"We Won't Bow down: " Mardi Gras Indian Performance and Cultural Mediation

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“WE WON’T BOW DOWN;”
MARDI GRAS INDIAN PERFORMANCE AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

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ABSTRACT

New Orleans, Louisiana is home to many secret Mardi Gras organizations, known as krewes, which represent both elite and working-class members of society. Acting on behalf of working-class African Americans, a group known as the Mardi Gras Indians parade through the streets of predominately black neighborhoods on Mardi Gras day. As they march, Indian men craft a performance culture that exhibits dances, costumes, and music unlike any other Carnival organization. Black Indian men use their parades to cultivate a self-defined identity, avouch agency, and enact communal bonds within a city that remains largely divided by social class. This is their story.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

New Orleans Mardi Gras is well known as a time to let loose, party hard, and embrace the pleasures of life. As early as one month prior to Mardi Gras Day, which falls on Fat Tuesday, people of all ages, races, and genders flood the streets of New Orleans, Louisiana to watch themed parades, attend private and public balls, and experience fellowship between friends and strangers. Painted and masked bodies are highly encouraged and people often masquerade as characters that deviate from their everyday lifestyles.

During the celebration, a respected group of working-class, African-American men lead visually stimulating parades through historically black neighborhoods. But this is not a typical group of Carnival performers. These men take to the streets, dancing and singing, dressed similarly to Native American Powwow dancers from the Plains region and call themselves the Mardi Gras Indians.¹

To the casual observer, these men appear to perform for sheer delight, and are merely taking part in a historical hometown celebration. In actuality, these men project an important

¹ For the purposes of this Thesis, the terms Black Indians, New Orleans Indian Maskers, Masking Indians, Black Maskers, and Black Tribesmen will be used interchangeably with Mardi Gras Indian men; in this work, masking refers to the participant’s practice of dressing-up as Native American populations.
and purposefully crafted collective identity. This results in a politically charged performance, which articulates a complex message of racial struggle, civil justice, and cultural recognition.

Mardi Gras Indian culture serves to address issues of power inequality in African American experience. The following chapters will show how Indian Maskers, in their quest to establish a sense of authority within New Orleans society serve as cultural mediators, using performance as a means to remedy their role as less influential citizens in order to establish a sense of authority within New Orleans. In the interest of mitigating this power imbalance, Black Tribesmen employ specific strategies to attain a self-defined identity and to establish agency and communal ties for the African-American men who comprise this masking practice. These strategies (or what I refer to as threads) ultimately empower Mardi Gras Indian tribal members, while simultaneously correcting the power imbalance. To rectify the societal disparity between elite and working-class people, Black Tribesmen relied on cultural hybridity and preservation, amalgamating together a variety of ethnic influences in order to solidify an African-American New Orleans identity and community. At their inception in the late Nineteenth Century, Mardi Gras Indian maskers emerged as cultural mediators by utilizing parades and battles in order to find their place within New Orleans culture; moreover, these gatherings continue to synthesize a collective identity, foster agency, and establish community in modern times.

Masquerades and carnival celebrations have had a lasting and influential affect on world history since their origination. According to historian Henri Shindler, New Orleans Mardi Gras stems from Greek and Latin roots dating back nearly 5,000 years. Ancient Romans later introduced masks and costumes into this ancient purification festival, which they named Lupercalian. Two other secular carnivals followed, Saturnalia and the Bacchanalia, and these three Roman festivals were collectively known as days when “all social and sexual order disappeared, and for two days the entire population ran riot.” During these gatherings, processions, decorated wagons, and musicians flooded the streets of Rome in much the same way that natives and tourists invade New Orleans today. Because of the taboo nature of these

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3 ibid.
three Roman carnivals, the Christian church renamed the festival “Carnelevamen,” meaning consolation of flesh, in 600 AD.4 This is how Mardi Gras Day came to be associated with its pleasurable, sensual, and promiscuous nature. It became known as a time for participants to cleanse the body and spirit of their sinful natures prior to the Lenten season. This association with Catholic practices remains true to the nature of Mardi Gras Day, which commonly functions as a period for bodily and spiritual cleansing.

In conjunction with a connection to the Greeks and Romans, other European influences exist within New Orleans. Beginning as a French colony, Louisiana was later taken over by Spain and, then, France once again prior to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.5 Even after America gained control of Louisiana, the Creole population dominated the cultural and social activities in New Orleans while the Anglo-Americans took control of economic and business matters.6 As a result, Creoles created theatres that featured music, literature, and even culinary delicacies that aligned with European standards, making New Orleans the most European city in America.7

New Orleans Mardi Gras follows a similar structure to the Parisian Carnival of the late Eighteenth and first half of the Nineteenth centuries. This Parisian model is certainly congruent with New Orleans’s celebration in regards to organization but, besides structure, the Parisian trait (that of class division) is largely evident between the elite and non-elite New Orleans krewes. Much like New Orleans people, elite society members held private-masked balls and banquets while the lower classes flooded the streets. On the last four days of the Carnival, members of the working class held public balls of their own inside taverns and appeared in masks as well. Peasants also formed informal groups that presented staged pageants throughout the city—much like Mardi Gras krewes do in New Orleans.8

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7 ibid, 486.
Mardi Gras krewes, are secret societies who normally hold private balls, create parades, and stage *tableaux vivants* during Mardi Gras season. Krewe members adhere to a variety of fantastical themes that generally present a serious or satirical point of view, and these organizations continue to stage parades through the streets of New Orleans in prelude to Lent. The original Mardi Gras elite krewes were: the Mystick Krewe of Comus (1857), the Krewe of Rex (1872), and the Knights of Momus (1874).  

When the earliest krewes formed in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, membership was limited to select society members, which excluded African Americans. 

Despite emancipation from forced slavery, black Americans in the Reconstruction Era South faced new manifestations of legalized racism through the implementation of the Black Codes and the Jim Crow Laws. This restrictive Era followed the “separate but equal mentality,” which continued to mark African Americans as inferior to the white race. For instance, one law stated that a person of color could not shake a white man’s hand; this action physically displayed the hierarchical structure of America at that time and placed black Americans in a powerless role. The effects of Jim Crow statutes were further visible in the racially segregated structure of Mardi Gras krewes. By excluding black men from membership, Whites divided themselves from Blacks, concretizing a division between white and black Mardi Gras rituals. In retaliation to this segregation, black men used the festival to create a performance krewe of their own—the Mardi Gras Indians—in order to find a place for themselves within a highly segregated community.

Today, the Mardi Gras Indians have many long-standing traditions integral to their cultural heritage. For example, tribal members spend several months prior to Mardi Gras Day preparing their costumes, music, and dance for their Mardi Gras Day parades. Black Indian rituals are notoriously secretive, but it is general knowledge that each tribe holds regular meetings, has ranking officers, pays dues, and rehearses all year for Mardi Gras festivities. Also, 

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12 ibid.
affiliates of each tribe compete with one another to see who makes the most impressive costumes, and performs the best music and dance, which explains why Black Indians aim to have highly inventive parades and performances.

Unlike other European American krewes (with names like the Mystick Krewe of Comus, the Krewe of Rex, and the Knights of Momus), the Mardi Gras Indians perform in the streets of predominately black neighborhoods, representing and honoring their inner-city communities. Black Indian men march while holding ornate hatchets or feathered arm extensions, tambourines, and other percussive instruments such as drums, beating sticks, or cardboard boxes. Black Maskers do not walk in a geometrical pattern but seemingly move throughout the space so they may interact with each other and the watchful crowd. Contrary to European-American krewes, the Black Indians avoid the more elaborate and themed floats that are present in other Mardi Gras stagings. The lack of such gigantic scenic pieces allows more people to parade alongside the Indians so community members and relatives of the masking Indians may join them as they march. This creates an all-inclusive environment different than other Mardi Gras krewes who perform separately from audience members, thereby creating a barrier between performer and watcher. In fact, Mardi Gras Indian enthusiast Michael P. Smith states, “Unlike the middle-and upper-class Social and Pleasure clubs that register for parade permits, hire bands, and allow their parades to be routed, monitored and timed by the city, the underclass Black Indians remain tribal and anonymous, perform their own music, and march… as they please.” Essentially, the Indian tradition of Mardi Gras is about “finding a place” for the African-American Black Indians through their unique parades within the larger scope of this carnival tradition.

This Thesis will document and analyze the parading culture of the Mardi Gras Indians through analysis and close readings of the historical evidence, the newer scholarly research, and video footage. In order to explain Mardi Gras Indian parades, the ancestral links of black tribesmen needs to be explored in order to confirm their influencing artistic voices. Beginning in

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Chapter Two, “Dance Hybridity: From West Africa to Congo Square,” a historical approach is taken, seeking to answer why even in today’s Black Indian parades, a West African, Caribbean, and Slave influence seeps through during performance. Starting with “Triangular Slave Trade,” Chapter Two, will examine influential aesthetics by tracing the pathways of West Africans and how they translocated to New Orleans. This chapter will also look at how movement helped preserve West African culture while maintaining ancestral links and crafting a collective identity among New Orleans slaves.

Chapter Three “Political Legislation and the Reconstruction of Black Identity” provides the cultural, social, and political context for the Reconstruction and Jim Crow Eras. Significantly, at the Civil War’s close, emancipated populations faced an identity crisis. In order to find a place for themselves during a time of segregation, Blacks adapted to a patriarchal model. They created a church that upheld the moral values and standards of African-American culture and established mutual aid organizations to help navigate and negotiate for themselves in the South. Shortly after the Reconstruction Era, black men began masking as Indians; clearly the changes among black society influenced the start of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. The origination of this tradition helped establish a sense of community as well as agency since it cultivated opportunities for Blacks to claim their own domain—a place where community and pride (not racism and hardship) ruled.

Chapter Four, “Preparing for Battle: The Organization of Mardi Gras Indian Society,” will cover the organizational structure of Black Indian tribes in order to illuminate the meaning and importance of the men’s performed identity during the parades. Since Black Indians are secretive, a synthesis of disparate sources will be utilized to help provide a more thorough account of Mardi Gras Indian rituals, customs, and preparatory methods. In this chapter are some of the folktales explaining how this New Orleans masking tradition began, which explicates some of the issues about the relationship between African- and Native-American populations. An overview of the “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows,” said to have inspired the first tribe to start parading, will be described in order to illustrate the links to these Western exhibitions. Finally, movement analysis of a Mardi Gras Indian rehearsal will be provided in order to support the claims made about the tribal identity synthesized during these gatherings.
The previous chapters will lead into the Mardi Gras Indian parades themselves. In Chapter Five “‘I’m the Prettiest Indian:’ Parading for Identity, Agency, and Community,” I will argue that members of contemporary Black Indian tribes are ultimately cultural mediators who continue historic performance traditions in order to maintain identity, agency, and community within current parades and battles. A detailed account of Black Indian gatherings based on a wide variety of source materials including video footage, interviews, and previous field research, will be given in order to define what makes these maskers cultural mediators. My conclusion will summarize the findings of this thesis as well as propose areas for further investigation.
The Mardi Gras Indians are a syncretic culture, influenced not only by accretions of specific New World phenomena but in large part, by the African, Afro-Caribbean, and African-American heritage of its members. Many characteristics of Mardi Gras Indian culture come from West Africa, as these practices made their way to America during the height of slave trade. African diasporic influences on Mardi Gras Indian culture may be seen in similarities between movement aesthetics, musical patterns, through the association between dance and spirituality, and in the conscious reverence that Black Tribesmen have for their African predecessors. Understanding the origins of the Triangular Slave Trade, the black slave culture of the West Indies, the slave society of the antebellum South, and a section of New Orleans called Congo Square will explain the cultural and aesthetic roots of Mardi Gras Indian traditions that inspire the hybridized cultural identity of maskers today.

Enslaved Africans made their first voyage to the New World in 1691 on a Dutch ship. Their arrival in America was not the first time in which Africans were forced into hard labor. In 1441, “Portuguese merchants and soldiers had dotted four thousand miles of the west coast of Africa with outposts, where they traded for slaves to export to sugar- and wine-producing islands

\[16\] Dr. Quintard Taylor, Jr., “United States History: Timeline: 1600-1700,” University of Washington: Department of History.
off the coast.” Other European nations, including the Spanish in the Sixteenth Century, followed the Portuguese; and the Dutch, Danes, French, and English began trading African slaves in the Seventeenth Century. Along with the addition of other European nations, a formal name was given to the process of slave trading and it became formally known as the Triangular Slave Trade. As indicated by its name, the Triangular Slave Trade was a three-part process. First, Europeans shipped goods from their native countries to parts of West Africa. There, Europeans forced Africans into slavery and transported them to the New World in what became known as the Middle Passage. Finally, ships returned to their European country of origin delivering “sugar, tobacco, rum, rice, cotton, and other goods” home. When aboard ships, Africans generally remained below deck, were separated by gender, and stayed chained into coffin-like spaces in which they were tightly packed together. In addition to living in close quarters, men and women had all of their clothing removed and their heads were shaved for health reasons. Disease and sickness were prevalent on slave vessels and some African passengers attempted suicide by jumping ship, seeing it as their only means of escape.

During the Middle Passage, dance (seen as exercise by the Europeans) was a part of the slaves’ daily regimes. During Triangular Slave Trade, the 40 million Africans transported across the Atlantic were forced to dance on deck under the watchful eyes of the ship’s crewmembers. A surgeon, Alexander Falconbridge, who served on a number of slave ships, wrote of these dances in his eighteenth-century book describing what occurred on these vessels. One of his entries stated that dancing was mandated aboard ship in order to keep the slaves in shape so that


21 Zita Allen, “From Slave Ships to Center Stage,” *Free to Dance: Behind the Dance*. 
when they were up for sale, they would be more desirable.\textsuperscript{22} Slaves who did not “move with agility” were flogged on the spot by a crewmember holding a “cat-o’-nine-tails;” so, in actuality, dancing became a means of survival.\textsuperscript{23} Dance historian Lynne Fauley Emery further describes the movement performed on slave vessels in her book \textit{Black Dance: From 1619 to Today}:

\begin{quote}
The African was forced to dance in bondage… He danced because the white ruler wanted his stock in good condition… he danced in answer to the whip. He danced for survival. The Africans danced in a ring; they danced in their shackles; they jumped up and rattled their chains; they writhed and twisted in “disgusting and indecent attitudes.” This they did to the accompaniment of a drum…\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

The concept of movement as a means of survival followed enslaved Africans into the New World and they continued to dance on plantations in the Americas. Perhaps more importantly movement preserved fragments of their West African culture, keeping slaves linked to their native traditions while also creating a shared Pan-African identity among people who came from many distinct African cultures with mutually unintelligible languages.

Many West Africans were exported from Africa to the West Indies to be seasoned before later being transported to the continental United States, where the “seasoned” slave produced more market-profit for sellers. Once in the West Indies, sugar plantation owners usually purchased slaves. Typically, enslaved men, women, and children worked from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, performing a variety of harvesting and agricultural tasks, housework, and miscellaneous skilled jobs such as carpentry or pottery.\textsuperscript{25} “The principles and structure of work organization on a plantation created a distinct hierarchical structure not just between white and black but between the house slaves, the field slaves, and the artisan.”\textsuperscript{26} Despite the differences between a


\textsuperscript{23} ibid.


\textsuperscript{25} Bristol and Transatlantic Slavery, “Women and men on the Plantations,” Port Cities Bristol: City Museum and Gallery.

slaves’ working rank, beginning in 1816 and ending in 1832, enslaved populations united and began a series of major revolts against slave owners that over time gained them their freedom.27

Residence in the West Indies had a profound affect on slaves who would eventually make their way to the United States. Caribbean demographics resulted in crucial interactions between three differing cultures: West African, indigenous Caribbean, and European.28 While in the West Indies, Afro-Caribbean populations and their decedents continued to practice cultural traditions from their African homeland, including dance. As a non-verbal form dance played a central role in the development of a Pan-African identity, which served to establish a sense of community and, in many cases, became essential for survival. Several types of dances were performed in the West Indies, and many of them reflected characteristics identified by noted African scholar Robert Farris Thompson as “Africanist Aesthetics.” These included: “the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; the songs and dances of derision; the “get down”… the Aesthetic of the Cool.”29 By integrating West African movement stylings into Afro-Caribbean dances, slaves actually preserved something of their native past and kept African culture alive in the West Indies. In doing so, Afro-Caribbean dancers also created new forms of movement by merging their former roots with New World traditions.

These dances and music resonated with a percussive dominance, and Afro-Caribbean populations emphasized rhythmic components in their dances, “and movement was frequently controlled by percussion instruments, usually the drums.”30 This has been documented by illustrations and written accounts from the late Eighteenth Century. In most staple dances (like the Calenda, the Chica, the Bamboula, and the Juba) slaves tapped their heels and feet, shimmied their shoulders and chests, and shuffled and stamped their feet; each of these movements


28 For the purposes of this chapter, I will use the term Afro-Caribbean to describe this blending of cultures amongst enslaved populations in the West Indies.


emphasized the polyrhythmic nature of the music as the movers recapitulated the pulsating cues through bodily gestures. In time, this emphasis on percussive aesthetics and multimeters was reflected in the relationship between drummers and dancers because they worked together to create the multi-rhythms of the dancing.

In a lithograph from the 1770s, a drummer sits among the dancers, watching them as he plays. This is one of the many illustrations that suggest the presence of Thompson’s Africanist characteristic of apart playing and dancing. According to Thompson:

… musicians move the whole trunk and head, whether seated or standing, in response to the music. West African musicians dance their own music. They play “apart” in the sense that each is often intent upon the production of his own contribution to a polymetric whole… Apart dancing is not correlated with the apart playing of instruments in the sense of absence of body contact. The unity, which the musicians and dancers share, seems, rather, to constitute a constellation of solo and chorus performances. The master drummer (or drummers) plays alone, intent upon improvisation; the master dancer (or dancers), intent upon following or challenging these improvisations, also dances alone. And the drum chorus and the dancing chorus interact by repetitive patterns, which means that a certain amount of performing together balances the apartness. But the critical fact seems to be this: West Africans perform music and dance apart the better to ensure a dialog between movement and sound.

This definition is closely related to Thompson’s next aesthetic, call-and-response. The dancers and drummers interact through musical dialogue with one another. When a drummer plays, he may “call” to the dancer, who in turn “responds” by mirroring a similar or more complex rhythm.

More importantly, the dialogue between drummers and dancers (established through apart playing and dancing and call-and-response) allows each to strengthen communal ties, which in turn builds communal bonds between performers. This was effective in structuring bonds of community among slaves in the New World who came from disparate cultural groups. This community building through performance largely occurred because slaves had to dialogue

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31 ibid, 23-29.
with one another through song and dance. Pictures of West Indies slave dances from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Centuries show men, women, and children dancing together in pairs or in circular groups. 34 Dancers typically formed circles, wherein they took turns dancing in pairs in the middle. 35 In moving together, the West Indian slaves improved verbal communication between each other since they chose to convene in places where Whites were not found lurking. Dance gatherings assisted slaves in organizing revolts since they could strategize and divulge plans of rebellion within the protection of group performance.

The West African aesthetics, as identified by Thompson, would eventually make their way to the continental United States as slaves were relocated prior to the end of Slave Trade in 1807. 36 In fact three West Indian slave dances—the Chica, the Bamboula, and the Juba—have been traced directly from the West Indies to New Orleans. Moreover, numerous American slave dances have similarities to other West African and Caribbean movement traditions. During slave trade, many Africans were taken to the West Indian islands for a period of “seasoning” before being sent to the continental America. Historian John Hope Franklin explains that the slave, “… was regarded as seasoned within three or four years and was viewed by mainland planters as much more desirable than the raw Negroes fresh from the wilds of Africa.” 37 Due to the port location of New Orleans, it was a prime place for slave trading, which welcomed slaves from Africa and the Caribbean, and from the Mississippi Delta. 38 Because of the presence of so many distinct ethnicities, many voices and traditions blended together. The city of New Orleans played a seminal role in cultivating a culture that would help define African Americans for generations to come.

34 Jerome S. Handler & Michael L. Tulte, Jr, “Dance, Dominica, West Indies, 1770s,” University of Virginia.


38 Jazz: The Mississippi River and Its Role in the Development of Jazz, “The Slave Trade,” Tulane University.
In the antebellum South, the typical slave’s life was filled with miscellaneous tasks “from sun up to sun down.”\(^{39}\) The majority of Southern slaves in the Nineteenth Century worked on cotton plantations that housed 50 or fewer slaves and who “worked in the fields, workshops, ports, and households of America.”\(^{40}\) When the workday was done, plantation slaves often held dances or would obtain written “ patterroller” (patrols) permissions to travel from one plantation to another to dance with friends and family at neighboring plantations.\(^{41}\) Enslaved Americans found joy in movement and it became a recreational practice. Throughout the tenure of slavery in America, slave owners perpetually attempted to prevent mass gatherings and “pagan” worship through movement by issuing a series of restrictions.\(^{42}\) In 1739 colonial laws in South Carolina banned the use of large drums. Percussions did not stop, however, but merely transferred to smaller means—beating sticks, hitting pots and pans, stamping feet, clapping hands and playing smaller tambourines, all of which ensured no rules were broken and the beat kept on. Other instruments that accompanied plantation dances were the “banjo, fiddle, quills, tambourine, and bones,” indicating mixtures of African and European influences on slave culture by melding European instruments (like the violin) with more percussive sounds.\(^{43}\) Dancing on plantations served other purposes beyond leisure. Dancing could be spiritual, celebratory or a form of mourning, it could be competitive or could be used as entertainment for the masters.

The importance of slave dancing in plantation life was to bring families and others together, emphasizing the necessity of community and companionship in the face of hard labor. Dances like the Ring Shout, for example, called upon ancestral support. Created in America, as a pan-African/African-American form, it consisted of a circle dance with gestures towards


\(^{42}\) Wendy James, “Reforming the Circle of the Social History of a Vernacular African Dance Form,” in *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2000), 143.

heaven and earth. Because the Baptist Church placed a ban on drumming and dancing, Ring Shouters had to find ways around anti-dance rules.\textsuperscript{44} As mandated by Baptist leaders, any movement that required crossing the legs was deemed “dancing.” In response, enslaved Americans developed a shuffling pattern where one foot never crossed in front of the other. They also clapped their hands, hit wooden walking sticks upon the floor (wood or packed earth) and stomped their feet instead of using drums. This created percussive sounds without breaking previous edicts. By bending the rules the Ring Shout became not only a religious movement, but also a transgressive dance of resistance against white society, which provided the enslaved with a sense of triumph over those who denied them freedom. Seemingly, this dance was a prayer for the ancestral spirits that encouraged slaves to keep on. While dancing the Ring Shout, Blacks in the antebellum South remembered that those who came before had also endured suffering and, therefore, movement became the method through which to renew strength and bind communities together.

Through oppression and segregation, the dance aesthetics of slaves in the Southern United States remained similar to those of West Africa. They relied heavily on percussive movements and music, evident through their clapping or patting (hamboning) patterns, soft-shoe steps and stamping that remained older common motional and percussive themes. Many dances maintained a call-and-response pattern, and the West African characteristic in the grounded aesthetic, referred to by Thompson as the “get down” quality, where the dancers rarely lifted their feet off of the ground, maintaining a spiritual and physical connection to Mother Earth. Circular shapes remained intact; this inscribes the past, present, and future generations together, a commonality shared with West African dancing.

In New Orleans by 1817 all slave dances were restricted to Sundays, the slaves’ one day off. Dances had to take place prior to sundown and were only allowed in Congo Square.\textsuperscript{45} Congo Square, located in what is now known as Armstrong Park, marked the spot where a “microcosm


\textsuperscript{45} Wendy James, “Reforming the Circle of the Social History of a Vernacular African Dance Form,” in \textit{Journal of African Cultural Studies} 13, no. 1 (2000), 144.
of African culture” erupted through song and dance. Used by differing cultures, the Native American and Creole populations used the space to play a ball game called racquette; in the summer months, a circus from Havana would set up tents and perform; and at “various points in time, bullfights, cockfights, and dogfights were also held” in the Square. Granted a day of freedom on Sundays, slaves would gather in Congo Square in the morning, a time and place where there was relatively little to no supervision. Exactly when dancing started in Congo Square remains unknown, but it is speculated that movement gatherings lasted into the 1880s. However, in 1819, a construction supervisor named Benjamin Henry Latrobe observed Congo Square and described an encounter in his journal on February 21.

This long dissertation has been suggested by my accidentally stumbling upon the assembly of negroes which I am told every Sunday afternoon meets on the Common in the rear of the city. My object was to take a walk … In going up St. Peters Street & approaching the common I heard a most extraordinary noise, which I supposed to proceed from some horse mills, the horses trampling on a wooden floor. I found, however, on emerging from the houses onto the Common, that it proceeded from a crowd of 5 or 600 persons assembled in an open space or public square. I went to the spot & crowded near enough to see the performance. All those who were engaged in the business seemed to be blacks… They were formed into circular groups [sic] in the midst of four of which, which I examined (but there were more of them), was a ring, the largest not 10 feet in diameter. In the first were two women dancing. They held each a coarse handkerchief extended by the corners in their hands, & set to each other in a miserably dull & slow figure, hardly moving their feet or bodies. The music consisted of two drums and a stringed instrument… The women squallled out a burthen to the playing at intervals,

46 Jazz: The Mississippi River and its Role in the Development of Jazz, “The Slave Trade,” Tulane University.


consisting of two notes, as the negroes, working in our cities, respond to the song of the leader. Most of the circles contained by the same sort of dancers. One was larger, in which a ring of a dozen women walked, by way of dancing, round the music in the center… I have never seen anything more brutally savage, and at the same time dull & stupid, than this whole exhibition… There was not the least disorder among the crowd, nor do I learn on enquiry, that these weekly meetings of the negroes have ever produced any mischief.  

Significantly, the dancers described in Congo Square were recreating movement that derived from West African and Caribbean practices. One of Latrobe’s descriptions confirms that the Chica dance from the West Indies was performed in this Square. Other dances such as the Bamboula, the Calenda, the Babouille, the Cata, the Counjaille, the Voudou, and the Congo certainly took place. In regard to aesthetics, the steps performed in Congo Square were seen as “savage” (meaning undisciplined by patterns and figures) and were displeasing to white society. Cited by researcher Lyle Saxon, one spectator with the surname Flugel recorded an observation of this Square on April 11, 1817:

Later I witnessed a negro dance. Their postures and movements somewhat resembled those of monkeys. One might, with a little imagination, take them for a group of baboons. Yet as these poor wretches are entirely ignorant of anything like civilization (for their masters withhold everything from them that in the least might add to the cultivation of their minds), one must not be surprised at their actions. The recreation is at least natural and they are free in comparison with those poor wretches, the slaves of their passions.

Anglo-American men and women found the slave dances at Congo Square disturbing because of the angularity (which was seen as awkward) and were so different from their own monitored movement traditions. Therefore the Africans and their descendents were viewed as inferior to Whites. Generally, the women’s feet rarely bounced upward and their bodies moved in undulating waves; men took to the air and danced in “wild,” athletic, almost acrobatic movements. Certainly, the weighted quality so present in West African and Caribbean dancing continued in Congo Square. Instruments such as the “various types of drums, a square drum, the 


52 ibid, 157-164.

calabash or gourd rattle, the triangle, an animal jawbone scraped by a stick or metal object, and quills,” illustrate the percussiveness in the music. And, the dancing, true to both African and Caribbean Slave cultures, mimicked this percussive beat. The “dances” of enslaved peoples were so intriguing that it became a major tourist spot and, in 1822, a guide to the city of New Orleans called it “Circus Square.”\(^{54}\) With the end of Congo Square (it is unknown exactly when but historians speculate that it ended sometime in the 1880s) came the beginning of other African-American traditions.

Concurrently, the Mardi Gras Indians began some time in the 1880s. The end of dances at Congo Square created a void in the African-American community and the start of the Black Indian tradition—circa 1885—was a perfect time in which African-American New Orleans men could preserve the performance aesthetics of their forefathers. Even in today’s Mardi Gras Indian parades, West African and Caribbean Slave dance stylings are present. New Orleans Indian men shuffle, feet close to the ground, maintaining a responsive relationship to musicians by mimicking their percussive rhythms through movement, while they also seek to build community through dancing. Movement analysis of a Mardi Gras Indian rehearsal, parade, and battle will be described in Chapters Four and Five, clarifying some of the connections to West Africa and the West Indies in modern times.

Once the Civil War ended, Black Americans could finally live freely, a kind of life that previously was only a dream. Signed on New Years Day in 1863 by President Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation became the central focus of the War.\(^{55}\) The document stated that, “… all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”\(^{56}\) This text caused much debate among Americans and was somewhat limited in that it only affected enslaved people who lived in states that seceded from the Union. Even


though Lincoln’s words did not end the practice of slavery, they had many benefits. They encouraged and inspired many Americans to imagine a world where slaves would be free, and with each Union victory, the words of the Proclamation became more real. It also allowed black Americans to join Union forces, and almost 200,000 African-American soldiers fought, enabling “the liberated to become liberators.”

Allowing Blacks to live as freedmen and freedwomen seemed inconceivable to the Confederacy and, even after the War’s conclusion, the Southern states continued to fight for white supremacy despite former slaves having received their freedom. During a short span of time, known as the Reconstruction Era, the foundations for the emergence of a distinctive African-American Southern culture evolved and inspired the Mardi Gras Indian tradition.

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CHAPTER THREE

POLITICAL LEGISLATION AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY

The Mardi Gras Indian tradition began shortly after the Reconstruction Era, during a period when the American South faced monumental changes following the Union’s victory and the abolishment of slavery. Americans from both the Northern and Southern states rebuilt cities, societies, and families, which were torn apart during the Civil War. As white society made changes to their everyday lives, formerly enslaved Americans began to assert themselves within Southern culture by creating a distinctive sense of community.

Ending on April 9th, 1865, the Civil War remains the bloodiest battle in American history. Prior to the 1960s, many historians viewed Reconstruction as a time for “negro incapacitation” in which black Americans achieved little progress and the North had financial hold over the South. 58 However, in the 1960s, the old view of Reconstruction shifted, and this time period became known as, “…a tragic era of misgovernment…”59 Contrary to older historical accounts, Reconstruction began to be viewed as a time of social and political progress for African Americans. The only tragedy for Blacks was that changes in social and political structures did not go far enough. Eric Foner writes that the changes in the South were superficial, and by 1879,

59 ibid.
most scholars agreed that the twelve post-war years were “essentially non-revolutionary” and ultra-conservative.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the lack of lasting and meaningful shifts in the political structures in governance in the Southern states, African Americans became active agents and found ways of improving their lifestyles.

Although slaves were now free, Whites found ways to maintain dominance over black men and women with the institutionalization of the “Black Codes” and “Jim Crow” Laws. In time, Blacks strengthened intra-cultural ties in order to fortify a community in which they could take pride and establish some control over their lives despite harsh legal restrictions. The Mardi Gras Indians are just one example of how an emancipated people gained autonomy within a predominately European-American culture. Several factors contributed to the emergence of a recognizable African-American ethos during Reconstruction. Familial structures within black communities shifted and affected communal ties among and within their neighborhoods. Also, the institution of the black American church became more firmly reinforced during Reconstruction, supplying stimulation and support to many other African-American organizations. In addition, community Benevolent Societies were established to assist people with insurance, funeral costs, living and health assistance, as well as crucial Social Clubs, empowering a formerly enslaved group to begin to live independently. Institutions fostered communal bonds and provided leadership opportunities. According to Reconstructionist Eric Foner:

\begin{quote}
…underpinning the specific aspirations lay a broader theme: a desire for independence from white control, for autonomy both as individuals and as members of a community being transformed by emancipation. Before the war, free blacks had created churches, schools, and mutual benefit societies, while slaves had forged a culture centered on the family and church. With freedom, these institutions were consolidated, expanded, and liberated from white supervision, and new ones—particularly political organizations—joined them as focal points of black life…\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

Following the behavior of their emancipated predecessors of color, former slaves discovered ways to consolidate and restructure black culture to reflect African-American values: Family

\textsuperscript{60} ibid, xiv.
\textsuperscript{61} ibid, 36.
structures, the churches, and black organizations cemented and communicated their vision of independence.

Strong family ties existed under slavery but, often, kinship structures were disrupted since families were habitually separated, housed with multiple other slave families, and all too frequently suffered early deaths. Under the umbrella of Reconstruction, however, families sought to reunite with lost kin. Family groups restructured, now living together instead of being combined with other families under one roof. Black women adhered to the nineteenth-century’s “cult of domesticity,” acting as mothers while participating in the traditional domestic pursuits prohibited to them during slave times. Also, men (for a time) became the sole breadwinners of the family; they were recognized by the Freedmen’s Bureau as the “head of house”; they were given land under the Bureau’s Act of 1865 and acted as delegates to black organizations. Moreover, after 1867, black men could serve on juries, vote, hold political office, and become leaders within the Republican Party—privileges not extended to black women. These developments in male societal roles demonstrate the gravitation towards normative patriarchal family structures during Reconstruction. This is contrary to their former slave societies. Under those social restraints, a more equal balance of power had to exist between men and women in order for the family and children to survive.

Not all black women welcomed this new imbalance of power, although this shift in family structure did provide some degree of independence from white control. “[B]lack men and women,” concludes scholar Leon F. Litwack, “found themselves in a better position to defend their marital fidelity, to maintain their family ties, and to control their own children. That in itself endured an enhanced dignity and pride as a family that [in] slavery has so often compromised.” Conforming to a patriarchal model provided black Americans with a sense of self-rule and some degree of power, at least over the fate of their families. Though it may seem that Blacks lost independence by adhering to a white patriarchal familial structure it, in fact,

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63 ibid, 87.
created agency because they were able to conform to family practices that already meshed with black American ideals.

The implementation of such a clear structure also organized the relationship of community members to each other. The patriarchal structure blended into freed culture, creating African-American communities where men acted as the primary working force and as societal leaders. The role the church played in conjoining black communities during Reconstruction exemplifies how a more distinctive free black culture began to emerge. Isolation from white churches fired the determination of black Americans to find their own independent traditions, and create distinctive church institutions.\textsuperscript{65} Black churches became more than places of worship, and were community centers where restrictions by white Americans had little effect. African-American churches were “the incubator[s] behind schools, business enterprises, charity, politics, and recreation.”\textsuperscript{66} Recreational activities (like church picnics) were often held, enhancing social ties between members; as well, the church encouraged communally acceptable morals, mediated family disputes, and even disciplined churchgoers for illicit behavioral choices.\textsuperscript{67} In this way, pastors and other church representatives became community leaders and mandated the ideals to which the black community would aspire. The church was the crucible of cultural values for black communities, reinforcing ways of living that were defining and unique to them as African-Americans. Black churches played a pivotal and proud role in African-American identity for many generations.

The unifying role the black church achieved is similar to the role that social organizations played in African-American communities. Some benevolent societies existed prior to Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction they became the motivating forces behind the Second Great Awakening (which lasted from 1790-1840) since they were motivated by new religious ideas that promoted charitable acts and altruism as the path to individual and societal


\textsuperscript{66} Fredrick C. Harris, “Black Churches and Civic Traditions: Outreach, Activism, and the Politics of Public Funding of Faith-Based Ministries,” Trinity College, 142.

perfection. But these organizations, which sought to help communities, became most popular after emancipation. Categorized as benevolent societies, fraternal organizations, or mutual-aid groups, in the early years of Reconstruction, “Blacks created literally thousands of such organizations; a partial list includes burial societies, debating clubs, Masonic lodges, fire companies, drama societies, trade associations, temperance clubs, and equal rights leagues.”

69 Meant to grant aid, the other tacit and perhaps main purpose of these groups was to cement fellowship and provide help to people when they were sick or in need of financial assistance. Ultimately, however, benevolent organizations helped African Americans establish discrete communities within a segregated society and empowered them to use their cultural assets for the good of their own people.

Even under slavery, many considered how their lives would change with freedom. Living freely did not come easily for all former slaves: They had never been given complete authority over their own lives and were ill equipped to make it in these new free circumstances. Historian Leon F. Litwack confirms this in his Pulitzer Prize winning book entitled Been in the Storm So Long: “But when it came to acting out these feelings [dreams of living freely],” states Litwack, “the old fears and insecurities and the still pervasive dependency on their former owners would first have to be surmounted.”

Still, the fact remains that white populations held more power than African Americans. Freedom did not mean racial equality. Blacks still faced many restrictions that were institutionalized and upheld by the Black Codes of 1865 and 1866, which set the stage for the Jim Crow Laws. When the states united after the Civil War, each one was able to put in place a series of statutes known as the “Black Codes” that enforced rules within that particular territory. Varying in severity, one code in Louisiana stated that Blacks

68 Claude F. Jacobs, “Benevolent Societies of New Orleans Blacks During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 29, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 22.


70 Claude F. Jacobs, “Benevolent Societies of New Orleans Blacks During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association 29, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 24.

could not rent or own homes “if not already in possession by January 1;” another mandated that African Americans were restricted from selling goods within town limits unless they received approval from their employers or the mayor.73

Despite these draconian rules, African Americans were not completely ignored by the National Government during the Reconstruction Era. To help protect them, the Freedmen’s Bureau was established in 1865, and given the mandate to spearhead the social and cultural reconstruction necessary to “bring freed people to full citizenship.”74 Though this Bureau advocated for Blacks at the national level, it was very limited in its ability to make long-lasting changes. After only a brief two years, the Bureau’s power was cut back to address just black educational reform. It was dismantled entirely in 1872. By 1876, Reconstruction was coming to an end, and the government “largely abandoned African Americans, and the era of Jim Crow was just beginning.”75

Starting in 1877 and lasting until the mid-1960s, the Jim Crow Era “was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in the Southern states.”76 Between 1880 and 1890, a series of new laws and constitutional provisions was “aimed at the subjugation of African Americans and the dominance of the political and economic, white elite within the Democratic Party.”77 Although Blacks were free Americans, this alteration by the Jim Crow Laws reinstituted and recognized segregation on a national level and allowed for white supremacy, maintaining a country in which African Americans had little power. Yet black populations found ways to resist the rulings of these statutes. “Publicity, legal challenges, bearing witness, self-help and advocacy groups, music, literature, and religion” became common avenues of resistance, but many African Americans faced violent consequences or death as a

74 The Freedmen’s Bureau, 1865-1872, “Background,” The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.
76 David Pilgrim, “What Was Jim Crow?” Ferris State University.
result of their retaliation. Rationally, the men who comprised the first Mardi Gras Indian tribes used their gatherings as a way to resist the rulings of the Jim Crow Era so that they could maintain control over themselves and their cultural expressions.

Mirroring the racial separation that Emancipation, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow Laws inspired, Mardi Gras celebrations were racially segregated. The first Black Mardi Gras traditions began in approximately 1823 in African-American sections of town. However, black krewes did not become a part of New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations until the late Nineteenth Century. The later creation of distinct black Mardi Gras groups reflected the cultural and historical trends of that time. Reid Mitchell discusses this reflection of historical trends in his book *All on Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*:

In the 1800s, Carnival represented the conflict between Creoles and Americans; in the 1850s it represented the political violence associated with nativism; before the First World War, it reflected the tensions produced by the rigidity of constitutionally mandated Jim Crow; in the Vietnam War era, Carnival assimilated the confrontation between hippies and straights. All of these conflicts were grounded in social reality. Carnival had little to do with causing them, a lot to do with displaying them.

The Reconstruction Era laid the foundation for segregation, and Mardi Gras festivities replicated this racial division. Doing so led to the creation of black Mardi Gras krewes—one of which was the Mardi Gras Indians.

The formation of Black Indian tribes was influenced by the historical and cultural factors that had impact on the community members. Originally Mardi Gras Indian gatherings were violent displays. Like other oppressed people “the injustices done to them are often internalized” and “violence is one manifestation” of how they dealt with this struggle. In fact, violence among tribal members remained a part of Mardi Gras Indian gatherings until the 1980s, when Black Indian leaders sought to reconcile differences among the tribes by leading competitive *

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mock battles.\textsuperscript{81} Using their parades and battles as a way to establish a sense of agency within a segregated New Orleans, the Mardi Gras Indian performances provided African-American men methods of cultivating identity through performance; this distinction emerges when examining the folklore surrounding Mardi Gras Indian tribes and their organizational structure.

\textsuperscript{81} ibid, 4.
Folk artists at heart, the Mardi Gras Indians are “self-taught, non-institution sponsored, seemingly craft-centered artisans” who reflect their group’s traditions through artistic visualizations. Rarely receiving professional training in dance, music, or costume making, Indian Maskers learn from experience, and from fellow tribal members, establishing a tradition that is preserved through intertribal dialogue. Tribesmen represent the members of inner-city New Orleans communities, a place where many Black Indians have lived since infancy. Given that each gang’s parades are exclusively performed in these parts of town, their parading spectacles are produced primarily for, and reflect the culture of, working-class Blacks in New Orleans, enhancing residents’ belief in their community. For these reasons, Indian Maskers are societal leaders who empower those who are not provided with ample opportunities for public display and position. This means that New Orleans Indians are homegrown heroes, providing working class people with a sense of value.

Indeed, historic and current Black Indian parades provide opportunities for New Orleans men to become cultural mediators within inner-city neighborhoods as well provide them with a

chance to reach out to their community members. On display during Mardi Gras festivities, Indian Maskers spend several months preparing for their celebrations. Looking into Mardi Gras Indian club structure explains not only how maskers devise their performances but also how they synthesize their unique identity, create agency, and develop a sense of community while parading as Indians. Since the Mardi Gras Indians are a private organization that keeps many of their traditions a secret to the general public, the history of their tribes is obscure. Accordingly, a synthesis of information from multiple sources will be used in order to provide as thorough an account as possible. This chapter will present a compendium of information regarding the multicultural and folkloric influences on Mardi Gras Indian traditions, a brief overview of tribal structure, and a description of how the Black Indians prepare for their parades.

In New Orleans, numerous African Americans are of African, Native-American, and European descent. In 1682, when French settlers first made contact in New Orleans, many indigenous tribes existed in Louisiana; however, the six most notable groups were the Attakapa, the Caddo, the Tunica, the Natchez, the Muskhoegan, and the Chitimacha. Many enslaved people joined forces with Native-American populations for a myriad of reasons. The most common was to correct “the imbalance of sex ratios,” meaning often the male African descendants would procreate with Native peoples in order to preserve family lines. Also, slaves escaped on routes used by Native Americans, who sometimes took the slave runaways into their communities and kept them safe by calling them their “slaves.” Although indigenous populations used the term “slave,” most African people were handled more respectfully than slaves housed by European Americans. Some Native Americans used the word “slave” as a means of protection. In calling African descendants by this name, Native Americans could claim

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83. During the remainder of this Thesis, the terms “gang” or “group” will be used interchangeably with “tribe,” as both scholars and Black Indians themselves use these terms to name the cohesive structure of Mardi Gras Indian tribes.


the Blacks as property, making it much more difficult for former owners to claim an escapee as their property and return them to work on their plantations.\(^\text{86}\)

Most significantly though, Native and African Americans shared a common bond of oppression and societal alienation. Historian Maurice Martinez points out that the link of the Mardi Gras Indians to Native populations was strongest in 1724, after Rulers of Colonial New Orleans wrote the earliest Black Codes. In response to fear of servile uprisings, the Black Codes edicts restricted the rights of slaves as well as protected them from wrongful mistreatment by their owners.\(^\text{87}\) Martinez states in his film on the Mardi Gras Indians, “Because of the restrictions imposed by the Black Code, the Blacks shared a common bond with the American Indian. A large number of African slaves escaped to live with Indian tribes. Many of the Black Indians of today are their descendents.”\(^\text{88}\) Here, Martinez concludes that the interaction between enslaved Africans and Native Americans during the time of colonial New Orleans led to a cultural blending between two differing populations. This mixed tradition is seen through the Mardi Gras Indians’ performances since the dance, music, and costumes maintain ties to both ethnicities. Likely, the Black Indians of New Orleans are representative of this bloodline to Native-American populations during a historic time when many Louisiana slaves would not have survived without the help of indigenous people. Martinez concludes that this is why New Orleans Indians mask as, and incorporate, Native-American traditions—because many black maskers today seek to commemorate their indigenous heritage.

While Native Americans and the Mardi Gras Indians endured their own historical problems, the adoption of an Indian identity by African-American New Orleanian men reveals shared values and experiences between these two cultural groups. For example, each societal sect felt divested of the freedom to engage in the actions of European Americans. The tribal members from both races were ordered by white leaders to conduct themselves in a particular manner, stripping them of their distinctive cultural identities in America. Scholar Jacqueline

\(^\text{86}\) ibid, 5.


Shea Murphy described one way that white society intervened with the indigenous American lifestyle.

As a central tenet of their Indian policies, U.S and Canadian officials were seeking to economize and—in a shift from outright warfare, which was seen as too expensive—instead “kill the Indian in” Native people by disciplining Native bodies through Western institutions. These included literary and boarding school education; Christianity, marriage, patriarchy, and control of sexuality; medicine and adherence to the doctrines of private property; and imprisonment.\(^89\)

Here, Murphy outlines how the cultural heritage of indigenous populations was systematically diminished by forced assimilation into European-American ways of living. As stated previously, black Americans also suffered under the Black Code and the Jim Crow Laws that similarly forbade them from living freely.\(^90\) Unmistakably, both populations experienced societal rejection, effectively making the connections to Native populations, through the Mardi Gras Indians, inevitable and understandable practices.

In addition to Native-American influences, historians speculate about other scenarios concerning how the New Orleans Indian tradition began. One such scenario states that the first tribesmen dressed and named themselves after Native Americans in order to pay tribute to indigenous inhabitants for their help during slavery.\(^91\) Another interesting scenario asserts that the Mardi Gras Indians emerged as a response to the city’s acknowledgement of segregation, beginning in 1874, which occurred as a result of the World’s Fair and Cotton Centennial Exposition held in New Orleans from 1884-1885.\(^92\)

One of the most popular exhibitions at the Centennial was William F. Cody’s “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show,” whose interpretation of “the Indian” is postulated as acting as the

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catalyst for the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. This show featured indigenous Plains Indians as the Native-American characters, who were both glamorized and demonized. This outdoor extravaganza was a highly theatricalized spectacle seen by hundreds-of-thousands of visitors. Most likely, it was the combination of all of the probable scenarios that fueled the Mardi Gras Indian conventions. However, in the similarities in costumes and music, the “Wild West Show’s” influence still echoes in the Mardi Gras Indians.

The entrepreneur William F. Cody made American entertainment history in 1883. He initiated “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows,” which featured him in the title role. These outdoor exhibitions depicted the heroic plights of Buffalo Bill, a fictitious, stereotypical frontiersman, who rescued other characters from dangerous encounters with “bonafide” Native Americans. Horses and real armory brought the shows to life, and staged fights set in Western-themed landscapes thrilled live audiences who witnessed American mythologies brought to life. Cody’s shows were the first of their kind and sought to project an “authentic” image of the American West. To the contrary, his stagings merely mimicked popularized narratives and discourses about Cowboy-versus-Indian relationships, fabricating and reinforcing more stereotypical Western aesthetics. Though this storyline pleased paying customers, it detracted from the authenticity of the Plains Indian culture through its performative realities. In Cody’s stagings, the role of Indian was that of an enemy to the noble Buffalo Bill character. This relationship asserted, underscored, and brought to life the show’s promotional posters, displaying dramatic visions of Native American battles and raids. Historian Joy S. Kasson states, “In many of the posters, American Indians were shown as villains, advertising the melodramatic portions of the show such as the attack on the settler’s cabin, the ambush of the Deadwood stagecoach, and the re-enactments of battles from the Indian wars.”93 The performative implementation of such divisive images disseminated a negative view of Indians among the mainly white audiences and, as a result, viewers continued to imagine indigenous populations as primitive violent people who sought to destroy white civilization. In addition, Indian performers who quit the shows explained that they were encouraged by management “to drink, gamble, and womanize.”94

94 ibid, 63.
such activities and by depicting them on stage as mindless barbarians, the management sought to convince non-Indian populations that Native-American people were uncivilized and untamable. In portraying indigenous performers as barbaric, the Buffalo Bill’s managers actually cultivated a derogatory stereotype of Native American culture, both nationally and internationally. Certainly Native-American performers who were hired by Cody were playing into these preconceptions, thereby fabricating a cultural identity that fit the expectations of white audiences, while concurrently detracting from any sense of indigenous autonomy.

Conclusively, Buffalos Bill’s shows further isolated Native-American performers from mainstream European-American society. In much the same way, African Americans were segregated from Whites during the Reconstruction Era South. Due to these circumstantial similarities in their placement in society, the originators of the Black Indian tradition felt empathy with the Plains performers as fellow societal outcasts. By emphasizing this connection, black New Orleanians men created a symbolic—as well as an actual—alliance with Native-American culture, strengthening the bonds between these marginalized groups.

The founders of the Mardi Gras Indians attended a touring performance of “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show” when it wintered in the city from 1884-1885; shortly afterwards, they formed “tribes” and then made costumes and composed music that reflected what they saw in these Western-themed spectacles. Other gangs soon followed and took names such as: the Wild Squat Toulas, the Red, White, and Blues and the Chickasaws.

It is commonly thought that the first Mardi Gras Indian tribe was called Creole Wild West. The exact date of their first appearance is unknown, but it definitely took place during the 1880s, probably after 1885, since the Buffalo Bill’s shows stayed in New Orleans during the winter months of that year. In a gesture of respect for Native-American culture, “… a group of young men decided to mask on carnival day as Indians.”

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tribe) was named B. Kate and was of Native-American and African descent. A descendent of Kate, Allison “Tootie” Montana continued the tradition—serving as the Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe—making Indian masking a practice that has remained a part of his family for over 100 years. Clearly, this is a fine example of the familial lineage that Mardi Gras Indian masking maintains. Likely, if family members were/are Indian Maskers, their descendents will be as well, although, they are entitled to join the group of their choice and are not always influenced by the tribal decisions of their kin.

Members of Indian gangs operate like families. Going beyond the duty of membership, Black Indian men act as a brotherhood. In his Ph.D. dissertation, David Elliot Draper writes:

Informants report that these organizations serve functions of mutual aid among its members. This includes lending money, and assisting financially other members who may be ill or unemployed. Should one be arrested, or sent to prison, he will seek assistance from the members of his tribe. The concept of mutual aid is particularly prominent in matters relating to construction of the costume. Men trade beads and other decorative materials, and often assist each other with their individual costumes.

Relationships between Black Indian tribal members run deeper than friendship and the treat one another as family, supporting each other through any circumstance.

Mardi Gras Indian groups allow anyone who wishes to try for membership to do so. However, the membership selection process can be difficult. Certain requirements must be met in order to be a good candidate for membership. Only men are eligible to join, and tribal affiliates can vary in age from approximately fifteen to sixty years. Also, in order to enter a particular Indian gang, a candidate must have the approval of the Big Chief. Finally, even if a man begins to associate with a certain group, it is up to the individual to decide if they want to

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98 ibid.


100 ibid, 23.

101 ibid, 24.

102 ibid.
become a full-fledged member. In essence, “membership in these organizations is not compulsory.”

It is legitimate for an outsider to approach a tribe’s leader to discuss the possibility of masking with that particular gang. But the Big Chief may also invite a candidate to begin the selection process. Draper later explains this course of action.

At least several men were observed to be coerced by tribal members into “masking” with their group. In one case, a leader successfully talked a man into masking with his tribe. To insure that the man would not later reverse his decision, the leader took the man to a local fabric shop in order to pick out a color for his costume and to purchase the necessary material. It was assumed that financial investment would solidify the membership.

Much like sororities and fraternities, candidates are sometimes “courted” in a sense, but only if they are deemed worthy and seen as an asset to the tribe. Though membership seems to be based upon compatibility between the candidate and the tribal members, ultimately, how the future Indian performs in rehearsal determines his initiation into the tribe. “Those members,” mentions Draper, “who do not learn the proper rules [of masking], or either refuse to play by the correct rules, may not be allowed to continue masking.” Essentially, if a candidate does not meet the expectations of the group, he is asked to leave and refused membership.

Due to their secretive nature, the exact number of tribes is unknown, but there are thought to be between twenty and forty in total. Names of some of the current tribes include “the Wild Magnolias, Creole Wild West, Golden Star Hunters, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Seminoles, Original Yellow Jackets, Creole Osceolas, Mohawk Hunters, Ninth Ward Warriors, Flaming Arrows, and the Guardians of the Flame.” Traditionally, the various Mardi Gras Indian tribes belong to

103 ibid.
104 ibid.
105 ibid, 25.
particular African-American neighborhoods and are divided between two districts: the Uptown and Downtown, with Canal Street serving as the point of division.\textsuperscript{108} The most obvious way in which these regional differences are visible is through Mardi Gras Indian garb. For example, Downtown Indians feature costumes that resemble three-dimensional African styles of masking, which cover the entire body, use feathers that have a lighter and fluffier texture, and incorporate beaded designs that create complex geometrical patterns. Uptown groups follow the Native-American style of dress, with emphasis on elaborate beadwork depicting battles between Native and European Americans. In conjunction with variations in dress, New Orleans history confirms another reason why tribal rituals vary between the two districts. Including the French Quarter, the Downtown section “reflects the early cultural traditions of the French and Spanish occupations of New Orleans.”\textsuperscript{109} Home to the Garden District, the Uptown neighborhood displays connections to Anglo-American culture.\textsuperscript{110} Seemingly, tribal rituals and traditions vary according to location and are also influenced by the heritage and customs of their particular neighborhoods.

Each gang practices its own traditions and has officers, and each group also maintains parading and battling rituals unique to its own praxis. The highest-ranking leader is the Big Chief. He makes all of the decisions concerning the tribe. Junior to the Big Chief are the three minor Chiefs—the Second, Third, and Trail Chief, respectively. Typically, only while parading and with the exception of the Trail Chief, each Chief is flanked by a Queen. There are also the Spy Boy, Flag Boy, and Wild Man or Medicine Man who follow behind the ranking chiefs. Many Mardi Gras Indian tribes spend from nine months to a year preparing costumes and rehearsing for their performances. Normally these practices take place in bars or dance halls within each tribe’s community. The logistical schedules of these gatherings are planned in advance. “In a strategy that serves a sophisticated networking agenda, different gangs gather at different places at different times,” states Michael P. Smith. “Practices are scheduled so each


\textsuperscript{109} ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} ibid.
gang is able to visit at least three or four other allied gangs…”111 Allowing another group to watch tribal practices confirms the camaraderie and communal respect between tribes even if they are rival groups. The practices are structured to allow time for New Orleans Indian Maskers to prepare for the mock battles or duels that commence between opposing tribesmen (these battles will be described at length in the next chapter). Competitive feuds are a fight to see who is the “prettiest” Indian, using as their tools of battle the dancing, costumes, and music.

Normally, percussionists arrive early and begin to warm-up. At a typical rehearsal, drummers use one to three bass drums, a variety of smaller drums such as the congas, snare, tambourines, and cowbells; other percussive instruments may also present, depending on the traditions of each tribe.112 After the musicians are ready to play, the Big Chief initiates the gathering by leading the Mardi Gras Indian prayer song, “My Indian Red,” a tradition upheld by every tribe. Smith describes the call-and-response scenario that follows the start of this song. “As he [the Big Chief] sings, the various gang members gather around him, with and without instruments, step forward as called, and participate by responding through song and dance as the spirit directs…”113 As Smith states, this call-and-response relationship is similar to interactions between pastors and church members in black churches where participants actively respond as the spirit moves them. Mardi Gras Indian rehearsals are just as much spiritual events as they are a time to practice for Carnival day and, like the church, they also serve the purpose of bringing members of the tribe together in what they consider to be a profound sense of community.

Following the prayer-song, a ritual that binds the men through song and dance continues. Eventually, the men separate so a kind of alley is formed down the center of the dancing space. Very similar to a cipher in hip-hop gatherings, the “home gang” (the tribe’s featured dancers) begins to hold physical dialogues, using bodily gestures and verbal chants to express themselves.114 During one of the Yellow Pocahontas tribe’s rehearsals, as seen in Maurice Martinez’s Mardi Gras Indian documentary, the home gang performed in cool manner, strongly

112 ibid.
113 ibid.
114 ibid.
mirroring Robert Farris Thompson’s term the aesthetic of the cool during their dancing. This potent Africanist aesthetic is reflected in their relaxed comportment since the performers are not dancing in order to cut the phrase and end in a particular body position or step. The aesthetic of the cool is overtly illustrated in the dancers controlled demeanor; it is the kind of cool that allows the tribesmen to appear unruffled and composed in their gestures.

During this same practice, the Indians look down towards the ground while creating rhythmic patterns with their feet that mimic the music. Though the arms are not in a fixed position, they remain parallel to the floor and are held in a loose manner. Also, the dancers sometimes put their arms around one another in a gesture of communal and physical solidarity. Though movement is at the center of this part of the rehearsal, dance practices are really about learning how to read another person’s body language while performing. This is indicated in how the dueling performers maintain eye contact, measuring each other up in an effort to out-perform their opponent and win the duel. Rehearsals are a time of exploration, when Black Indians perfect their performance techniques in order to win battles while parading.

Although not clearly defined until show time, Black Indians begin to project their distinctive identity through pre-season tribal gatherings. In dancing, tribesmen confirm that they are men of honor and strength. Their stance in the cipher-like space is one of dignity. Although they appear to lack eloquent, extravagant virtuosic movement styles, Black Indians honor their bodies through their stoic movements, bringing into themselves a sense of empowerment and strength. This is clearly seen in their improvised dancing. While moving, they do not project gestures that emphasize lighter qualities, such as fluid arm motions or delicate jumps. But Black Indians perform bounded motions that look effortful, and they maintain a warrior-like stance. The tribesmen remain low to the ground, embodying movements that emphasize muscular agility and mass, while they maintain a gaze of domination. The goal of Mardi Gras Indian dances are to show that even though these tribesmen have encountered social and economic struggle, they are resilient men who can prevail over anyone or anything.

Pulling from various cultural and local influences, the Mardi Gras Indians linked Blacks together through their performance gatherings. Occurring at various historical points, this Black Masking ritual ushered in a tradition that allowed its practitioners to determine agency, identity, and community within the city of New Orleans, and, these same themes are present in current traditions today. Becoming cultural mediators, Black Maskers utilized dance and costumes to establish these threads of power and selfhood through various eras, and have become a standard ingredient of Mardi Gras Indian parades and battles.
CHAPTER FIVE

“I’M THE PRETTIEST INDIAN:” PARADING FOR IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND COMMUNITY

Mardi Gras Indian culture is a multi-faceted phenomenon in which tribal gatherings become a site for playing out complex cultural issues. The most powerful and succinct of these social and political matters are highly visible during Mardi Gras Indian parades, and during the climactic danced battle between the highest-ranked tribal leaders. The foregoing chapters have provided historical and cultural contexts for the development of the Mardi Gras Indians. New Orleans African-American men found logical and creative strategies with which to navigate oppression, and establish an institution that effectively created and symbolized self-defined identity, agency, and community. Black Indian parades and danced battles literally embody and bring to life these fundamental principles within Mardi Gras Indian culture. For this reason, the following chapter will recognize and analyze specific elements present during Black Masking parades, and the Big Chief battle, emphasizing how these men use performance as a means of cultural mediation.

Since the New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration’s inception, some variation of civic pageantry has taken place during the festivities. A parade is generally thought of as a public procession that incorporates some sort of visual display since people march, dance, or play instruments while processing alongside, or, riding in an oversized pageant wagon. This cart is constructed as an ornate set, usually centered around one particular theme. An example of this
type of civic pageantry comes from an elite New Orleans krewe called Rex. This krewe traditionally hosts a parade on the morning of Mardi Gras, which takes place in the Uptown section of New Orleans. Their floats revolve around “the worlds of mythology, art, literature, and history, drawing on the rich images of ancient cultures and faraway lands.” For instance, the 2005 Rex Procession titled “Royal River,” featured a giant hooded skeleton riding in a boat with a wooden staff in hand. This skeletal figure guarded the entrance to the River Styx, confirming Rex’s attraction toward mythological and unworldly images. Rex is not the only elite society that conforms to themes of mythological origin, as most of the highest-ranking krewes do. A common theme among elite New Orleans krewes are that their floats are always intricate, extravagant, and colorful, unlike any other form of pageantry in the South.

Originally, only white members of society participated in New Orleans Mardi Gras and the first documentation of a black celebration comes from Timothy Flint in 1823. Unfortunately, it is unclear if Flint saw this festivity during Mardi Gras Day. It is certain, though, that this journal entry was recorded during his stay in New Orleans (from January to March), making the connection to Mardi Gras more likely since this was the only day when Blacks would have been able to dance as Flint describes. Also, in this entry, Flint recounts a dance featuring the crowned “King of the Wake,” a traditional staging that appeared in early black Mardi Gras gatherings.

Every year the negroes have two or three holidays, which in New Orleans and the vicinity, are like the “Saturnalia” of the slaves in ancient Rome. The great Congo-dance is performed. Every thing is license and revelry. Some hundreds of negroes male and female, follow the king of the wake, who is conspicuous for his youth, size, the whiteness of his eyes, and the blackness of his visage… He wags his head and makes grimaces. By his thousand mountebank tricks, and contortions of countenance and form, he produces an irresistible effect upon the multitude. All the characters that follow him, of leading

118 ibid.
estimation, have their own peculiar dress, and their own contortions. They dance, and their streamers fly, and the bells that they hung about them tinkle.\textsuperscript{119}

The King of the Wake and Congo-dance provided the black community with an opportunity to define black culture as well as preserve traditions from their native worlds: Africa and the Caribbean. In turn, African-American populations cultivated numerous Mardi Gras traditions of their own. The formation of the Black Indians is one such Carnival ritual, and it gave tribal members a voice within the prejudiced American South.

Originally, when the Mardi Gras Indian masking tradition began in the mid-1880s, Black Indians came to physical blows while marching through their neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{120} Black Maskers carried “razor-sharp spears and hatchets,” and hidden beneath their Indian garb were “knives and guns.”\textsuperscript{121} When opposing tribes crossed paths, they would fight each other since they could not take their anger out on the dominant society that actually oppressed them. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, Mardi Gras Indian men would leave home unsure if they would survive the day’s activities and, even if a masker was not killed, he was often seriously injured. At the end of the day, members of Uptown and Downtown tribes gathered at the “battlefield,” located on Loyola Avenue, “in order to settle what informants refer[ed] to as ‘grudges.’”\textsuperscript{122} By the beginning of the 1980s, Black Tribesmen no longer resorted to violence, but they sang, danced, and held costume competitions known as “battles” to see who could do them best. This style of Black Indian gatherings then became the traditional format for their parades, and the incorporation of artistic competition within the battles demonstrates that performance acted as a way to mediate conflict and oppression without resorting to violence.

Although the description of Mardi Gras parades holds true for white krewes, the word “parading,” as Black Indians use it, refers to a different kind of activity. The Indians do not rely

\textsuperscript{119} Timothy Flint, \textit{Recollections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi, From Pittsburg and the Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico, and From Florida to the Spanish Frontier; in a Series of Letters to the Rev. James Flint, of Salem, Massachusetts}, Google Books.

\textsuperscript{120} Compucastweb Interactive, “Mardi Gras Indians.” Mardi Gras: New Orleans.


\textsuperscript{122} ibid.
on wagons to project their creativity. Instead, Black Tribesmen place their visual efforts onto the body through dance and costume. Significantly, by donning pageant garb, Black Tribesmen themselves, as bodies, become the main mode of visual display—they are the pageant wagons, so to speak, shaping the vision of their processions with their corporeality as they march through the streets. This is why the Mardi Gras Indians are active paraders, who shape these stagings, based on their physical appearance and gestures. This is distinctively different from the processions of white elite krewes (such as Rex, Comus, etc.). Those krewes construct the wagons as tangible objects, upon which they project their visions. However, Black Indians, in a sense, wear their floats as costumes. Indian garb is all consuming, making Indian paraders appear as massive bodies that seem larger than life size, and they bring these masks to life through bodily movements. When watching a Mardi Gras Indian parade, viewers see participants of all ages dancing, singing, and battling; some are dressed as Native Americans, others appear as unmasked spectators, but each constructs the framework of the spectacle through physical actions.  

Importantly, by placing their visual constructs on their bodies, Mardi Gras Indians devised a parade that reflected their cultural practices. During parades, Black Indians had an opportunity to incorporate the characteristics that defined them as members of the New Orleans’s African-American population. When Mardi Gras first began, it was not until the King of the Wake was crowned that Black New Orleanians found a place within Mardi Gras festivities. Soon afterward, black men started to mask as Native Americans, but they did so within their African-American communities. Like Congo Square, a physical locale that served as a common gathering spot for black populations of New Orleans, the parading practice of the Mardi Gras Indians provided a literal and symbolic space of power for African-American men and women. In both cases of Congo Square and the Mardi Gras Indians, black New Orleanians crafted their American culture through the dancing body.

Mardi Gras Indian parades take place on two well-known occasions. In addition to Mardi Gras Day, the Indians take to the streets of predominately black neighborhoods on St. Joseph’s Day (March 19th), or on the Sunday closest to this Catholic observance. Locals and Black Indian

enthusiasts know this tradition as “Super Sunday” and it attracts mostly black community members. On St. Joseph’s Day, parades begin around noon, which allows supporters and visitors to admire the Indians’ brilliant costumes. Throughout the year, Indian tribes may perform for community gatherings (like Jazz Fest), but Mardi Gras season, along with St. Joseph’s Day, are when they make most of their public appearances.

Mardi Gras Indian parades are the central focus of this Black Masking tradition. Once en route, tribal members separate, sometimes maintaining a distance of several blocks between each other. Tribal members and Second Liners continue to dance and sing while traveling through their neighborhood streets. Typically, paraders meet at a neighborhood bar or at the Big Chief’s home prior to the start of their processions, which begin at sunup and end at sundown. In his Dissertation, David Elliott Draper remarks that Mardi Gras Indian Maskers consume exorbitant amounts of alcoholic beverages while parading. Seemingly, this black masking tradition, in keeping with Mardi Gras Carnival tradition, also serves as a means of escapism, providing social license to working-class men with a break from the realities of daily living.

Among participants and observers, a distinctive hierarchical structure is in place. First and foremost, the Indian maskers remain the center of the event. Then family, friends, and audience members gather around them and join in the performance in order to pay tribute to their tradition. In creating an all-inclusive environment, large numbers of viewers come together, forming Second Lines within Black Indian gatherings. Defined by academic Helen A. Regis, Second Lines are “massive moving street festivals” that are “organized and funded by working-class African Americans.” Although Mardi Gras Indian gatherings do not pull in thousands of viewers as is common during New Orleans Second Line parades, they do attract hundreds of watchers. Also, while en route, Second Liners will show tribal support by providing

126 ibid, 35.
127 ibid, 35.
refreshments and food for masking members. 129 Tribal members welcome communal involvement and find ways to make sure fellow community members can be a part of the parading experience. Typically, spectators participate through performance since they dance and sing alongside the Black Masking Indians.

In addition, the presence of Second Liners shows the importance of Indian mimesis to working-class communities. By welcoming watchers, Mardi Gras Indian parades create a sense of camaraderie and group cohesion, helping to build up the spirits of participants. This certainly affects the way that black neighborhoods are viewed by those who live there. People find a sense of common pride in what they do and where they are from; this cooperative satisfaction largely results from Mardi Gras Indian parades. Nevertheless, it is not just about creating a collective feeling of pride. Black communities have an original performance practice that represents them throughout New Orleans. Conclusively, Mardi Gras Indian parades show the spirit and zeal that working-class Blacks have for this masking tradition, presenting them as contributing and valuable members to Carnival culture.

As for parade routes, they remain secret to the public and the Big Chief decides which route the tribe will take. This means that the competitions—or danced mock battles—take place spontaneously and are often unplanned since tribal members are unsure of who they will run into. During the parade, the Indians march through the street in a particular order. The first to lead the tribal members are informants known as Spyboys (sometimes there are Spygirls, but this is very rare). 130 Their job is to lead the Indians on the designated path that the Big Chief has revealed only to them, and to communicate information about the streets to the next officer, called the Flag Boy. 131 The Flag Boy carries a banner that bears the name of the tribe and he recounts the Spyboys’ findings to the rest of the tribe through memorized flag signals. The Chiefs follow next in line and they are typically each flanked by a Queen and scouts who act as


bodyguards. The Big Chief “directs the march” deciding where his krewe will go and when to interact with other Indian tribes so that a battle may occur. According to the traditions of the tribe, a final leader called the “Wildman” or “Medicine Man” filters among the parade participants and acts “wild” so that the streets clear and the Indians have a place to march. He also carries a symbolic weapon so that he can protect the Big Chief and he communicates the Chief’s orders to his fellow maskers while running through the crowds. Intermixed throughout the paraders are musicians, specifically drummers, who maintain the beat to which the paraders march and play the songs in the order decided by the Big Chief. Clearly, the Indians work together with their own structured community and they also use this system of ranks so that they are prepared for battle.

Robert Farris Thompson has described what he titles the “Africanist Aesthetic” present in both West Africa and much of the African Diaspora worldwide. Characteristics of Thompson’s Africanist aesthetic are clearly evident in the Mardi Gras Indian performances. Dancers incorporate the “get down,” maintaining symbolic reference to mother earth. Mardi Gras Indian paraders also display angular lines with their bodies, keeping the knees, torso, and arms bent. This illustrates Thompson’s description of the Africanist belief that to be flexible is to be alive and vibrant, contrasted to being stiff, which is associated with lifelessness. Improvisation forces both mental and physical flexibility, and, as a commonality of West African traditions it is retained and re-enacted as the black tribesmen create their dances on the spot. By mirroring in actions the beliefs and behaviors of their elders, Black Tribesmen continue to infuse elements of their West African heritage into their dances, using performance to maintain links to an ancestral past.

132 ibid.
Over the years, the elaborateness of Mardi Gras Indian costumes has dramatically increased. In his research, Mitchell Reid interviewed Alice Zeno, an eyewitness who said that the Mardi Gras Indians of the 1880s and 1890s dressed “like real Indians, not like they do now.” Zeno meant that original Black Tribes dressed simply, reflecting an aesthetic more closely resembling the Plains performers from “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows.” When Black Indian inter-tribal performance competitions began, the costumes became more commercial, incorporating lots of glitz and glamour in order to one-up their rivals. Today, in fact, garments can cost up to tens-of-thousands of dollars and include several oversized costume pieces. Black Indian men wear towering headdresses that incorporate feathers reaching about a foot and a half in length. These headpieces usually continue down the masker’s back, very similar to Plains Native American headdresses, and are brilliantly colored. African-American Indian men wear arm pieces that surpass or exaggerate the length of their arms. Sometimes they will do this by adding hanging layers of fringe, ranging the length of their torso, or by designing arm pieces that resemble goalie pads on hockey players. Whatever the style, Indian Maskers decorate the arm-gear with copious amounts of feathers and beads. The torsos of Black Indians are also covered in beads that form detailed pictures that depict scenes of Native American motifs. Even their shoes are made to look like moccasins, and incorporate folded ribbon, beadwork, and bunched fabric. These outfits are intentionally ostentatious so that observers are attracted to—and cannot visually ignore—the extravagance of tribal members’ handiwork. Once each separate section of the costume is assembled, the Black Indian men are transformed into spectacular figures. They resemble extraordinarily oversized turkeys, using brightly colored feathers and beads in ways that achieve opulent beauty. Obviously, viewers are captivated by the magnificence of their Indian gear since it creates such a visually spectacular image.

When approaching a rival tribe, Indians ordinarily assemble for battle. As mentioned, battles are performative competitions, which explains why it is important to have enchanting dances, costumes, and songs. During these mock battles, the Indians “employ a ritualized


display of dance and protocol.”

Maskers from each gang mix and mingle while the drummers from each group intertwine their rhythmic patterns. Eventually, the Indians clear a particular section of the street so that an alleyway forms. “Using a type of formalized speech,” states Draper, “which they call “chanting,” the Indian men relate who they are, and what tribe they represent.” Within this cleared space, dancing, costume, and musical battles commence, and Indian men compete against opposing tribesmen who hold the same rank. The last two Indians to battle are the Big Chiefs from each tribe and their meeting is the most dazzling.

When the Big Chief battle occurs, fellow tribesmen gather around in order to show their support. Two men are dressed in the most ornate of Indian gear standing on opposite sides of a sort of runway. A fellow Indian who acts as the referee between the two opposing teams stands in the center of the alleyway bearing a hatchet and, like a flag at the start of a race, the axe signals the beginning of the battle. Once this symbolic object is waved, the Chiefs begin to dance in a shuffling pattern while rotating around themselves in a circle. Movement happens in time to the percussive music and their feathered headdresses mirror this rhythm, similar to that of a men’s Fancy Dancer at a Powwow. Due to the magnitude of their costumes, the dancers move in ways that best display and utilize their ensembles. For instance, one Chief may wave his arms in order to show off the complex design of his arm pieces. Also, while rotating in a circle, both dancers may twist their heads in time to music, which in turn, adds motion to the feathers incorporated in their headpieces. The way that the costume moves affects the excitement of the performance. Audience members seem to find it more impressive when the Chief and costume work together to create a seamless unity between the two, and performing well with this kind of quality, is what helps one Indian out-do the other.

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143 ibid.

144 ibid.
The chiefs continue to duel, moving in a wide stance while keeping their feet close to the ground, and they seem to “muscle” through the movement. The dancing appears effortful, and lifting the arms above the head is minimal. Keeping their elbows straight, the Big Chiefs’ arms stay parallel to their shoulders, and each opponent maintains eye contact with the other—looking like two lions preparing to pounce on each other. Portraying aggressive mannerisms, the chiefs execute forceful actions while maintaining a steady tempo, following the musicality of the drums.

Eventually, both Chiefs make their way towards each other. Dan Baum, a writer for the *New Yorker* describes this interaction and concludes that, “...as solemn as two knights squaring off, they [the Chiefs] danced toward each other until they were face to face, their headdresses and bustles coming together and all but hiding the two men inside.” In this moment, the dueling men are no longer themselves, they surrender their bodies to the battle, allowing the ritual to lead and influence their movements. Once they meet, the “enemies” continue to dance; however, they adhere to a call-and-response pattern. One Chief will dance and the other responds to their movement by trying to out perform the previous stylistic pattern.

At the close of the Big Chief’s battle, one is declared the winner. The spectators show their support through their applause and cheers, but the Chiefs instinctively know “when they’ve won, you see it in their eyes.” Nevertheless, both Chiefs part on good terms, showing that they respect one another. Likewise, the audience cheers on their battling community members, and while they may shout approval for a particular tribe, viewers support the efforts of both the Chiefs at the close of the confrontation. These battles are really about communal joining together and encouragement, transforming the Chief battles into a morale-boosting and pleasurable experiences for both dancers and spectators. These duels do more than entertain. They foster belief and pride in New Orleans African-American communities.

At their inception, the black men who formed the first Mardi Gras Indian groups were recently freed, still adjusting to life without slavery. Living in a city where European-Americans

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145 ibid.

continued to rule, these men needed to establish their own traditions. By creating Mardi Gras Indian gangs, they provided a prime place and situation in which to foster a sense of belonging. But this masking practice also allowed the first tribesmen to synthesize a self-determined identity as freed men through using cultural hybridity. By blending facets of West African, Native-American, and European-American carnival aesthetics into their costumes and dances, Black Indian men became navigators who used performance to find a place for themselves within a European-American city.

The following descriptions, which provide concrete examples of Mardi Gras Indian costumes, will be based on a photograph by Michael P. Smith, published in his 1984 book *Mardi Gras Indians.* It is a photo of Bo Dollis, Big Chief of the Wild Magnolias. Dollis designed a costume of red and white and it is animalistic in structure. The back of his costume resembles the tail of a turkey, while viewed from the front he looks like a peacock with feathers extended. Comprised of a beaded apron, feathered arm extensions, an oversized headdress, and a feathered bustle, this costume takes on a life of its own, transforming the performer into some other creature. Dollis’s costume covers every body part with the exception of his face. In this way, his costume is very similar to the full-body Egungun masks worn by Yoruban dancers. In fact, Mardi Gras Indian garb serves a similar purpose to that of the West African tradition. When masking, Yoruban people believe that a loss of self occurs in order to channel ancestral spirits and achieve a sense of enlightenment. Likewise, as one Mardi Gras Indian describes it, a similar loss of self is achieved while parading and, for some, “by donning Indian garments and singing Indian chants, they become Indians.” A seasoned Black Masker named Monk Bourdreaux stated in 1977, “When I put on my costume, I feel like an Indian... Sometimes when I’m singing, I’ll be thinking about things I don’t know where they come from. I’ll be standing in front of people and I won’t see their faces... My voice and manners will be different.”

Seemingly, there is a cause and effect relationship between Mardi Gras Indian costumes and how

\[147\] ibid.


\[150\] ibid, 125.
this clothing affects the tribesmen that is similar to the way that Yorubans use their masks to channel ancestral spirits in hopes of spiritual clarity.

In addition to West African connections, Mardi Gras Indian men infuse their costumes with Native-American traits. Dollis’s costume incorporates beaded pictures that depict stereotyped Indian themes such as eagles, portraits of tribal leaders, or horses. Common in other Mardi Gras Indian garb, this beadwork depicts scenes of Native American struggle and battles with cowboys. The costume pieces also adhere to Indian regalia commonly worn by Traditional men dancers at Powwow competitions through the use of a bustle, apron, and headpiece. As discussed in previous chapters, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show” allowed the originators of these masking traditions to connect with Native populations, and the “othered” costumes manifested a metaphysical alliance between two marginalized people. Their Indian garb helped Black Maskers “feel like Indians.” By masking as indigenous people, Mardi Gras Indian men are reminded that they are not the only ethnicity to face societal strife, which gives them the courage to battle against racist doctrines.

Also, the costumes display links to European-American society. Beginning first as a white tradition, Mardi Gras incorporated elaborate sets, costumes, and masks that appealed to high-class society. As mentioned earlier, Mardi Gras krewes relied upon mythical and Grecian folklore in order to depict qualities associated with “high art.” Krewes used ornate performance aesthetics in order to be known by the general public as regal, beautiful, and educated people. Although Black Indian regalia is unique, it displays the influence of European-American Mardi Gras aesthetics. In Smith’s photo, for example, the feathers worn by Dollis are fluffy, they incorporate folded pieces of ribbon (which are bent and pushed together in order to form a border of bows), and his arm extensions look similar to the oversized feathered fans used by burlesque dancers in Busby Berkeley films. The use of costume traits associated with European and European-American carnival aesthetics are combined with African, African-American, and Native-American signifiers, exemplifying the hybrid nature of Mardi Gras Indian identity. The extraordinary glamour, extravagance, and splendor of the costumes (particularly the Big

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152 ibid, 71.
Chiefs’), combined with their larger-than-life size, make Mardi Gras Indian garb a phenomenal public display of pride and self worth. Mardi Gras Indian men bring a kind of over-the-top glamour to the streets of inner-city New Orleans, helping maskers show off the beauty and importance of a marginalized performance culture.

Mardi Gras Indian approaches to dance and movement in the parades also provide evidence of the group’s hybrid cultural identity. In the following discussion of Mardi Gras Indian dancing I will refer to a filmed battle between the Big Chiefs from the Wild Red Flames and the Wild Magnolias. In this video excerpt, both Chiefs display elements of Thompson’s Africanist aesthetics—the “get down” postures, polyrhythmic dancing, and improvisation. The highly improvisational nature of the Black Masker’s dancing strengthens camaraderie between fellow participants and spectators. Likewise, West African dances are intended to unite communities, mediate conflict, and promote healing, just as Mardi Gras Indian men use battles to improve communal ties through dance.

Links to Native-American movement practices are also common in Black Indian dancing. Qualities common with indigenous American cultures, such as a physical connection to the ground and reflection of the drumbeat are present in the same Big Chief battles. But as Smith points out in his book, both Native and African Americans have encountered certain restrictions that have prevented them from freely sharing their dance rituals within their communities and to outsiders. Each population has had to develop ways around such restrictions (such as choreographic changes or a resistance to supervision) in order to uphold the unique qualities that define their performance rituals. Therefore, both Native and African Americans use dance as a means for building identity and resistance of conformity to European-American traditions in order to maintain the dance traditions that provide them with a sense of individuality.

154 ibid.
155 ibid.
Lastly, and curiously, European-American links to runway model shows are visible in the floor patterns that commence during Mardi Gras Indian battles. In the video clip, spectators form a large oval around the Big Chiefs so that an alleyway is created. Meeting in the center, the Big Chiefs come closer together, then separate, and meet again towards the middle, using Africanist and Native American dance aesthetics while moving through this particular spatial relationship. This mirrors a similar floor pattern to fashion models, who strut down a runway in order to best “show” a designer’s latest creation. Like models, the Big Chiefs know how—or whether—to “pose” or dance in order to make the clothes look good. Their goal is to achieve the “prettiest” state and, like fashionistas, Mardi Gras Indian men manipulate their bodies to reach this level of visual display.

Conclusively, Mardi Gras Indians use costumes and movement to synthesize a hybridized identity. In borrowing or retaining elements of West African, Native American, and European American culture, Black Maskers created a unique site for themselves within New Orleans society. This mixture of ethnic traditions reflects the beloved “melting pot” concept, so well known throughout America. But Mardi Gras Indian men hand-selected exactly which cultural traits would be incorporated into their battles. This intentional selection gives power to maskers because they forge an identity that adheres to their ideals.

Creating a certain kind of glamour through Mardi Gras Indian ensembles seems to be an integral part of the extreme standards of beauty tribesmen set in order to win battles. In reference to Gianni Versace’s designs, scholars Reka C.V. Buckley and Stephen Gundle define glamour as opulence and an “approximate notion of wealth, excitement, beauty, sexuality, and fame.” Black Indian costumes seem to fall into this definition. However, the way in which maskers move their bodies adds a particular finesse to their glamorous designs because gestural motions highlight the detailed beauty of Indian gear. Researcher Dara Milovanovic supports this

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157 ibid.

idea, concluding that dance is a perfect site for making glamour more potent and recognizable due to its role in bringing “appearances and ephemeral qualities” to life through movement.\textsuperscript{159}

Mardi Gras Indian parades create agency. Through the use of opulent beauty, Black Maskers use costumes and movement to portray a magical or romanticized vision that presents inner-city people as “kings for a day.” Mardi Gras Indian Parades create a special time and place where the reality of oppression and marginalization is temporarily suspended, and Mardi Gras Indians become honored and admired. Dance ethnologist Joann W. Keali’ino homoku argues in her article “You Dance What You Wear, and You Wear Your Values” that, “Behavior is often shaped or reinforced by costumes, and this is especially noticeable in affective expressions such as dance.”\textsuperscript{160} Mardi Gras Indian costumes dictate much of the character traits of maskers, making Keali’ino homoku’s statement applicable to this tradition. Because of their intricate design, Black Indians are not able to move freely since their garments are so massive. Consequently, their gesticulations look more combatant, defensive, and proud. The regal glamour and larger-than-life visual spectacle, as created by Indian gear, is a strong symbolic statement about pride.

Mardi Gras Indians’ use of glamour in creating authority and presence is strikingly similar to Vogue dancing practices. Emerging as an American subculture in the 1950s, and made popular with the 1990 release of Madonna’s single entitled “Vogue,” Voguers were typically disenfranchised urban black and Hispanic gay men who employed glamour and high fashion to live the dream of supermodel stardom for a day. Often working day jobs and saving earnings for months at a time in order to splurge on an expensive name-brand outfit to wear for one night of glory, Voguers perform in dance competitions known as “Balls” that resemble runway fashion shows. Typically, Voguers employ a movement vocabulary that references the fashion industry, such as runway walks and poses, and serve to display and animate their glamorous attire. Through performance, Vogue dancers become special. Members of a marginalized population, competing in Balls allows these men to live the dream of opulence as if they were part of a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{159} Dara Milovanovic, “Androgyny, Glamour, Fetishism, and Urbanity: An Analysis of Bob Fosse’s Choreography,” (M.A. Thesis, Florida State University, 2003), 17.
\end{itemize}
community that is privileged, glamorous, and desirable. Performatively, men create a romanticized and magical world where they can be the people they want to be—even if it is just one night of perfection. In common with Vogue dancers, Black Indian Maskers use movement and costume as a way to achieve value for the disenfranchised men from inner-city neighborhoods. They use battle like the Voguers use competition Balls—to bring participants into closer proximity to beauty and fame.

In keeping with the pursuit of glamorous visual spectacular in the extreme, Dollis’s costume is visually stunning. Incorporating bright colors, and a staggering abundance of feathers and beads, he assembled the costume so that it set a standard of beauty and opulence unachievable for the common man. Masking Indians enliven their ensembles by manipulating particular costume pieces in order to enliven them. For example, in the same battle between the Big Chiefs, one Chief dressed in a bright green and orange costume began his dance by extending his arms towards the sky, forming an “X” shape with his body. This action allowed him to show off the way that he used feathers in his costume design, helping him prove that he was in fact the “prettiest” Chief. After showing off his costume’s construction, the Chief tilted his body to the right, and then began a series of hops, resembling the motion of a pogo stick. After this, the Big Chief shuffled his feet so that he traveled around the space in a circular motion and ended his movement phrase by shaking and waving his feathered arm extensions with an assertive quality towards his opponent. While improvising this dance, the costume moved in ways that enhanced its details. The feathers reacted to each motion, undulating throughout the movement phrase, enlarging a vision of splendor induced through a physical action. By embodying opulence through costume construction and movement, this Mardi Gras Indian created a magical setting, one that allowed him to become the person he wanted to be. As in the Vogue Balls, Black Indian parades and battles make inner-city community members famous among locals and tourists—even if it lasts for just Mardi Gras Day.

162 ibid.
163 ibid.
Performances grant Mardi Gras Indian maskers leadership and power equal to the New Orleans elite society members who venture into their neighborhoods to watch battles. Within that time and place, Black Maskers are the controllers of their communities, synthesizing meaning through public parades and battles. These activities show that Black Communities invent visions of glamour that are enticing cross-racially. Their masking practice has become a New Orleans Carnival trademark, one that many people seek out during the festivity, making it a celebration that is no longer centered on white communities. Black Indian men channel their cultural traits through glamorous costumes and dances, helping the working-classes assume equality and momentary ascendancy over the upper-class society who come to see them and who initially excluded them from the celebration.

Engendering a powerful community (however briefly) Black Indian maskers deploy performance practices that link individuals and inner-city neighborhoods. Creating a unique culture that represents this section of New Orleans, Mardi Gras Indian men create an inclusive Pan-Tribal identity that includes members of disparate tribes. Through performances, Black Maskers employ androgynous elements by fusing hyper-masculine bodies and gestures with opulent costumes that can be read as highly feminine. This fosters as a strange almost magical “otherness,” an inclusive environment that attracts both males and females. Also, Black Indian parades and battles rally together large numbers of participants, who formulate groups known as Second Lines, who in turn build an even broader community among working-class New Orleans populations. This Pan-Club identity affects more than just working-class members. By attracting massive amounts of spectators, Mardi Gras Indian parades and battles break down barriers between socio-economic classes, creating an environment that for one day joins together various societal groups that would otherwise have little or no contact with one another.

Androgyny is the ability to incorporate both male and female traits of converging hyper-masculine bodies with feminized costume aesthetics, particularly when battles ensue. The Big Chief battle is a clear example: both leaders are big men; they are clearly strong since they are able to manipulate costumes that are substantial in size and weight; and, they improvise warrior-like movement, which triggers an association with ultimate maleness.\(^{164}\) Moreover, the Big

\(^{164}\) ibid.
Chiefs are territorial, using movements that look protective. The men conform to a typical male role as familial leader and primary guardian. The battle also follows a competitive format, another masculine trait, as many men duel in order to declare who is the best at a particular thing. Each of these ideas is reflected by their physicality. However, contradicting the maleness are hyper-feminine costumes that incorporate feather motifs, arm extensions, and intricately detailed beadwork—designs and décor that are commonly seen in showgirls’ costumes. Moreover, Mardi Gras Indian men design, sew, and assemble their costumes. In this case, Black Indian men are pursuing a domestic task typically executed by women.

“Androgyny,” states Milovanovic, “purposely is without boundaries, which evokes total imaginative freedom for the viewer. Androgyny can take on any role, any direction, inviting infinite speculations, interpretations, and meanings…. Reading the human body is convoluted by the ambiguity of androgyny and the unease aroused in the mind of the viewer.”¹⁶⁵ Milovanovic’s words describe what occurs as a result of the simultaneous fusion of both male and female. By entering an androgynous state, Black Indians become ambiguous and potent since they do not adhere to the usual polarized gender codes, especially in the context of parades and battles. Black Indian men personify an all-inclusiveness that captivates all types of people with all types of gender preferences. Everybody can find something to connect with during battles. This state of ambiguity allows viewers the freedom of personal fantasy and interpretation. Tribal performances create an environment that allows for imaginative play, enticing and attractive to a broad range of viewers.

In creating this all-inclusive environment, many spectators then come together to form Second Lines in Black Indian gatherings. How Second Lining builds community may seem fairly obvious. Mardi Gras Indian parades foster connections and general camaraderie between community viewers, creating stronger links between various people who live in inner-city New Orleans neighborhoods. However, Second Liners also aid in building a Pan-Club identity by involving spectators in parades. While observing viewers during another Big Chief battle with the Golden Comanche tribe, the Second Liners shouted loudly, encouraging the battling Chief

they supported, they sang and danced along with the music, taking pictures and videos and talking to one another. These interactions make Second Liners part of the spectacle, since they continue to follow tribes throughout the day, and performing gestures while observing parades. Second Liners, alongside Black Indian maskers, represent themselves, formulating a parade with a collective identity. Thus, Mardi Gras Indian gatherings actually construct an inclusive site of working-class communities while displaying the particular cultural traits that define their own society.

The importance of Mardi Gras Indian parading holds great value for Indian Second Lining community members as well as maskers. Furthermore, parades also welcome people from all social classes into working-class sections of New Orleans. This means that members of upper and middle-classes are entering spaces they normally would not frequent. Now, inner-city populations are visible to dominant members of society, creating a space in which one is not divided from another according to socio-economic class. Significantly, this recognizes the importance and value of working-class African Americans to the New Orleans community. When affluent populations enter Black Indian neighborhoods, maskers become recognized members of society who add significance to New Orleans culture. Black Indians have become a Mardi Gras tradition appreciated by both Blacks and Whites. In welcoming people from outside inner-city limits, Indian tribesmen are breaking down social barriers while also aiding in creating an environment undivided by race and class. Ultimately, through Mardi Gras Indian parades, men and women show affection, support, and joy for family and friends, positioning Black Indian gatherings as a site where community prospers—if only for a day.

Another important element present in Mardi Gras Indian parades and battles is cultural preservation. Throughout this and previous chapters, several retentive performance traits that reveal the migratory patterns and cultural heritage of Mardi Gras Indians have been discussed. For instance, Thompson’s Africanist aesthetics are still present during Mardi Gras Indian battles. By referencing their West African heritage, Black Indian maskers are keeping their roots alive, preserving artistic traditions created by their ancestors. One Big Chief, named Donald Harrison, Jr., described how the Mardi Gras Indian tradition taught him about his African lineage:

166 Othatheughmanatee, “Mardi Gras ’10 (Golden Comanche tribe).MPG,” Youtube.
I am certainly at least a third generation Mardi Gras Indian, and I feel that this particular tradition is a way to strengthen family bonds, as well as it's something that defines you as an individual, especially as a person of African descent. My father… made sure that we were rooted in the fact that we were of African descent. Our history did not begin when we were brought over here as a testament in humanity to other men.¹⁶⁷

For Harrison, the Mardi Gras Indians are a way for him to understand the practices of his African predecessors, and to celebrate facets of West African dance, art, and music inherent in this masking tradition.

Although Native American aesthetics seem exaggerated and abstracted in Mardi Gras Indian costumes, Mardi Gras Indian men are intentionally keeping this indigenous presence alive through their garb. Currently, Black Indian maskers are working on copyrighting their costumes. More than anything else, this move towards copyrighting something purposely created for public display, unequivocally asserts that what matters most to these men are their inventive ensembles and the creative energy that goes into making them. What makes the costumes so unusual are the Native American motifs illustrated or interpreted by the way the beads, photographs, and pictures are worked into the actual design of the costumes. The incorporation of these elements put into living motion both the mythologies and historical narratives within a Southern region that sent many Native populations into societal exile. One example of this type of mass exodus would be the Trail of Tears. In this way, Masking keeps indigenous aesthetics and narrative histories alive and preserved in a society that was unexposed to its meanings.

While researching Powwow dancing, historian Ann Axtman coined the term “performative power.” She concluded that Native Americans used powwow dances to celebrate their heritage and identity.

Bodies, the primary instruments of dance expression, do not exist in isolation; they contain and transmit personal, collective, and above all, visceral experiences… physical, social, and spiritual power is produced by the moving bodies of Native American powwow dancers as they execute specific choreographic styles.¹⁶⁸


Black Indians elegantly use their dances and costumes to generate performative power. Participants, viewers, and community members are better able to understand and appreciate New Orleans African-American society, making Mardi Gras Indians cultural interpreters for the people from outside working-class neighborhoods who attend their performances. The artistic explorations and achievements of Mardi Gras Indian men are important tools in building the community’s reputation within the larger community while preserving a fascinating culture. Research on the traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians is enlightening since it illuminates aspects of a generally unknown performative masking practice, explaining how it functions as a unique method of defining culture.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

During Reconstruction Era, the Mardi Gras Indians physically made their presence known and recognized in New Orleans by initiating a performance event in which African-American men literally and symbolically reconstructed their lives, publically displaying their definitions of themselves in unique terms. Black Maskers continue in the Twenty First Century to refine their collective identity and community pride through their increasingly popular and wildly spectacular public performances.

In cultivating identity, Mardi Gras Indians synthesized elements of three distinct cultures because they reflect a collective historic journey, from Africa to the New World and for some, the relocation of Native Americans to distant reservations. Cultural retentions migrated with enslaved people from West Africa, to the Caribbean and the United States. These retentions, combined with influences from European, European-American, and Native-American populations, with whom African Americans came into contact, resulted in a tri-part creolized form and discourse that Black Indians used to navigate the societal and political landscape of Reconstruction-era New Orleans.
At the close of the Civil War, the newly united nation convulsed with radical changes. The Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws were made into punishable events in order to re-establish the older order of segregation, influencing a city that adhered to the philosophy of “separate but equal.” These repressions inspired formerly enslaved African Americans to assert their own way of life and their new “free” status allowed them to assume leadership roles within black communities. Throughout Reconstruction, Blacks adopted the normative patriarchal family structure, which eventually became the organizational model for African-American communities. During this same Reconstruction period, black churches became community institutions and physical centers that passed on the general societal morals and values prevalent at the end of the 1800s, as well as the specific morals and values that defined the African-American community. Concurrently, the public presence and increase in what had previously been, under slavery, clandestine black service organizations occurred, assisting newly freed populations to take on leadership roles within their communities. This combination of influences and institutions inspired black American men to begin a performance tradition that put on public display agency and community solidarity during a time of racial segregation and inequality.

Although no one knows for sure when Mardi Gras Indian tribes first formed, historians surmise that they emerged in the mid-1880s. Several anecdotal folkloric tales explain why the Black Indian gangs started. The first concludes that the black tribes began in order to pay tribute to Native Americans for their assistance during slavery. The fact of segregated communities was also an influencing factor, because black men needed an outlet through which they could begin to formalize and codify their New World/Old World traditions, independent of white control and intervention. Other historians assert that the Worlds’ Fair and Cotton Centennial Expositions that featured the “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show,” galvanized the images of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Most likely, an amalgamation of multiple factors rather than a single event coalesced to spark the inception of a unique performative expression. Since their origination, Mardi Gras Indian groups have established a membership selection process, mandated a clear system of ranks, and held practices that help prepare them for parades and danced battles. The cohesive structure of Mardi Gras Indian society has given inner-city black men a special recognizable identity and community function, which are the themes most potently visible and compelling in their parades and battles.
Parades remain the most popular mode of Carnival display used by elite New Orleans krewes in civic pageantry. Wearing elaborate costumes that transfigure them into oversized creatures that exist somewhere between a human pageant-wagon made of feathers and beads, and a man-bird of enormous proportions, and, while singing and dancing, Mardi Gras Indian men have created a completely distinctive parade practice. Delighted and ecstatic community members join the Indian Maskers in the festivities, forming Second Lines, demonstrating their support and respect for Indian Masking men. Through improvised dance, glamorous costumes, and resourceful song arrangements, Black Indians hold intertribal competitive battles to see who is the “prettiest.” No duel is more spectacular or extravagant than one between two Big Chiefs. Dancing Big Chiefs conflate various cultural influences that produce a distinctive and unforgettable self-defined identity. Costumes and dance fuse various West African, Native-American, and European-American traits, further emphasizing a powerful syncretic identity. Embodying opulent beauty through visually spectacular costumes, Black Maskers epitomize today’s popular obsessions with glamour and visual displays of wealth in custom-designed clothing, even if lasts for just one day. By infusing hyper-feminized costumes with masculine bodies, Black Masking men are androgynous, entering an ambiguous state. This obscure state encourages such events as the Second Lines to take shape, enticing members from a wide variety of societal and economic classes to join in parading. Moreover, by incorporating a variety of performance traditions that stem from various ethnic influences, Mardi Gras Indian men reinforce and reawaken ancestral roots to West African, Native-American, and European-American traditions.

It is hoped that more extensive research be conducted in the future by other researchers in order to document in even more detail how the Mardi Gras Indian performance praxis influences communal ties within New Orleans. Doing this will shed light on how important this culture has become to the New Orleans inner-city inhabitants. Ultimately, the Mardi Gras Indians, throughout their history, chose creative measures to mediate societal, political, and racial conflict within difficult circumstances of a segregated society. As a group, the Black Indians are living celebratory proof of the power that the arts hold in formulating community and the evolving codifications of identity.


**Videography**


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jaime Kight

Jaime Kight began her research of the Mardi Gras Indians in her undergraduate work while completing her BFA in Dance Performance at Florida State University. Conducting this research during her undergraduate years is what inspired Jaime to develop the concept behind this thesis. This past year, Jaime presented her research at two different conferences hosted by the American College Dance Festival and the Congress on Research in Dance. Other than dance scholarship, she enjoys performing and has participated in FSU’s Dance Repertory Theatre Company for three seasons and has performed in a variety of other works. Jaime also has taught Ballet technique and dance history classes, and hopes to pursue a career in dance journalism. Besides the Mardi Gras Indians, she is interested in the cross-cultural connections found in social dancing between American and European soldiers during World War II, Kabuki theatre and its influence on American musical drama and choreography, and the country dances from Jane Austen’s novels, and their translation and influence on the American dance scene during the colonial era.