of the ancient Carnival customs that survived in New Orleans as open sexuality and public debauchery. It served as a vital component in keeping the essential spirit of the Carnival alive. On Ash Wednesday, 1838, *The New Orleans Daily Picayune* relayed to their readers their Mardi Gras day experience, illustrating a grand procession of Creole gentlemen of the "first respectability." All of the men rode horses, and "Many of them were dressed in

² Leatham, *A Carnival According to Their Own Desires*, 61-62.

³ Ryan, *Women in Public*, 29.

female attire, and acted the lady with no small degree of grace.”⁴ Both men and women could and did masquerade as each other and explored the other’s social advantages, if only temporarily.

If there existed some understanding among prostitutes that gender roles were decided upon through public rituals and displays, as Karen Leathem and Mary Ryan both postulate, then perhaps the more clever working women noticed the significance of cross-dressing through awareness of fashion trends. Women such as Sarah Bernhardt stunned people by wearing pants in public and playing the roles of men in the theater, essentially eroticizing cross-dressing. Perhaps prostitutes realized the power of male-impersonation when they saw men, year after year, cross-dressing as women and behaving in ways that made it look fun for women to command the streets in drunken revelry. Tallant mentions that in 1871, Mary E. Walker, a physician, visited the Crescent City for Mardi Gras and costumed herself as a man, a role she likely identified with due to her occupation. She noted feeling “out-heroed” by the many prostitutes also donning male raiment.⁵ Interestingly, author Reid Mitchell found evidence of Walker’s arrest for her act of donning men’s attire, an uncommon response by the police, even if they assumed her a prostitute. In fact, Mitchell later asserts that the local newspapers routinely considered cross-dressing nothing more than Carnival gaiety.⁶ Most likely, prostitutes realized from the reactions they elicited, especially during Carnival, that they were already influential actors consciously creating the images they wanted the rest of the public to assimilate.

⁴ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, February 28, 1838.

⁵ Tallant, *Mardi Gras . . . As It Was*, 127.

⁶ Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day*, 136-137, 140.

In other words, prostitutes cross-dressing as men served to both symbolize and lampoon their male patrons, who likely thought themselves at the top of the gender hierarchy and in control of economics and government. In reality, the prostitutes controlled a lucrative profession that exercised influence over police, city officials, and merchants alike, and it was in the prostitutes' best interest to make their claim as an important social force and major contributors to the city's economy, and demand attention and respect for who they were--a group of successful women in a city that had never been without their presence and their specialized offerings.

Among prostitutes, as with any large group of people, there existed social stratifications as well, depending on which neighborhood they resided in or whether they worked alone or in a brothel under the protection of a madam. Pure, white-skinned Creole and European immigrant women of the sex industry often lived in areas that suffered such high crime rates that a man of means looking for a good time would have been wise to look elsewhere. Robert Tallant recalled countless tales of rivalries between uptown and downtown gangs of prostitutes, likely American versus Creole, due to the way the city's neighborhoods grew. Americans developed the real estate above or uptown from Canal Street and immigrants usually resided within or below the French Quarter. The antagonistic women would march into each other's sections and instigate all-out brawls, "that began with verbal blasting and ended with fists, sticks, and stones." He continued by writing that, "Mardi Gras was a favorite time for this, when the heart was in high spirits and the inhibitions were released by alcohol and the gaiety of the season."⁷

⁷ Tallant, *Mardi Gras . . . As It Was*, 109.

Tallant claims that the police would not venture into the Gallatin Street district, even in broad daylight, and that murders in the area increased exponentially during the Carnival season. He relays that the crime was even worse uptown in the “Swamp,” the uptown area around Girod Street. According to Tallant, women in the Swamp and Gallatin Street areas prostituted themselves for pennies, often possessed no home, and literally lived on the streets. Tallant described the women as terrible fighters, “brawny and battle-scarred female savages, ready and willing to gouge out a man’s eyes or slit his belly or his testicles with a razor or a knife.” Since this type of behavior was supposedly an everyday occurrence for the women in the area, “There was really little that the Swamp could do to provide additional excitement [on Fat Tuesday], so on this day they would often wander in large numbers to Gallatin Street to exhibit their superior prowess, to tear the Gallatin Street dives to pieces, and to maim the inhabitants.”⁸ In essence, these debased women represented one end of the spectrum of prostitution, and the women of the high-class brothels who hosted the men of means in the city represented the other.

The 1840s heralded a new epoch in the Carnival history of New Orleans. Between 1800 and 1840, the city-wide festival gave everyone the opportunity to intermingle without too much fear of social disapproval. Openly socializing across all demographics was customary behavior of the New Orleans natives, as new arrivals quickly learned. There indeed existed places and events where certain groups normally gathered and others were generally unwelcome, but those restrictions were often disregarded, and all but disappeared during Carnival. Until those final years before the Civil War, notoriously known as decades of disquiet and heightened animosity between the races

⁸ Tallant, *Mardi Gras . . . As It Was*, 109-110.

and classes in New Orleans, lives were lived in the public sphere and the fabric of society seemed firm and in place. But as national germs of social unrest began to filter into the city, the fabric began to loosen and come apart. Social restrictions were imposed from the top down where none had been before and the people found themselves more and more separated and privatized from each other.⁹ In fact, the 1842 travelogue of Louis Tasistro noted that the public began comparing costumed women with prostitutes as the latter filled the streets during Carnival when other women would not, in fear of the street violence continually erupting as a precursor of the Civil War.¹⁰ The flour that mischievous young boys traditionally threw at innocent revelers was replaced with bricks and quicklime, causing the quality of the celebration to deteriorate, as reflected in the media of the time.

Gradually the sensible citizens of the city began to disappear from the streets during Carnival as the local newspapers made pessimistic comments concerning the rising violence occurring during the traditionally celebratory season. In 1848 *The Bee* commented that “Mardi Gras altogether was a poor affair. Some few boys paraded on the streets on foot, in carriages, and on horseback and began throwing flour in each other’s faces, when other boys standing by pelted them with mud and brickbats . . . So ended the ceremony which is now more honored in the breach than in observance, and which should be altogether done away with.”¹¹ Six years later, their assessment of the holiday

⁹ For further information about class and racial animosity affecting the New Orleans Carnival season in the 1850s, see James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997); The Presbytere; Ryan, *Women in Public*, 1990; Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 1998; Tallant, *Mardi Gras . . . As It Was*, 1990; Young, *Carnival and Mardi Gras in New Orleans*, 1939.

¹⁰ Louis Tasistro, *Random Shots and Other Southern Breezes* (New York: Harper Bros., 1842).

¹¹ *The Bee*, March 8, 1848.

had not improved. *The Bee* curtly stated, “Boys with bags of flour paraded the streets and painted jezebels exhibited themselves in public carriages, and that is about all.”¹² The media’s concerns were not unfounded, and in fear for the people, who they themselves were, they pushed for the privatization of the season’s festivities by urging revelers to gather in places less public than the streets.

Until 1857, Carnival events that took place in the private sphere, such as quadrone and invitation-only high society balls, still seemed semi-public, and the public sphere had few boundaries. It took transformational forces of enormous influence to change the egalitarian Creole Carnival style of celebrating, and those forces were the socially conservative Americans steering the ship of cultural change during times of inner-city discontent at the dawn of the Civil War.

¹² *The Bee*, March 1, 1854.

CHAPTER 5
AMERICANS VERSUS CREOLES: A BATTLE FOR PRIVATIZATION AND
POWER

Women in general had enjoyed a more democratic freedom of expression in New Orleans when the people still clung tightly to their French and Spanish colonial roots. As the city slowly began to assimilate American influences, women's freedoms, especially for those in the upper classes, deteriorated, falling to their lowest point between the periods of the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, then reviving once again at the turn of the twentieth century. The early colonial cultural practices of easy inter-racial mingling and condoned miscegenation had endured to well into the nineteenth century until, in the 1850s, the politically self-empowered elite American population attempted to halt what they perceived as solecistic behavior among the Creoles. In order to gain control of the city's social realm, the Americans struck at the heart of Creole sociability, the Carnival.

The rancor that persisted between Creoles and Americans began soon after the United States bought the Louisianan Territory from France in 1803. In the 1808 travelogue of Thomas Ashe, he noted that there existed a difference in attitude and behavior between the Creole natives and the newly arriving Americans flocking into the region. His observations described a social wound that began with the appearance of the Americans and reopened anew every Carnival season. It is likely that the behavior of the Creole women aroused distress among the northern newcomers because the American men enjoyed less social freedom to play and express themselves than the Creole women

did, and the unpredictable and chaotic behavior associated with the Carnival only magnified the cultural chasm that existed between the vastly different groups, further aggravating American social sensibilities. Ashe wrote, “The Americans, since their arrival here, have been so occupied by politics and legislation that their minds have never been sufficiently unbent to form a course of pleasure for themselves. . . . It is not so with the French gentlemen: their pleasures are forever varied, and of a nature to be participated in by the most delicate of the female sex.”¹

Karl Postl, an ordained priest, disappeared from his parish in Prague in 1823, reappearing in New Orleans later that same year calling himself Charles Sealsfield. During his travels across America he kept journals and published novels that reflected his interpretation of American and European culture. During his stay in Louisiana, he remarked on the nativist sentiments the newcomer Americans felt towards the French Creoles, providing a sense of the intractability between the two groups. He commented that the Americans knew nothing more about the French than the proverb “French Dog,” that they would not deign to learn the French language, which the whole Creole community and government communicated in, and, worse yet, they behaved toward the French “as if their lands as well as the inhabitants could be seized without ceremony.”²

Between the years 1836 and 1852, the rift between the French and the English escalated to such a point that the citizens of New Orleans forced the local government to separate the city into three distinct municipalities, the first being the original French Quarter neighborhood, the second, the American settlement west of the French Quarter,

¹ Ashe, *Golden Petticoats*, qtd. in *The World from Jackson Square*, ed. Basso, 87.

² Karl Postl, (Charles Sealsfield, pseud.), qtd. in Fossier, *New Orleans: The Glamour Period*, 280.

and the third, the area east of it. Animosity remained between the groups until a common bond was created during the Civil War due to the new cause to rally behind, fighting for the preservation of the Confederacy, and, perhaps more realistically, for the continuance of slavery that would ideally keep labor cheap and white women safe from what was feared might be vengeful attacks by black men. During the years following the dissolution of the separate municipalities, the American elite in New Orleans deliberately planted seeds of change that blossomed during the post-Civil War Carnival season, changing the face of the festival in ways that are still seen today.

With their hard-won political positions in place throughout the city, the Americans seized control of the Carnival from the inside out and made it a governmentally sanctioned holiday. They injected their own cultural criteria into the already tangled Creole-Catholic past of the city through law instead of custom, and through personal politics instead of natural cultural progression. The politically and economically empowered American men manifestly imposed themselves at the top of the social ladder with the Creoles, to their chagrin, beneath them, and they relegated free people of color to virtually the same social status as slaves. In a sense, the Anglo-American newcomers became a mock royalty and created a new private realm for themselves within Carnival time, imposing stronger prejudices on other classes and races than ever before seen in New Orleans, expecting the women of their class to support them. An unprecedented and conspicuous “us and them” mentality arose that trumped other previous social prejudices harbored by the Creole population before the Americans arrived en force, and the original settlers of New Orleans faced the possibility that their democratic folk festival would

collapse into a foreign controlled event deprived of its communal nature and strong female presence.

The Americans introduced the tradition of exclusivity of participation into the public sphere in a clever way that sought to deceive the people into playing the part of observers when previously they would involve themselves in whatever activities interested them. Private Carnival “krewes,” as they call themselves, appeared on the streets displaying spectacular, themed parades for the masses to ogle at, but not participate in. The Americans institutionalized their message-laden mobile theatrical presentations with the help of fellow city officials who belonged to the krewes. New bans on masking forced the public into less performative roles, making traditions of revelry, misrule, and masquerading unofficial styles of celebration when participated in by the masses, yet official if rendered by the private krewes who utilized the art of masquerade to create anonymity for themselves. The freedoms that historically the elite Creole women and upper-class free women of color enjoyed were truncated as they were pushed into a more private social sphere of elite, official, invitation-only Carnival parties, and to the sidelines of public parades. Privatization of Carnival events gained support among both the American and Creole elites as their fears multiplied as forced federal Reconstruction legislation transformed the city.

American apprehension that they would lose their newly won social and political control found a performative stage for vocalization through the use of themes in parades and balls staged by the elite American men. The arrogant American attempt to organize the ancient folk festival is strikingly similar to the attempts made by the Catholic Church to eradicate the pagan core of the Carnival eleven hundred years before. In both cases,

the public disorder, decadence, hierarchical role inversions, and sexual promiscuity associated with Carnival offended the sensibilities of the conservative minorities, and, either ironically or conveniently, their desires to harness and control the wild celebration forced them to participate in it in order to effect change. To be sure, in both cases the celebration was changed, but in neither case could the cultural interceptors fully control it. Prophet-like in his comments, Sir Charles Lyell in 1846 wrote in his travelogue,

There was a grand procession parading the streets, almost everyone dressed in the most grotesque attire . . . in a variety of costumes . . . The strangeness of the scene was not a little heightened by the blending of Negroes, quadroons, and mulattoes in the crowd; and we were amused by observing the ludicrous surprise, mixed with contempt, of several unmasked, stiff, grave Anglo-American from the North, who were witnessing for the first time what seemed to them so much mummery and tomfoolery. . . . This rude intrusion struck me as a kind of foreshadowing of coming events, emblematic of the violent shock which the invasion of the Anglo-Americans is about to give the old regime of Louisiana.³

In 1856, *The Bee* was still reporting on the deterioration of the Mardi Gras holiday, relaying to the public that “in old times, this was the greatest holiday in the whole year round in the Crescent City, but of late years its observance has been gradually falling into desuetude before the march of new people, customs, and religion.”⁴ *The Bee* was speaking of the Anglo-Americans and their well-known disenchantment with the Creole style of celebrating Carnival. For years, the Americans had expressed their discontent with the social customs of the city. Finally they took measures to reorganize the celebration they had always associated with licentiousness and chaos.

³ Sir Charles Lyell, qtd. in *The World from Jackson Square*, ed. Basso, 139-140.

⁴ *The Bee*, February 6, 1856.

CHAPTER 6 THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE NEW ORLEANS CARNIVAL

The year 1857 was definitive. It was in that year that the Anglos changed the way the people of New Orleans celebrated the Carnival. Sir Lyell was correct in his 1846 premonitions of events to come. The old Creole regime was shocked as Carnival traditions transformed before their very eyes and assumed an air of bureaucratic control backed by Anglo-American city officials. Parades became consciously crafted, selectively participated in, and wrapped up in overriding themes meant to enlighten the masses to English customs and insult those considered too boorish to understand the social commentary contained in the props and costumes embellishing the procession. As a result, Carnival festivities became split between public and private affairs, between an unofficial folk festival celebrated spontaneously on the streets and in saloons, and a privatized, invitation-only set of events no longer open to the public.

An upper-class cohort of influential American Protestant men formed a secret society for the purpose of taking over, improving, and reviving the Carnival in innovative ways more suited to their tastes. What were their tastes? They would invite only their own class and race to join, excluding most Creoles, and all women, blacks, Italians, and Jews, insisting that membership be kept absolutely secret, not known to even their own families and friends. They would present to the public an organized parade with a theme lauding Puritan Protestantism intending to insult the Creoles and their lax and loose Mardi Gras reveling, and they would create a tableau, privately staged at their ball held at the Gaiety Theatre, again intended to dishonor and slight the French by displaying a sign

in flames that read, “Vive la Danse.” There is one particular name associated with the transformation that occurred on Fat Tuesday, February 24, 1857, and that name is Comus.¹

The elite krewe of Anglo men chose for their group the name Comus, necromancer son of Bacchus and Circe, and title character of Puritan John Milton’s masque, Comus, a celebration, ironically, of chastity. Masques, a stylized form of drama, were characterized by lavish spectacle. From the beginning, Comus exuded a Janus-like presence. Publicly they introduced their krewe as a benevolent organization with the intention of saving the people of New Orleans from hell on earth. According to Comus’s official history, published by the members of the Krewe themselves, the organization began as a charitable gift to the city intending to bring dignity and orderliness to the “crude and vulgar” manner in which the people tended to celebrate.² But privately, Comus played the cunning part of the Lord of Misrule, doling out a mythical “Orient Liquor” that caused “foul disfigurement to those who ingested it.” The krewe of Comus hoped that their new Mardi Gras performance and the message that it expressed would serve as an “Orient Liquor” for the Creoles to drink in an attempt to discredit their old Carnival regime, thereby allowing the Americans to rise to the top of the social ladder.

Times Picayune columnist James Gill commented in his book about the politics of race during Carnival that Comus’s real intention of starting a new Mardi Gras tradition had more to do with the nativist sentiments of the krewe’s founding members, rather than their displeasure over the Creole’s social domination of the festivities. He suggests that

¹ For further information on the history of the Krewe of Comus, see Perry Young, *The Mistick Krewe: Chronicles of Comus and His Kin* (New Orleans: Carnival Press, 1931).

² *One Hundred Years of Comus* (New Orleans Public Library, 1947), 5-6.

Comus's concern over the rushes of German and Irish immigrants pouring into the city persuaded them into "co-opting the masked ball, which once entertained all classes of Creoles, and [Comus] made it an emblem for an emerging elite determined to keep the rest of the population at one remove." Gill also explains that Comus was able to function outside the boundaries of the law. He relays that the City Council conveniently adopted an ordinance in 1857 making it illegal "to abuse, provoke, or disturb any person; to make charivari [excessive noise], or to appear masked or disguised in the streets or in any public place."³ The ordinance was imposed on the public as a means of assisting Mardi Gras out of the state of decline it had fallen into over the past ten years, but in actuality, it was a way for Comus to demonstrate its control over the entire populace by attempting to regulate the ways the public could celebrate. Mayor Charles Waterman, a founding Comus member, made sure that the krewe was exempt from these ordinances. He ordered the police to clear the streets for the parading maskers as they marched (thumbing their noses at the law), as well as the public who they hoped would be forced into idly watching the procession with no legal means of actively participating in it. At this defining moment, Comus and its entourage, without saying a word, exhibited its new ritual as the only "official" Carnival event, positioning this krewe as the sovereigns of the citywide celebration. This particular event set a strong precedence for a dichotomy to thrive between the public audience and the private participants, the unmasked masses and the incognito Comus members. Privacy, in this case, became the luxury of the elite Anglos, and relegated to the public realm were all those without the social standing, racial criteria, or gender necessary to join the krewe. It represented an official attempt to

³ Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 46.

separate the city's elite men from the common classes. Contrary to the new official laws banning many traditional means of celebrating, primarily masking, the February 16, 1858, edition of *The Bee* advertised a series of grand costume balls for the Carnival season. On Ash Wednesday, 1859, a section of the same paper was devoted to illustrations of the street maskers whose costumes, "lacked in quality, not quantity," making it apparent that the public still entertained themselves on the streets and at other balls, a further testament to the laxity of city officials to enforce laws concerning Carnival.⁴

Many women in the city found themselves at the mercy of the restrictions imposed on their class or race. The high-society women fortunate enough to be affiliated with the members of Comus and receive a non-transferable invitation to the ball found new roles as audience, patiently waiting in the theater seats to be "called out" in order to dance with the micromanaging members who allowed no one else the honor of enjoying a spin around the dance floor other than those women they chose to partner with. Men other than krewe members attended the fashionable balls, but none were granted the privilege of partaking in dance. Instead, they had to sit and watch as their ladies were chosen by unidentifiable men to be whirled around in waltzes. In fact, the exclusivity of the ball was so obsessive that a \$2000 reward was publicly offered for the return of two stolen ball tickets.⁵ The effects of Comus's new tradition had only begun to take shape in the years before the Civil War. Over the next ten years, Carnival would go through a

⁴ *The Bee*, February 16, 1858; *The Bee*, March 9, 1859.

⁵ *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, February 28, 1877.

metamorphosis that would change the ways in which people viewed the celebration and partook in it.

When the Civil War came, the new official Mardi Gras celebration was temporarily suspended because the men who created it had now enlisted to fight for the Confederacy. When the soldiers returned, the half-century of distressing relations between the Anglos and Creoles began to fade due to cooperation against a shared enemy, the Union. Elite Creoles gained entrance into the ranks of Comus, and together the elite whites of society joined in a dual effort to reorganize Carnival and to suppress the carpetbagging Reconstruction–fueled government and the black majority population of the city adjusting to their new-found freedom. The white population in general, and the krewemen in particular, were aggravated by the fact that blacks were immediately enfranchised after emancipation, while Confederate troops returning to New Orleans remained disenfranchised until they held their noses and swallowed an oath of allegiance to the Union. Grace King’s descriptions of emancipated slaves boldly loitering on the banquettes, exhilarated by their freedom, and the outrage of white people being ordered around by Negro Union soldiers leaves the impression of a city ready to erupt in passion over the sudden change in command.⁶

White women were arrested on the streets for laughing at federal troops, singing Confederate songs, refusing to walk down streets flying Union flags, and for spitting on Union soldiers.⁷ In response, Union General Benjamin Butler issued the “Woman Order” in 1862. It stated, “As the officers and soldiers have been subject to repeated

⁶ King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, 300.

⁷ King, *New Orleans: The Place and the People*, 308.

insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous non-interference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that here-after when any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the U.S., she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.” He continued by complaining that, “We cannot walk the streets without being outraged and spit upon by green girls,” possibly an allusion to the Irish women in the city.⁸

The Woman Order was issued only fifteen days after Butler arrived with his troops to take military control of New Orleans. The interactions between the Union soldiers and the women during those two weeks must have been intense and draining for such measures to be taken. Butler and his men were not dealing with the common variety of delicate southern women, but exceptionally strong and independent ones due to centuries of wars, disease, and Carnival-time experiences that allowed women to taste true freedom every year as they stepped outside of their social boundaries to explore other roles. Women of all races and classes in New Orleans were forced to deal with the absence of their husbands off fighting the war, as well as the enemy at their doorsteps, but the white women felt doubly spurned. Along with separation anxiety, they also had to contend with the manumitted slaves on the streets flaunting their new freedom. Butler walked into a city in turmoil and might be considered lucky that he was only spat on, and not shot by the Confederate women. Most likely, in response to Butler’s order, no respectable woman wished to be accused of appearing to ply a trade as a prostitute, but it

⁸ By Command of General Butler, General Order No. 28, Headquarters Department of the Gulf, New Orleans, May 15, 1862.

is more likely that the order succeeded to the extent that it did because no New Orleans woman wanted to be thrown in the enemy's jail.

By 1866, Comus was back on the streets for Mardi Gras with a scaled-down parade and tableau ball. Bad years tend to inspire good Carnivals. Even a city occupied by enemy forces could not suppress the people's need for a celebration of self-expression, and over the period of the Reconstruction, the people made the most of the power of satire to psychologically assault their enemies. White people dressed as freedmen dupes, Republicans, and minstrels, black people dressed as hostile Indians, and everyone dressed as carpetbaggers.⁹

Edgar Degas visited the city in the winter of 1872-1873 and became well acquainted with the internal affairs of Comus through his relative, Rene De Gas, member of both Comus and the newly formed Crescent City White League, a parallel to the KKK. The two organizations mixed methods, members, and locales. Edgar Degas found the dual membership emblematic of the two-faced nature of the elites. Christopher Benfey, author of the book, *Degas in New Orleans*, tells how Degas noticed with disgust that "one secret society plotted festivity while the other plotted terrorism." Benfey continues insightfully by saying, "Mardi Gras was as much a rest from politics as a continuation of it by other means."¹⁰ Four new "official" krewes organized themed parades and private

⁹ For further information on Reconstruction Carnival costumes, see Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997; Young *Carnival and Mardi Gras in New Orleans*, 1939; The Presbytere, New Orleans.

¹⁰ Christopher Benfey, *Degas in New Orleans: Encounters in the Creole World of Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). Also, James Gill devotes two chapters to events concerning the overlapping membership of men in Comus and the Crescent City White League, titled, "The Krewes and the Klan," and "Honoring the White League Martyrs." For more information, see Stuart Landry, *The Battle of Liberty Place* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Press, 1955); Judith Schafer, "The Battle of Liberty Place: A Matter of Historical Perception," transcript of a lecture given to the Louisiana Historical Society, New Orleans, October 13, 1992.

balls between 1870 and 1882.¹¹ For the purpose of understanding how Carnival in New Orleans went from a pagan ritual with Catholic overtones celebrated democratically throughout the city, to a watered-down version of the past with a new emphasis on hierarchy, privatization, and monarchy all enacted by the new “official” Anglicized krewes, the Krewe of Rex, formed in 1872, was perhaps the most important representation of officialdom.

Similar to Comus, the Krewe of Rex manifested a dubious dual intention. With the krewe’s motto, *Pro Bono Publico*, King Rex proclaimed that he was for the good of the people, and was literally given the keys to the city and the authority to shut down all city offices and businesses on Mardi Gras day. This edict, originally issued by mock royalty, became official New Orleans law. To this day, no government offices or schools are open on Fat Tuesday. On the other hand, the Krewe of Rex insisted on the same membership restrictions as the rest of the new Carnival organizations. Gill’s comments about the earliest formations of krewes include, “The clubmen and krewemen of New Orleans had come to regard membership in a white-supremacist organization as a mark of manhood and resistance to a northern government that sustained Negro and carpetbag authority.”¹² It became a custom that every year the King of Rex would leave the company of his ball, make a grand entrance into Comus’s exclusive affair, and shake hands with the other mock king in a show of solidarity and camaraderie.

According to *The Presbytere*, during Reconstruction, “general street masking came to be seen as solely the diversion of poor people and African-Americans.” The street

¹¹ *The Presbytere*, the Crescent City’s official Mardi Gras museum, considers Comus, Twelfth Night Revelers, Rex, Momus, and Proteus, among a few others, the “official” nineteenth-century krewes.

¹² Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 107.

maskers were the representatives of the “unofficial” Carnival in the eyes of the museum; they were what made the festivity a folk Carnival, the living links back to the origins of the holiday. Karen Leathem, in her dissertation highlighting the roles of elite women during nineteenth-century Carnival, explains that the unmasking of women began in the 1870s because the krewemen desired to be the only ones with the power of a secret identity. She writes that the shift in women’s Carnival ball attire from Carnavalesque masquerading to societal raiment signaled an anxiety on the part of men.¹³ Included in the social disorientation that accompanied losing the war and the manumission of slaves was a strengthened desire among white men to protect their women from the perceived dangers of interacting with blacks, especially black men. Allowing women to masquerade during a period of such social unrest conceivably could undermine the racial and class separation that white men had fought for and continued to fight to preserve. Anonymity not only meant that a person could become someone else for the purpose of archetypal exploration, but also that a person could commit crimes or licentious acts anonymously. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the old pictures of the Krewe of Comus’s costumes look remarkably similar to the white sheets worn by the KKK. After the Civil War, the official krewes enforced strict dress codes for their ball guests. Mandatory formal attire meant that not just the women had to retain their own identities, as Leathem supposes, but rather everyone in attendance except the krewe members. This double standard meant that all the mischievousness and freedom of expression that is implicit in a hidden identity became the private playground of the elite of the elite.

¹³ Leathem, *A Carnival According to Their Own Desires*, 40-42.

There had always existed a tradition among the Creoles of holding “society” or private balls, but the manner in which they did this differed greatly from the post-war krewes. For instance, the ancient Carnival ritual of discovering and crowning Le Roi et la Reine de la Fève, or the King and Queen of the Bean, meant that a large donut of a cake with a bean hidden somewhere within it would be presented to the attendees of a ball. Pieces of the confection would be cut and randomly distributed. Whomever found the bean in their piece of cake gained the title of king or queen of that year’s or week’s celebration, and they were responsible for choosing a mock royal mate to their liking, to rule the party in a fool’s fashion, and to host the next party that would set the ritual in motion once again, assuring parties throughout the season or for the next year.¹⁴ The Anglo krewes showed no such sense of randomness or playfulness when choosing who among them would be King. The lucky Lord was appointed by the Captain of the Krewe, the latter a position that did not annually change, and this tradition has existed in the old-line Krewes ever since.¹⁵ Queens were not part of the ritual equation of the official krewes until the turn of the twentieth century, and even then the woman selected to reign was chosen from among the high-society debutantes. Official krewe queens wielded no real power except to indirectly glorify the King they were attached to and serve as a proud representative of the family they belonged to.

At around the turn of the twentieth century, Storyville prostitutes started to lampoon the elite institution of appointing royalty to reign over balls by choosing queens

¹⁴ Young, *Carnival and Mardi Gras in New Orleans*, 9; The Presbytere, New Orleans.

¹⁵ Encyclopaedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture, Social Sciences, New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes, http://gltq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.html (last accessed June 6, 2006).

for their soirees from among the most popular of the leading girls of the district. In his well documented book about Storyville, Al Rose includes an article from the Mardi Gras edition of the 1906 *Sunday Sun* that reported on “The French Ball and the probable candidates for the Queen Title.”¹⁶ “French Ball” was another name for a gala hosted by prostitutes, an event essentially representing everything that the elite krewemen wanted to shield their women from. The French Balls made a mockery of the conservative and structured official balls by choosing loose women to reign over the event as Queens of the Demi-Monde, in contrast to the carefully selected unsullied debutante queens of the upper classes, and by allowing everyone to wildly dance and cavort in full costume and mask. Once again, the prostitutes aided in the preservation of the act of inverting social roles, an essential element of Carnival magic.

¹⁶ Rose, *Storyville, New Orleans*, 62.

CHAPTER 7
REVISITING THE CREOLE PAST: WOMEN COLLECTIVELY RECLAIM THE
STREETS

Reconstruction ended in 1877 and, after fourteen years under a “foreign” government, New Orleanians regained control of their local politics in a changed city. Quadroon balls and the protective placage system they offered was fading fast, and inter-racial relationships historically condoned in the city had become frowned upon in the postbellum years. Evidence of the declining social position of blacks in New Orleans is reported in the work of Alecia Long in her carefully documented case of a mulatto former slave named Adeline Stringer and her long love affair with white merchant Joe Mathis. In 1885, after living with Adeline for several years in many different locations around the city, Mathis found himself in a personal quandary. At once he felt like he could not live without Adeline, yet he also felt the societal pressure for whites to cease their centuries-old custom of living as life-partners with blacks. He wrote to Adeline, “if we live together it must be outside of New Orleans.” Long comments that, “Joe’s conundrum suggests that the informal demands and decisions made by individuals struggling to shape the city’s postbellum sexual culture laid the foundation for the legal sanctions against such relationships that would follow.”¹

Free people of color likely suffered the most by the loss of the war by the South because that meant the loss of their unique social status somewhere between white and slave. As Jim Crow laws made their way into the city, in the eyes of the whites, the

¹ Long, *The Great Southern Babylon*, 40, 42.

elegant quadroons and wealthy colored land-owners and former slave-owners became no different than any other black person. Come the twentieth century, Carnival would become a performance stage for blacks protesting the legalized discrimination whites forced on them. Numerous black marching krewes and Carnival clubs developed, starting at the beginning of the century, to function as a social release for racist standards and laws in the city. Black women dressed as baby dolls and Mardi Gras Indian queens to march through the streets, new black music began attracting even the most conservative of white ears, and strong black walking and parading krewes emerged onto the Carnival scene, the most notable and influential being the Krewe of Zulu, who eventually staged yearly community elections to decide their kings and queens of the Zulu parade.

Evidence of mounting anxiety among white men about white women's liberated behavior is found in parade themes of the early 1880s. The Krewe of Momus, the younger relatives of the Krewe of Comus, constructed a whole parade, floats and all, around ruling women of the past. Each famous woman they chose to spotlight had somehow created her own downfall. Given that the purpose of Carnival parades began as vehicles for social commentary, the underlying message depicting women as inadequate leaders is telling at a time when women are collectively reaching for more respect, independence, and rights. Another official Krewe, the Phunny Phorty Phellows, also accosted women's growing independence with the parade theme, "Ye Women Fair, a Farce." Women witnessed these insulting theatrical presentations and finally took actions to subvert the hierarchical system of the private, "official" Carnival krewes that promoted elite white male superiority. They turned the tables on the men in both the public and private spheres of Carnival in the true spirit of the celebration. It did not take eighty-plus

years after the Civil War for women to “appear alongside and equal to men in a few Mardi Gras clubs,” as Ryan asserts, instead it started happening before the end of the nineteenth century.²

Mary Ryan suggests that the few female figures behind the scenes of elite civic ceremonies in the late nineteenth century did not “lead a female assault on the public sphere,” instead she sees their roles as likely “diverting women from demanding full citizenship in their own right . . . carrying intimations of privacy and passivity that tended to disguise the interests specific to their gender position.”³ Here Ryan neglects giving credit to the influential steps women did take towards transforming their social status from under-representation in government matters to consciously seeking to expand their roles in the public eye. She also disregards many contrary examples of elite women’s explicit roles in the public ritual called Carnival. The *Presbytere* offers examples of several women employed in the late nineteenth century by the official krewes to design and build costumes and floats for the bewitchingly themed parades, all of whom must have possessed a relatively clear vision of the theatrical metamorphosis that the men wished to create as evidenced by the parades’ yearly successes. If it is true that the majority of upper-class women of the time embodied the Victorian gender stereotypes Ryan imagines women acquiesced to, then certainly Carnival would represent an opportunity for them to cast their everyday roles aside, allowing them to assume alternate personas in order to invoke the true spirit of the celebration. Role inversion, transformation, transgression, and time transcendence are all readily available

² Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 251.

³ Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 251.

possibilities conjured through participation in the Carnival, and women often understood and seized the opportunity to remodel themselves and project their desires and concerns onto the community through fantastic decorating and masquerading.

In 1896, the first known all women's Carnival organization, Les Mysterieuses, was born. These upper-class women had traditionally participated as attendants at the elite Carnival balls, and after many years of watching and waiting to dance in stuffy evening wear while the krewemen mischievously reveled in full costumes, they decided to invade the men's exclusive and secretive sphere and invert it upon them. The concept of mystery implied in their name signified to their guests that they alone would claim the right to fully conceal their identities, while all others in attendance would remain revealed. Les Mysterieuses did not parade; however, they staged a lavish ball on two consecutive leap years that reversed the gender roles that had been imposed on female guests at men's balls since the time of the Civil War. In further imitation of the men's krewes, an incognito queen was internally selected to rule the ball and pick a king of her choosing while the other krewe women kept their identities well hidden in order to cavort and misbehave without consequence. These were conscious choices that conspicuously expressed exclusionary forms of representation traditionally reserved for members of the men's krewes who were suddenly forced to dress in formal evening wear with no costume to hide behind, or else they were refused entry.⁴

The revival of women's merrymaking through masquerading in the late nineteenth-century represented a revitalization of the pagan spirit at the heart of the Carnival celebration that elite Anglo men had been unrealistically trying to possess and control

⁴ Arthur LaCour, *New Orleans Masquerade*, 199; The Presbytere, New Orleans.

since before the Civil War. Les Mysterieuses challenged men's zealously guarded hierarchy, exposed its weaknesses of unequal participation, and metaphorically sent it tumbling to the ground. The men did not abandon their elite yearly tableaux balls, but now the tradition was opened for women to simulate and fully participate in as well. In general, the last decade of the nineteenth-century signaled a new era for women to participate in the Carnival celebration in ways similar to old Creole times, but also in ways more evolved. Les Mysterieuses only lasted until 1900, but their impression endured, evinced by the many other all women's krewes that followed in their wake including The Mittens and Les Inconnues in 1901, the Mystic Maids in 1906, the Krewe of Yami in 1911, and the Krewes of Iris and Les Marionettes in 1922, and in 1942, the Krewe of Venus was the first all women's parade to roll across the city equipped with floats, a full twenty years before Ryan claims women appeared on the streets during Carnival in a position equal to men. Several groups of black women also formed their own krewes in the 1920s including the Red Circle, Young Ladies 23, and the Mystic Krewe.⁵

Especially for whites during Carnival season, the end of the nineteenth century heralded a time that emphasized mirth rather than mourning the loss of the war. White women of all classes joined the revelry on the streets and began reclaiming their right to freely express themselves in true Carnival spirit, reviving a method of release that had not openly existed for them inclusively since the antebellum era. The Merrie Bellions, "a right and jolly set of Belles and Beaux they were," paraded the streets in full pagan regalia pulling behind them a single float titled, "Ye Fantastic Lunatics of the New Isms. .

⁵ For a comprehensive listing of 100 years of Mardi Gras Krewes, see LaCour, *New Orleans Masquerade*, 1952.

. Suffragism, Aestheticism, Shakerism, Bloomerism,” a piece of social commentary intended to inform, or perhaps warn, the public of the extreme “isms” many organized groups felt compelled to proselytize.⁶ After decades of physical and psychological detachment from the people on the streets, elite Creole and Anglo women no longer subscribed to the belief that concealing their identity through masquerade transmuted them into prostitutes and *gens du commun*. Women found courage and strength en masse from joining the public work force, augmenting urban and industrial growth, and partaking of slowly expanding educational opportunities. Prostitutes continued to march on the streets in no small numbers during Carnival demanding public attention, consideration as an economic force, and changes in the laws concerning taxation of their occupation. The Presbytere claims that, as of 1910, women of many stripes were all over the streets at Carnival in full costume, traveling in groups, and often carrying whips to keep aggressive male revelers at a distance. By the turn of the twentieth-century, women of all classes and races had reclaimed the streets in full force, restoring in part the Creole Carnival past by liberating elite women from the private sphere of the celebration. This, in turn, liberated all women from the social reproach of the elite men aimed at the boisterous “unofficial” Carnival customs traditionally participated in by the whole community.

⁶ *New Orleans Daily States*, February 6, 1884.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

From its beginnings, the Carnival in New Orleans existed simultaneously as a public and a private affair celebrated by the different classes and races in a variety of ways that changed and evolved over time. The celebratory roles available to women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depended much more on their class and race than on their gender. In the historiography of New Orleans's Mardi Gras, Mikhail Bakhtin's name is often found in academic bibliographies for his interpretations concerning the social meanings behind the Carnival celebration. To Bakhtin, "The Carnavalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization which is suspended for the time of the festivity."¹ As Bakhtin did not figure in the reality of laws, political trends, and socio-cultural influences affecting people's styles and parameters of celebration, Ryan, utilizing the same quote, failed to see how closely Bakhtin's definition fit New Orleans's unique population, more often than not allowing women to fully participate "in the way of the people."²

Virtually all Carnival traditions developed and transpired in the public sphere throughout the colonial and antebellum eras. It was not until the end of the Civil War

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 255.

² Ryan, *Women in Public*, 20.

that elite women got their first taste of the private side of Carnival under the coercive direction of the newly established official Anglo Carnival krewes. The original New Orleanians had openly supported Carnival reveling in all its glory since the earliest days of the colony, and it was not until after the Louisiana Purchase that a significant Anglo-American population moved to the city and felt obliged to change the celebration to reflect their Puritan sensibilities. Elite white men, in fear of losing their newly-won powerful status in the city's society and government, took actions to change and control the lax Creole- style Carnival celebration that promoted intermixing of all races, classes, and sexes. Following the tumultuous period in the city between the late 1840s and the 1850s, the conservative northern newcomers seized the opportunity in 1857 to transform the face of Mardi Gras by utilizing a performative and message-laden civic parading style commonly seen during other holidays in nineteenth-century New Orleans and in other parts of the nation. Since the majority of women in New Orleans, regardless of race or class, lived a public lifestyle that included promenading on the streets and the levees, and frequenting the taverns and coffeehouses on a daily basis, the mid to late nineteenth-century social opprobrium associated with identity concealment and public revelry during Carnival did not create the same effect of privatization on them as it did on the elite upper-class minority of women. From the time that the ancient pagan Carnival celebrations commenced, full community participation was integral. Women could not be omitted or the essential purpose of the ritual would be lost. Since festivals of inversion are ubiquitous throughout time and space among humanity, they serve as events that equalize. Women are necessary as Carnival participants and cannot escape integrating and transforming the meanings of the events around them.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I began my undergraduate degree at the University of Florida in 1992. Originally my goal was to attain a degree in psychology to aid in the process of healing my community, myself included. Through my coursework in the field of psychology it became obvious to me that many ideas and social constructs I had learned earlier in life and believed wholeheartedly were often false, misleading, or incomplete, and with that understanding came a desire to expand my consciousness and seek out the interconnectedness between seemingly unrelated disciplines. I wanted to figure out how to make my life more real, honest, and complete, and bring that knowledge into my work with the community. Studying the psyche was not answering my spiritual questions.

In the winter of 1993, I attended my first Carnival in New Orleans. In those few days I learned more about myself than I had in all the years leading up to that experience. I suddenly knew that the intuitions I felt about the multifaceted nature of the individual and society were cornerstones in understanding life. I suddenly knew that nothing is permanent and that we are not bound by the clothes we wear, the roles we play, or the thoughts we have. I have not missed a Carnival since then, and every year I am affirmed that I can become anyone that I want to be and that no one is truly bound by their pasts or their surroundings.

I went on to earn not only a degree in psychology from the University of Florida, but also a minor in religion with an emphasis on esoteric knowledge. Over fourteen years I moved back and forth from Gainesville to New Orleans four times due to my

fascination with the Southern Louisiana city, its people, and the unique cultural heritage of the region. In 2002, I moved back to Gainesville once again to work on a master's degree, but this time in American history. I wanted to study New Orleans, but more specifically I wanted to study what makes New Orleans so unique and otherworldly. Among the many reasons I continue to find for the magic that lives in New Orleans, the Carnival is at the top of the list. The Carnival is now a continuous part of my life and my thesis is simply a natural reflection of my love for and fascination with the ancient ritual that lives on in the Crescent City.