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# Hiding Behind the Mask of Contradiction: A Study of Mardi Gras and Race in New Orleans

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**  
**HIDING BEHIND THE MASK OF CONTRADICTION:**  
**A STUDY OF MARDI GRAS AND RACE IN NEW ORLEANS**

SUBMITTED TO  
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AND  
DEAN GREGORY HESS

BY  
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FOR  
SENIOR THESIS  
SPRING 2011  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*The air on those mornings was warm, wet, and fragrant: a hedge of star jasmine in the churchyard across Burgundy, coffee roasting on Congress Street, fish coming into the Spain Street wharf, the big old sweet olive hanging over the corner of Louisa. But what lit Wil up inside was the music—a ship on the river sounding its horn across the Marigny, the clickety-clack of the trains along the Press Street tracks accompanied by the eighth-not ding-ding-ding of the signal lights at Dauphine. The music was all around and inside him.*

– *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*<sup>1</sup>

New Orleans is a magical place. Time and time again, it is said that New Orleans is distinctly un-American. It seems to be untouched by the quintessential American dream, of achieving one’s own success. New Orleanians live different sorts of lives, characterized by a slower pace, disorganization, and laid-back demeanors. Good food, good company, and good music are high priorities, and are more important than wealth or status. Money and time are simply not concerns of New Orleanians.

Without context, one might assume this relaxed and cultured city must be problem-free. Rather, the opposite is true. New Orleans is plagued by rooted poverty, high murder rates, failing public schools, crooked cops, and a fizzling economy.<sup>2</sup> Shockingly, these issues seem to have little to no impact on New Orleanians’ livelihoods. One 2005 poll gauged the satisfaction of New Orleanians, across wealth, race, and age sectors. Conclusively, the poll found that New Orleanians are “more... ‘extremely satisfied’ with their lives than residents of any other American city.”<sup>3</sup> This sets up an

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), Location 1364-7111.

<sup>2</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 190-7111.

<sup>3</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 188-7111.

extreme paradox in New Orleans. While the city is pulled apart by devastating problems and racial struggles, it is pulled together by these feelings of contentment. A key part of this equation is New Orleans' Mardi Gras.

Fantastical Mardi Gras is a fundamental part of New Orleanians and their city. The Mardi Gras tradition has been instilled in New Orleans' culture and treasured annually. Year to year, Mardi Gras and its preceding Carnival season, underwent changes. These changes range from who is allowed to participate, to what participants wear, to what goodies they toss to the crowd. Mardi Gras developments began in the eighteenth century and continued each century afterward. More often than not, the Carnival advancements correspond to the political and social climate of New Orleans at the time.

The Crescent City's Mardi Gras commonly reflects racial struggles. Originally, New Orleans was settled by Frenchmen, who lived alongside Americans and African slaves. From the start, the city's diversity presented challenges. Interestingly, these racial conflicts were inconsistent and varied, involving different races and circumstances. New Orleans' racial history presents compelling material on its own. However, when looked at next to New Orleans' Mardi Gras history, it all becomes much more fascinating.

Before discussing the format and argument of the thesis, I would like to introduce a particular New Orleanian, who breathes life into the research and findings, by defining the mold of a New Orleanian. *New York Times* reporter Dan Baum extensively covered New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Rather than looking at the event itself, Baum traced the lives of nine New Orleanians from the 1960s to 2006, in *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*. Wilbert Rawlins Jr. represents one of these lives. Wil, as



the reader comes to know him, both represents and challenges the notion of a New Orleanian. The anterior quote is a description from Baum, of how Wil views his New Orleans, at the age of ten.

Wil's story begins in 1980, with the picture of him growing up in his family's home. From the start, the reader can see the strength in Wil's mother and father, as they both woke up at "five o'clock every morning" to work long, hard days.<sup>4</sup> Da, as Wil called his father, had a passion for music, which transferred to Wil at an early age. Because of this, Wil joined Colton Junior High School's marching band and cultivated his musical talents.<sup>5</sup> As he grew up, Wil promised himself he would make an honest living for himself one day. Despite his promise, Wil fell prey to the pressure of his peers.

In 1983, Wil began to hang around his friend Chicken. Chicken had little family in his life, and turned to selling drugs enclosed in pies to make money.<sup>6</sup> Together, the two had a few run-ins with the police, causing Da to take disciplinary action. Through troublesome times, though, Wil demonstrated personal ambition. He constantly envisioned himself going to college, and then owning a house of his own.<sup>7</sup>

In 1995, Wil received his music degree from Southern University, and secured the marching band teaching position at Sarah T. Reed High School. It was here that he learned the true difficulties of New Orleans' public school system. Wil quickly came to understand the student body and his role within it, as his principal informed him that his predecessor and his wife had been beaten to death by band kids the previous year.<sup>8</sup> Wil

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<sup>4</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 1354-7111.

<sup>5</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 1726-7111.

<sup>6</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 1828-7111.

<sup>7</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 1905-7111.

<sup>8</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 2807-7111.

worked wonders with his kids, as he deeply cared for both their well-beings and their educations. His efforts showed through in his student's performances, academically and with the band. However, the educational system continued to frustrate Wil, pushing him to participate in fraudulent activity to buy new textbooks for his students.

In the years to come, Wil married Belinda and became a step-father to Curtis. His father got sick and passed, as his marriage dissolved. To an extent, Wil had achieved high status in his city, as a homeowner and Lexus-driver. While Wil's optimism diminished from time to time, he embodied his city, in his sanguinity and fulfillment. In writing this thesis, Wil became my personal symbol for a New Orleanian. He materializes many aspects of the city, including music, family, the flawed education system, and the drug culture. In other ways, Wil breaks away from the stereotypical New Orleanian, in his aspiration. This departure will be addressed in the conclusion, as Wil comes into the twenty-first century. On the whole, Wil is a manifestation of the New Orleanian poll, remarking on citizens' satisfaction levels.

In the following thesis, I will examine the relationship between race and Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Both race and Mardi Gras work to hold up and tear apart the city, concurrently. This paradoxical relationship is illustrated by the idea of masking, or wearing masks, in Mardi Gras. Essentially, New Orleans tries to hide behind the mask of its inherent problems, while using the mask to celebrate in unity. In the end, this contradiction produces the concept of a New Orleanian, who is happier and less affected by American ideals. These ideas were informed by different periods in New Orleanian history, addressed in each chapter.

In chapter two, I will trace the history of Mardi Gras from its origin in Europe, to its adoption in New Orleans. After New Orleans' establishment as a city, Mardi Gras began to develop its identity and personality.<sup>9</sup> Much of this identity and personality reflected the racial composition of the time, which provided the framework for future racial disputes. New Orleans was finding its footing as a city, leading up to the nineteenth century.

In chapter three, I will uncover a buried piece from America's past. Two hundred years ago, in 1811, New Orleans was home to the largest slave revolt in the United States' history. After careful and detailed planning, a few slave leaders took the reins. The revolt coincided with Mardi Gras, as this timing capitalized on the planters' insobriety. Ultimately, the results were devastating, and slavery maintained a tight grip on New Orleans.<sup>10</sup> The stage was set, then, for future shifts in black-white dynamics.

In chapter four, I will analyze the role of Creoles in New Orleanian society, in the nineteenth century. This unique portion of the population proposed an objection to Americans and their set ways. As a result, the two groups collided. Power shifted back and forth between them, and the shift translated to the dominance of Mardi Gras. In the end, Creoles were marginalized by New Orleans' division into municipalities, and Americans controlled Mardi Gras, once again.<sup>11</sup>

In chapter five, I will look at the turn of the twentieth century in New Orleans. This time period was characterized by the initiation of white-supremacist groups, and

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<sup>9</sup> James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 30-34.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 1820-4689.

<sup>11</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 37.

their contrasting black groups. Most notably, the White League influenced the city and its Mardi Gras processions. In 1900, the Robert Charles Riots broke out, highlighting the recurring tension between New Orleanian whites and blacks.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, New Orleans established its standing of having a corrupted police force.

Finally, in chapter six I will briefly evaluate Mardi Gras' advancements in the twentieth century. Mainly, though, I will explore the proceedings of Katrina in 2005, and its subsequent effects on New Orleans and its Mardi Gras. In the end, the devastating storm drove 2006's Mardi Gras to proceed.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it provided a platform for New Orleanians to express their frustrations. As always, racial undertones were woven into the experience and its aftermath.

Through the course of these chapters, I will have delved deeply into New Orleans. This city, though, is not an easy one to decipher. All in all, I have identified three significant components of New Orleans and its history. Consequently, I argue that the practice of Mardi Gras and the ever-present racial tensions simultaneously join and segregate the city. First, the thread of Mardi Gras connects all centuries, and provides an outlet for self-expression and the voicing of concerns, and an opportunity for the community to divide and come together.<sup>14</sup> Second, racial conflicts have and will afflict New Orleans. Third, the attitudes and mentalities of New Orleanians are primarily easy-going, short-termed, and unconcerned. As a result, this incongruity produced the character of New Orleanians, who find contentment in the city they call home. For them, they discover peace in the chaos.

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<sup>12</sup> William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Reid Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," *The Journal of American History* (December 2007): 792.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," 792.

To me, this coexistence of peace and chaos is of individual interest. Next year I will embark on a two-year adventure in New Orleans, where I will be teaching in a low socioeconomic area. The explored attitudes, tensions, and practices will soon be a part of my everyday life. Thus, my work carries both academic and personal weight. In the end, I hope to have a better understanding of the interworking of this perplexing place.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BIRTH OF MARDI GRAS AND NEW ORLEANS

To best understand Mardi Gras' history, a basic explanation of Carnival, Mardi Gras, and their procedures is helpful. The name Carnival stems from the Latin term *carnelevare*, which means to lift up, take away, or remove meat. The festivities take place before the start of Lent, and the forty day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday. Typically, before Lent celebrators would overindulge in meat, eggs, milk, and cheese, as they would only eat fish and fast in the coming weeks. Because of this debauchery, the French labeled the day before Ash Wednesday "Fat Tuesday," and it included the slaughter of a *boeuf gras*, or an ox. Within the course of the celebration, the feast of the Epiphany occurs on January 6, and is also called Kings' Day or Twelfth Night, referencing the "the day the gift-bearing Magi visited the Christ child."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the highpoint of Mardi Gras takes place forty-seven days before Easter, representing the forty days of Lent and seven Sundays.

In the following paragraphs, I will look at the origin of both New Orleans and Mardi Gras. In doing so, the groundwork is laid for the analysis of Mardi Gras alongside racial demographics in New Orleans. From the start, New Orleanian Mardi Gras and racial politics were entwined together. In essence, the two could not be separated, equally affecting one another. While the politics divided the people, Mardi Gras banded them together. Hence, New Orleans' entangled nature began as soon as the city and the celebration began.

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<sup>15</sup>Mardi Gras Unmasked, "Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans" (2010), <http://www.mardigrasunmasked.com/Carnival101/MardiGrasHistoryTheEvolutionofCarnival.asas> (accessed February 2, 2011).

Before Mardi Gras captured the heart of the U.S., and particularly New Orleans, Louisiana, the tradition emerged in Europe. The practice began thousands of years ago, most likely in the fifteenth century, and was deemed Carnival.<sup>16</sup> Originally, it was known as a pagan holiday, as reforming humanists and church leaders disagreed with the “satirical theatrics, boisterous games and bodily self-indulgence.”<sup>17</sup> These reformers linked the luxuries of Carnival to paganism, and the Greek and Roman Bacchanalia, Saturnalia, and Lupercalia festivals. Those who did participate celebrated the prospect of fertility and the beginning of spring.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Christianity began to take root in Rome, Italy. At this time, secular thinkers tied Carnival to the religion, as a means of justifying the indulgence. Thus, the holiday became attached to Judeo-Christian thought. Roman religious leaders guided this change, as it was simpler to include Carnival in their faith, than to do away with the cherished rituals of the people. Their rationale included the recognition “of the occasional need for carefree folly” so that they “loosened the festival’s ties to the logic of asceticism binding it to meatless Lent.”<sup>18</sup> In accordance with the spread of Christianity, Mardi Gras then expanded to England, France, Germany, and Spain.<sup>19</sup> The below image is an oil painting by Ernest Seigneurs, entitled “Le Carnaval, place de la Concorde,” and it depicts an early Carnival celebration in Paris, France.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans.”

<sup>17</sup> “Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans.”

<sup>18</sup> “Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans.”

<sup>19</sup> History.com, “Mardi Gras” (2011), <http://www.history.com/topics/mardi-gras> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Henri Schindler, *Mardi Gras: New Orleans* (New York: Flammarion: 1997), 12-13.



Mardi Gras spread much further away, starting on March 3, 1699. Pierre Le Moyne and Sieur d'Iberville reached the U.S., and settled seventy miles from New Orleans; they named their landing point "Pointe du Mardi Gras."<sup>21</sup> The name stemmed from the pride in and significance of Europe's Mardi Gras. From day one, New Orleans was associated with the tradition of Mardi Gras, that would come to define it as a city. The expedition continued on to claim settlements in Biloxi Bay, Mississippi, and Fort Louis de la Louisiane, Alabama. The second location is in present day Mobile, Alabama, and it was there that the first Carnival celebration was recorded in the U.S. in 1704. In this year, Nicholas Langlois established the Societe de Saint Louis, which inspired the Carnival krewes in New Orleans that play a prominent role in the merriment.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans."

<sup>22</sup> "Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans."



In 1717, the city of New Orleans was officially founded, under the discretion of Scottish promoter John Law and Le Moyne's brother, Jean de Bienville. It was seen as a profitable location, due to "its crescent shaped strategic location on the Mississippi close to the giant Lake Pontchartrain."<sup>23</sup> The name "New Orleans" recognized the Crown Regent and Duke of Orleans, who was responsible for managing the colonies for young, French King Louis XV.<sup>24</sup> In 1743, the city leaders and dancing expert Bebe introduced "society balls and banquets that became the model for upper-class Carnival soirees of later generations."<sup>25</sup> These customs were limited, though, as the majority of settlers endured tough conditions in the colony. Carnival had taken root and was in full swing in New Orleans around the time of the Revolutionary War, in the 1780s.<sup>26</sup>

As the Carnival season began to evolve, the city of New Orleans itself began to cultivate a personality. It became known for its "remarkable ethnic diversity" that drew people in, both to live and visit the Crescent City. The combination of Americans and Europeans made for a diverse environment. New Orleans had a remarkable blending of location, in being a port city, and a burgeoning, unique culture. Though, at the same time, this diversity encouraged trepidation and aggression. New Orleans' first record of Carnival occurred in 1781, when a report was sent to the *Cabildo*, or the Spanish colonial government. However, it was not a simple report, as it raised "concerns about slaves and free people of color masking and mingling while passing through the streets in search of

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<sup>23</sup> Carnaval, "Mardi Gras – Myth & History," <http://www.carnaval.com/cityguides/neworleans/history.htm> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> "Mardi Gras – Myth & History."

<sup>25</sup> "Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans."

<sup>26</sup> "Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans."

dance halls.”<sup>27</sup> Essentially, the report asked “for stricter racial segregation.”<sup>28</sup> Blacks and Indians stood behind each other, prompting the *Cabildo* to prohibit feather wearing altogether for New Orleanians. For a few years following, masks were completely forbidden for all participants.

In 1792, the city’s first theater opened for business, featuring a comic opera, *Silvain*. New Orleanians, though, maintained an “anti-intellectual” attitude. Most of the people dedicated themselves to “the frantic round of balls and parties that made up the Carnival season,” as opposed to academic or occupational pursuits.<sup>29</sup> As evidence of this, the city had no bookstores at the time, due to little interest in spending money on reading or one’s education. This indulgent lifestyle was accompanied by an unusual dynamic between men and women. In 1800, the *Cabildo* created a resolution to halt “the practice of putting wads of chewing tobacco on the chairs where the ladies sit, of chewing vanilla sticks and scattering these wads throughout the building thereby producing an intolerable odor.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, the tension between New Orleanians were not merely centered on race, but on gender as well.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, New Orleans was still French-dominated, in custom, outlook, and language. But in 1803, American troops came to the area, following the Louisiana Purchase.<sup>31</sup> With this intrusion, racial conflict increased. Violence became common at public balls, as people fought over which songs and dances would be played in which order. Most often, the disputes were over an American country

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<sup>27</sup> “Mardi Gras History: Carnival & New Orleans.”

<sup>28</sup> James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 30.

<sup>29</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 31.

dance and a French waltz. The French and Americans fought about “forms of civil law, over matters of language, over politics,” as well, yet the ballrooms provided a place for these clashes to come to light.<sup>32</sup>

One story that expresses the dispute is that of an American who switched the dance from French to English. In response, one woman yelled, “If the women have a drop of French blood in their veins, they will not dance.”<sup>33</sup> After this, all of the women cleared the room, and the notion sprouted that the Americans were trying to limit the customs of New Orleanians. William C.C. Claiborne was the governor of the Territory of Orleans in the early 1800s, and communicated the contention to Secretary of State James Madison. Claiborne wrote, “I fear you will suppose that I am wanting in respect in calling your attention to the Ball of New Orleans, but I do assure you Sir, that they occupy much of the Public mind and from them have proceeded the greatest embarrassments which have heretofore attended my administration.”<sup>34</sup> He sent this during the heart of Mardi Gras, which resulted in the forbiddance of weapons at balls, and the addition of police officers.

The racial clashes soon heightened, between the Americans and the newly named Creoles. The Creoles were those living in New Orleans, who were born in Louisiana, but had French or Spanish blood. For the most part, the Creoles viewed Americans as “crass opportunists,” while the Americans saw the Creoles as “idle and backward.”<sup>35</sup> Claiborne enforced these differences in 1804, by again telling Madison that “the principles of a popular Government are utterly beyond their comprehension,” in reference to the

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<sup>32</sup> Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 33.

Creoles.<sup>36</sup> From the start, the political representation of the city had an outward, racist opinion. This message got out to the public, inciting Creole Joseph Dubreuil to call Claiborne “a stranger here, a stranger as far as the soil itself is concerned, the customs, habits and even the language of the inhabitants and who is therefore without even the most absolutely necessary knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> This racial divergence was undeniable, as the principal leader of the area amplified the animosity. Unfortunately, these years were only a glimpse of the racial conflicts that were to come in New Orleans.

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<sup>36</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 33-34.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE UNMENTIONBLE UPRISING OF 1811

Leading up to the nineteenth century, New Orleans witnessed racial conflict between the city's settlers and Americans. When a third population was added to the city, the clashes heightened in intensity. As slaves were imported to Louisiana, an explicit relationship developed between planters and the slaves that worked their land. The detrimental and demeaning relationship came to a head in 1811, with the largest slave revolt in American history. However, evidence of the event has been swept under the rug. Daniel Rasmussen's recently published *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, exposes new truths to a wide audience.

In the following paragraphs, I will scrutinize the 1811 uprising and its place in New Orleanian history. Surely, the case is a crucial component of the city's racial history. It also relates to Mardi Gras, in its calculated timing. Most importantly, though, it reveals part of the New Orleanian identity. The movement to cover up the event reflects the city's disregard and discounting of racial conflict. These sentiments are present today, and allow for the persistence of New Orleanian racial divides.

By the nineteenth century, Mardi Gras had become engrained in New Orleanian culture. The case was no different in 1811. At the time, the German Coast was an extremely important place, as it handled a good portion of the produce market and commerce.<sup>38</sup> January 6, or Epiphany Sunday, kicked off the following month of Carnival celebrations. Epiphany Sunday was predominantly celebrated by planters and their loved

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<sup>38</sup> Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper, 2011), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 1, Location 99-4689.

ones, and brought with it religious significance. This year was particularly meaningful, as the sugar crop from the past year marked the most successful harvest yet.<sup>39</sup>

By 1811, Carnival and Mardi Gras had defined schedules, especially for the city's planters. Leading up to Mardi Gras, New Orleanians partook in "all-night parties, mixed-race balls, and constant gambling."<sup>40</sup> The evening of Epiphany Sunday featured the King's Ball, which was held at the Destrehan plantation in 1811.<sup>41</sup> Several Mardi Gras traditions were initiated around this time, including the King Ball's cake with a bean in the center, "the election of a King and Queen of the Twelfth Cakes," and of course, the consumption of alcohol.<sup>42</sup> The aforementioned plantation was owned by the Frenchman, Jean Noël Destrehan. Destrehan studied in France and then came to the U.S., to start a family and run his parents' plantation.

Many began to view Destrehan as the representative of the French living in the U.S. As follows, Destrehan worked to promote French culture and luxury in his new home.<sup>43</sup> Destrehan became a man of historical significance, as he involved himself in the debate over southern slavery. Destrehan, and men like him, took pride in their abilities to have slaves, as "To these men, slavery signaled status and wealth, not immortality or

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<sup>39</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 123-4689.

<sup>40</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 118-4689.

<sup>41</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 138-4689.

<sup>42</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 138-4689.

<sup>43</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 159-4689.

danger.”<sup>44</sup> This attitude, and the role of slaves in New Orleanian societal structure, account for the noteworthy statistics of slavery in the city.

Plantation owners generally believed that the German Coast could not function without slavery. In their minds, they needed slave labor to produce for the city, to secure money in their wallets. These plantations ruled the city and the surrounding areas. Thus, slaves made up for seventy-five percent of the population in 1810, and almost ninety percent of homes had slaves.<sup>45</sup> At first, these slaves came from the Atlantic slave trade, but after this influx, the region developed its own slave trade.<sup>46</sup> Destrehan expressed the idea, reiterated by other plantation owners, that “saw Africans as uniquely matched to the hot weather and tough work.” Similarly, he felt that whites were not suited for plantation work, as they were superior creatures. This belief was an easy one to hold, as it meant a dominant position for him. Slaves were in-between the sophisticated whites and the rugged land, and were crucial to the success of the plantation lifestyle.<sup>47</sup>

Along with this mentality came violent punishment practices. Oftentimes, the treatment of slaves included the forced wearing of face masks and iron collars, and whipping.<sup>48</sup> Rasmussen’s novel demonstrates the details of whipping, based on a first-person account. In Louisiana, whipping meant:

Three stakes is drove into the ground in a triangular manner, about 6 feet part. The culprit is to lie down, (which they will do without a murmur), flat on the

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<sup>44</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 180-4689.

<sup>45</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 199-4689.

<sup>46</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 962-4689.

<sup>47</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 192-4689.

<sup>48</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 209-4689.

belly. The Arms is then extended out, side ways, and each hand tied to a stake hard and fast. The feet is both tied to the third stake, all stretched tight, the overseer, or driver then steps back 7, 8, or ten feet with a raw hide whip about 7 feet long well plaited, fixed to a handle about 18 inches long, lays on with great force and address across the Buttocks, and if they please to assert themselves, they cut 7 or 8 inches long at every stroke.”<sup>49</sup>

The exacting and specific nature of the procedure dehumanized and justified the act, making it like punishing an animal. The details of slaves and their owners’ practices are critical in the study of this city, and the time period, as they explain the motivations of the brewing slave revolt.

This violent behavior undoubtedly sparked resentment and outrage among the slaves. In particular, two African men named Kook and Quamana initiated the revolutionary state of mind. They came to the New World in 1806, by force, alongside 1,000 to 1,500 other slaves. In total, between 24,000 and 29,000 slaves were shipped to Louisiana from Africa, between 1770 and 1808.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, forty percent of Africans intended for slave trade “died even before boarding a slave ship,” and ten “percent died either on the Middle Passage or shortly before arrival in the New World.”<sup>51</sup> Despite these losses, a considerable number of slaves were imported to New Orleans in these years.

When Kook and Quamana reached the U.S., they were already dead set against the idea of working on a plantation, because of the carnage they had witnessed on the trip over alone. Instead, they dreamed of inspiring a revolution. The two began by assembling

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<sup>49</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 955-4689.

<sup>50</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 263-4689.

<sup>51</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 289-4689.



a group of slaves who held similar beliefs.<sup>52</sup> Kook and Quamana knew, like other slaves, that Mardi Gras was a perfect time to carry out their dissent, as their masters were often drunk and unresponsive.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, these rebellions took careful and strategic planning. While the details of their exact preparations are unclear, it is sure that Kook and Quamana were astute and deliberate.

Before Kook and Quamana's arrival, Robert Livingston purchased the state of Louisiana from Napoleon for \$15 million in 1803. Livingston represented President Thomas Jefferson, and the purchase comprised one-quarter of the country's current geography.<sup>54</sup> Jefferson then appointed the previously mentioned Claiborne, from Virginia, to be Louisiana's governor.<sup>55</sup> Claiborne was an advocate of republicanism and conservatism, and was thus unprepared to manage the foreign and unpredictable New Orleans. Immediately, Claiborne was faced with multiple issues, as he "had to form a government, bring order to a wild frontier zone, and confront the dangers of a sugar colony that relied on the forced labor of a slave population."<sup>56</sup> While Claiborne originally clashed with European immigrants, like Destrehan, the clashes to come would be on a grander scale and between different races altogether.

Concurrently, New Orleans was bordered by an unstable Spanish rule in the west. Because of this, Claiborne aimed to remove the Spanish government and expand his

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<sup>52</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 406-4689.

<sup>53</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 426-4689.

<sup>54</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 598-4689.

<sup>55</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 617-4689.

<sup>56</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 638-4689.

reach, and made his start by first travelling to Washington D.C. in 1810.<sup>57</sup> Claiborne suggested a plan involving an unlawful take-over, and President James Madison agreed. Claiborne remained in D.C. to keep his name clean, while his military appropriated parts of West Florida and Baton Rouge.<sup>58</sup> To many, it seemed that Claiborne was ruthless and illegitimate in these dealings. Conversely, “Claiborne believed strongly that American expansion was God’s work, and that whatever actions he took to promote her power and improve her national security would ultimately prove justified by the blessings that would flow from enlightened government and individual liberty.”<sup>59</sup> Claiborne, expressing the belief in divine right, saw his position and his work as unemotional, straightforward, and supported by God. To him, his work was legitimate.

The actual structure and procedures of the plantation are worth noting, as they illustrate the daily lives of the people in question. Planters focused primarily on productivity and efficiency.<sup>60</sup> Aside from the slaves and their owners, there was a third, crucial group on the plantations: the slave drivers. The slave drivers were between slaves and owners, as “the system of slavery rested on coercing or bribing a portion of slaves into betraying their compatriots and becoming loyal tools of the planter elite.”<sup>61</sup> This intermediary body oversaw the plantation day-to-day, as well as administered much of the slaves’ physical punishment. Oftentimes the slave drivers had lighter skin, which convinced the owners of their trustworthiness. The lowest level of slaves, below the slave

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<sup>57</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 738-4689.

<sup>58</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 798-4689.

<sup>59</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 818-4689.

<sup>60</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 870-4689.

<sup>61</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 870-4689

drivers, was split into three categories: the first was “the strongest, and most powerful young men,” the second was “younger slaves and women,” and the third was “highly skilled laborers who knew the intricacies of cane sugar.”<sup>62</sup> Based on these differences, the slaves were given different assignments. With these specifications, the planters had control and simultaneously used their resources most effectively.

Charles Deslondes was one of the notable slave drivers on Manual Andry’s plantation in the early 1800s, about forty miles outside of New Orleans.<sup>63</sup> Rather than embracing his elevated role, Deslondes took revolutionary action. Impressively, Deslondes “independently plot[ted] the overthrow of a system from which he benefitted.”<sup>64</sup> On Epiphany Sunday in 1811, Deslondes met fellow slaves Quamana and Harry Kenner; each man represented one of the three largest plantations in the area.<sup>65</sup> Individually, they communicated to small sections of slaves, passing along their revolutionary notions. This was the start of the approaching upheaval.

Louisianans had attempted rebellions before, but they had never been carried out victoriously. In the past, failed rebellions meant severe punishment: “torture, decapitation, and one’s head upon a spike.”<sup>66</sup> Hence, knowing the potential consequences, the commanding slaves were courageous and calculated in their words and actions. On January 8, a group of slaves kicked off the revolution by rushing the second

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<sup>62</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 911-4689.

<sup>63</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 891-4689.

<sup>64</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1028-4689.

<sup>65</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1028-4689.

<sup>66</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1113-4689.

story of Andry's plantation, directed by Deslondes, as he had experience with the property. Deslondes used a plantation axe to swing at plantation owner Andry, and with the help of other rebels, killed Andry's son Gilbert. Andry fled, while Deslondes and his followers took militia uniforms and weapons.<sup>67</sup>

The crew continued on, despite rainy weather, to New Orleans. Along the way, the slaves spread the word from person to person, contributing to the larger movement. In many cases, planters left their plantations with trustworthy slaves in charge. This encouraged the rebel leaders, as it suggested that they would not have to fight as hard as they had once thought. As they travelled mile after mile, their army expanded. When they reached New Orleans, they were hopeful and optimistic.<sup>68</sup>

On January 9, the rebel slaves awoke early to prepare for the day to come.<sup>69</sup> A similar rebellion had taken place in Haiti a few years before, which struck fear into the hearts of New Orleanian whites. In an attempt to prevent what might come, Claiborne pronounced the city in "lockdown," meaning "No male Negro is permitted to pass the streets after 6 o'clock."<sup>70</sup> General Wade Hampton also worked to secure the city, under Claiborne. Most planters left, but a few stayed, to partake in hand-to-hand combat.<sup>71</sup> This

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<sup>67</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1153-4689.

<sup>68</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1275-4689.

<sup>69</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1301-4689.

<sup>70</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1320-4689.

<sup>71</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1362-4689.

ratio, though, left many of the plantations without owners to fight. The rebel group was more energetic than ever, but unsure of how to utilize their force.<sup>72</sup>

As the group began to question itself, fellow rebels became violent with one another, in hopes of spurring each other on. Even further, “Charles, Kook, Quamana, and their allies raised the stakes, threatening to kill any slaves who would not join.”<sup>73</sup> When they reached New Orleans, the congregation set a doctor’s house on fire, symbolizing an act against the city’s wealthy and powerful.<sup>74</sup> A few more slaves joined here and there, amounting to between 200 and 500 members by the end of the day.<sup>75</sup>

The rebels continued through the night to the next major plantation, owned by Jacques Fortier. Here, the slaves utilized a strategic technique, based on a West African method. It included a combination of advances and retreats, resulting in mass bewilderment. They were successful in this, as it tired the enemy and encouraged them to take “a break at Jacques Fortier’s plantation.”<sup>76</sup> Then, the slave group hoped to meet and defeat the Americans at Fortier plantation; the group did encounter the planter group, led by Charles Perret.<sup>77</sup> Deslondes’ people greatly outnumbered the planter militia.

Going into battle, the whites benefitted from their geographical knowledge. At the same time, the weather disadvantaged the whites. For them, it meant that they could not

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<sup>72</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1394-4689.

<sup>73</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1412-4689.

<sup>74</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1433-4689.

<sup>75</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1453-4689.

<sup>76</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1486-4689.

<sup>77</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1500-4689.

“bring in artillery, either by river or along the muddy River Road.”<sup>78</sup> This helped the black side, by leveling the playing field, as muskets were the only option. Shots rang from both sides, until the slave side had no ammunition left. Alternatively, the planter side had more than enough, and quickly took the lead.<sup>79</sup>

The rebels reacted by running for the nearby forest and swamp, if they were fast enough. Many, though, were shot down or captured by the opposition. Kook and Quamana were taken as prisoners, while Deslondes was able to escape.<sup>80</sup> Next, the whites searched the swamps for injured slaves, while rabid dogs attacked available bodies. Deslondes, in the swamp, was overtaken by these dogs, and bitten repetitively. When the planters found and identified his dead body, they “brought him back into the cane fields to make a public demonstration.”<sup>81</sup> The loss of Deslondes undoubtedly hit the slaves hard, as they reluctantly moved forward with their revolt, less one instrumental leader.

Between January 12 and January 21, a pattern developed in the killing of slaves: each dead slave was decapitated, regardless of the cause of death. Then, the whites put the heads on poles, and proudly displayed them all over town.<sup>82</sup> More than ever, this practice marked a new level of barbarity. At the time, many planters, and whites in

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<sup>78</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1532-4689.

<sup>79</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1553-4689.

<sup>80</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1573-4689.

<sup>81</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1599-4689.

<sup>82</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1639-4689.

general, thought of their slaves as animals, useful only for labor. Thus, the rising up of this crew caused panic. In response, killing turned into savagery.<sup>83</sup>

In the next week, the plantations owners held tribunals, designed to implicate the oppositional leaders. Planters were hoping “to legitimize their violence and to help reestablish the boundaries between the civilized and the savage,” or as they saw it, the whites and the blacks.<sup>84</sup> For the most part, the number of slaves killed in the tribunals was greater than the number of recognized leaders. Among these, Kook and Quamana were killed and beheaded.<sup>85</sup> Some slaves were brought before a formal court, which became known for its mercilessness. By January 21, over one hundred heads dotted the streets of New Orleans, creating a bloodcurdling sight and stench.

After, Claiborne immediately began damage control. Claiborne championed the military victors, but kept politics separate. Consequently, the idea and system of slavery were not called into question. Simply put, it looked like a successful dissolution of a mutiny.<sup>86</sup> Some disagreed with Claiborne’s take, including one of New Orleans’ newspapers, the *Louisiana Courier*. One article expressed the surprising opinion of some New Orleanians, stating that “We are very sorry to learn that ferocious sanguinary disposition marked the character of some of the inhabitants. Civilized man ought to

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<sup>83</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1639-4689.

<sup>84</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1700-4689.

<sup>85</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1764-4689.

<sup>86</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1823-4689.

remember well his standing, and never let himself sink down to the level of savage; our laws are summary enough and let them govern.”<sup>87</sup>

This quote spoke for the minority, though, as the future would soon tell. Claiborne’s goal, perhaps along with other Louisianan leaders, was to cover up the uprising. If it were to have received greater attention and coverage, more would know the truth: it was the largest slave rebellion in American history. Instead, the efforts to conceal it succeeded, and amounted to “the collective amnesia about the 1811 uprising in historical and popular memory.”<sup>88</sup> The concealment allowed for the continuation of slavery in the city, and thus higher productivity and profit for white planters. But far worse, the savagery committed went unnoticed and unpunished.

Thus, a precedent was set in New Orleans: the 1811 rebellion was a taboo topic. It was not until much later in the century that the structure of slavery began to change. As Rasmussen suggests, it took “a war—and massive resistance on the part of African Americans—to separate the American nation from its dependence on slavery and secure the freedom for which the 1811 rebels had fought and died.”<sup>89</sup> By the mid 1860s, racial changes were finally seen in Louisiana, as the slaves were freed.<sup>90</sup> Although, this secrecy paved the way for future racial conflicts to plague the city and its people.

2011 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the slave revolt. Because of the distance from the event, the rebellion has been covered in a few print and media sources. Even so, this

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<sup>87</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1820-4689.

<sup>88</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 1820-4689.

<sup>89</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 2110-4689.

<sup>90</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 2256-4689.



case is crucial in the study of New Orleanian history. As such, the city of New Orleans recognized the past, to some extent, by holding informational exhibits and lectures. Lorraine Gendron painted the below picture, which illustrates the 1811 rebellion.<sup>91</sup> Her work adds color and expression to the suppressed revolt, suggesting hope for future generation's knowledge of the outbreak.



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<sup>91</sup> Edward W. Lewis, "New Orleans: The Struggle for Recognition of the Historic 1811 Slave Revolt," *The Louisiana Weekly*, January 10, 2011, <http://revolutionaryfrontlines.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/new-orleans-the-struggle-for-recognition-of-the-historic-1811-slave-revolt/> (accessed April 4, 2011).

Today, Leon Walters is a specialist on the subject, stemming from his familial oral tradition. In the 1990s he began intensive research, exploring the stories he had been told, and bringing science backing to southern history. Through his work for the Afro-American History Society of New Orleans, he established the “Hidden History Tours,” designed to educate students and tourists about the atrocities of 1811.<sup>92</sup> Louisiana has yet to officially recognize the occurrence. As such, Waters strives to spread the message, but the revolution is still absent from textbooks and conversations.

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<sup>92</sup> Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*, Location 2291-4689.

## CHAPTER 4

### NEW ORLEANIAN IMMIGRATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

As aforementioned, New Orleans has always been an ethnically diverse city. With this diversity, though, has come feelings of hostility and disagreement. The nineteenth century was no different, and saw many racial struggles. As discussed in the previous chapter, the century began with the largest slave rebellion in U.S.' history, in New Orleans, in January of 1811. While the contention between blacks and whites persisted in New Orleans, it was the contention between Americans and Creoles that took the spotlight in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the following paragraphs, I will consider the nineteenth century, in the context of New Orleanian history. These years provide an ideal example of the connection between Mardi Gras and race in the Crescent City. The power struggle between the Creoles and Americans played out in Mardi Gras, then in the city's politics, then in Mardi Gras, and so on. Despite these vacillations, Mardi Gras adopted remarkable traditions that hold true today. Also, New Orleans itself gained a standing reputation.

Before moving onto the racial disputes, it is important to look at the reasons behind French immigration to the U.S., and New Orleans in particular. These reasons, though, were not the same for all immigrants. A portion of the immigrant pool was French royalists, who were exiled due to their involvement in the French Revolution. For example, Louis Philippe Joseph de Roffignac came to New Orleans in 1800, as his "godparents were the Duke and Duchess of Orleans" and the parents of the to-be French

monarch.<sup>93</sup> After Napoleon Bonaparte's *coup d'état*, another group of French immigrants came to New Orleans, both those who agreed with and disagreed with Bonaparte's rule. In addition to political reasons, "most immigrants from France probably came in search of adventure, fortune, or some combination of the two."<sup>94</sup> This chapter will demonstrate the impact of this immigration, in creating Creoles and their function in New Orleanian society.

In the early nineteenth century, the demographics of the city exhibited its heterogeneity. In 1820, New Orleans had 27,175 people in total. Of this group, "6,237 were free people of color," who spoke "Creole French" or "Nigger French."<sup>95</sup> This category held a mix of descendants of white men who worked for the freedom of slave concubines and children, those who bought their freedom or earned it for "meritorious service," and immigrants who were never enslaved.<sup>96</sup> The second part of the group was made up of 7,355 slaves, who were both Creoles and Americans. Lastly, there were 13,584 whites, making up the greater part of the New Orleans' colored population. Further down the line, New Orleans' population tripled in size in the 1830s, jumping from 20,110 to 61,131, by cause of Irish and German immigration.<sup>97</sup>

Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon's *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* addresses the demographics of New Orleans' from 1810 to 1860, and explicates New Orleans' resistance to Americanization. The numbers come directly from censuses taken during the time period, and divide the city into non-French, foreign

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<sup>93</sup> Arnold R Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>94</sup> Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 113.

<sup>95</sup> James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 34.

<sup>96</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 34.

<sup>97</sup> Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 119.

French, Creoles, free persons of color, and slaves. While each group tended to fluctuate, peaking around the 1840s, the non-French population grew dramatically and consistently. Overall, New Orleans saw significant expansion in the nineteenth century, which generated an environment vulnerable to divisions.

While there were conflicts between Americans and Creoles in the eighteenth century, as evidenced by the ballrooms showdowns, Creoles asserted their presence in the early 1800s. The initial conflict stemmed from the strained concept of combining two cultures. The majority of both sides were superficially in favor of this combination, “but such realistic acceptance of a transformed political attachment hardly bespoke willingness by Louisianans to renounce their culture or identity or to submit passively to their new partner’s unilateral interpretation of rights.”<sup>98</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, Creoles took control of Mardi Gras without hesitation. In 1827, a small number of Parisian men came to New Orleans after studying in France and brought with them “fancy costumes to dance in the streets.”<sup>99</sup> Up until this point, masking had been outlawed, as it disguised participants’ races. Yet, when the men returned with their spirited carousal, their masking went unquestioned. The same year, the city council received “a petition signed by two hundred prominent citizens,” which “lifted the ban on masking for the period from January 1 through Mardi Gras.”<sup>100</sup>

The force behind this change came from the Creole population. Creoles, as well as other colored inhabitants, foresaw that masking would allow everyone to equally participate in Mardi Gras, despite class and race. Councilman Maunsel White, a devoted

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<sup>98</sup> Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 145.

<sup>99</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 35.

Episcopalian, attested to, but disagreed with the fact that masked balls had been common practice for years. At the balls, it was not uncommon for “‘high class’ ladies...to be found on the same floor as quadroons,” or people of one-quarter black and three-quarters Caucasian descent.<sup>101</sup> Conversely, two other councilmen agreed with the revision. J.F. Canonge had no problem with this mixing of classes, and Dominique-Francois Burthe believed that the masks correctly represented the French population.<sup>102</sup> In the end, White was outnumbered, and masking became legal.

This noteworthy shift marked the time of the Creole Mardi Gras, beginning in 1827. A few years later, in 1835, a Mardi Gras visitor chronicled his experience. Undoubtedly, the happening was a foreign one, and was a foreshadowing of years of New Orleans Mardi Gras to come. He wrote:

Men and boys, women and girls, bond and free, white and black, yellow and brown, exert themselves to invent and appear in grotesque, quizzical, diabolical, horrible, humorous, strange masks and disguises. Human bodies are seen with heads of beasts and birds; snakes’ heads and bodies with arms of apes; man-bats from the moon; mermaids, satyrs, beggars, monks, and robbers, parade and march on foot, on horseback, in wagons, carts, coaches, cars &c, in rich confusion up and down the street, wildly shouting, singing, laughing, drumming, fiddling, fifing, and all throwing flour broadcast as they went their reckless way.<sup>103</sup>

The visitor highlights the diversity of the celebration, and portrays it as inclusive of all types of people. Although it was a bizarre spectacle, he seemed to appreciate the universality of Mardi Gras. This diversification is a direct reflection of the Creole dominance of the festival, as Creoles worked to make the festivity accessible for all.

In 1837, the *Daily Picayune* newspaper provided the first account of a Mardi Gras parade on Ash Wednesday:

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<sup>101</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 35.

<sup>103</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 36.

A lot of masqueraders were parading through our streets yesterday, and excited considerable speculation as to whom they were, what their motives were and what upon earth could induce them to turn out in such grotesque and outlandish habiliments. Some said they were Seminoles; some that it was Brown's Circus—while others said nothing and very likely knew nothing at all about it. Boys, negroes, fruit women and what not followed the procession—shouting and bawling and apparently highly delighted with the fun or, what is more probable, anxious to fill their pockets with sugar plums, kisses, oranges &c, which were lavishly bestowed upon them by the so good-hearted jokers, whoever they were.<sup>104</sup>

This passage is telling, as it reflects not only the physical celebration, but the Creole energy of the city, propelling the celebration. At this point, Mardi Gras was somewhat of a mystery to New Orleanians. This element of the unknown and question of motivation captured the attention of the people, whether negatively or positively.

The following year, in 1838, the *Commercial Bulletin* made an announcement on Ash Wednesday. It described Carnival in a positive light, and lastly mentioned that “the exhibition surpassed anything of the kind ever witnessed here.”<sup>105</sup> Clearly, the Creole influence on Mardi Gras continued to make the festival larger, and more popular. But outside of Carnival, New Orleans' Creoles had less and less power. Before 1836, Creoles were the majority in city council. However, in 1836 the tides turned. The Americans, out of fear that their neighborhoods would be unrepresented, succeeded in convincing the state legislature to separate “New Orleans into three municipalities with separate governments.”<sup>106</sup> The municipality divisions had drastic effects on the city. Now, essentially, the Creoles were confined to a small district, as the Americans spread uptown.

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<sup>104</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 36.

<sup>105</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 37.

More and more, New Orleans saw a struggle between Creole customs and Americanization, while the Creoles had less and less say in commerce, real estate, and politics.<sup>107</sup> This decrease in Creole impact was seen in the decrease of the French language in newspapers, business, and the courts, limiting the usage of the language to select groups.<sup>108</sup> In addition to Americans, Creoles' status was threatened by steady immigration, including the British, Germans, and Irish. The chaos and disorder that had come to be associated with Mardi Gras persisted, but did not please these new New Orleanians. For example, one Englishman remarked, in 1846, that the "blending of the negroes, quadroons and mulattoes in the crowd" was distasteful.<sup>109</sup> This sentiment even began to infiltrate the Creole population, as well.

As the Creoles lost control of the city, they likewise lost control of Mardi Gras. *L'Abeille*, the Creole newspaper, expressed the concerns of these people, regarding the sacred celebration. It referred to Carnival as lewd, and in 1850, "*L'Abeille* gloomily concluded that 'the genuine Mardi Gras of former years had passed forever.'"<sup>110</sup> The next year, the *Daily Picayune* called for a complete dismissal of Mardi Gras, due to "the vulgarities of lubberly boys."<sup>111</sup> Additionally, the city's elderly population disliked the event for its loud disruptions.

This decrease in spirit and support was directly linked to the diminishing role of the Creoles in New Orleans society. Finally, in 1852, the city was once again rejoined

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<sup>107</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 38.

<sup>108</sup> Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 161.

<sup>109</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 39.

<sup>110</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 39.

<sup>111</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.



under one government.<sup>112</sup> This meant, for the Creoles, that they no longer had authority, politically or otherwise. The change prompted even more resentment between the Americans and the Creoles, as the Creoles responded “by looking down their noses at Americans, whom they considered to be crass, money-grubbing destroyers of a delicate colonial civilization.”<sup>113</sup> These sentiments mirrored how the Creoles thought of Americans a few years before. The demographics of New Orleans, and the corresponding power of each race, were represented by the state of Mardi Gras in this time period.

Furthermore, a relationship between New Orleans’ races and politics, and the energy of the city, developed. It was at this time, between the 1850s and 1860s, when New Orleans established the reputation that many affiliate with the area today.<sup>114</sup> Typically, the Creole neighborhoods were illiterate, and education did not seem to be a priority, as it was not a possibility. As follows, bookstores were few and far between in New Orleans. Alternatively, “getting a drink was easy.”<sup>115</sup> The city’s economy hit a high point, resulting in two thousand businesses that sold alcohol. Alcohol sales were not limited to liquor stores and saloons, but alcohol was sold “in grocery stores, oyster houses and coffee shops.”<sup>116</sup> In these years, New Orleans became known as a drunken city, proven by the 610 people who died from delirium tremens between 1856 and 1860.<sup>117</sup> These alcoholic tendencies spilled over to all classes, including the courts. In one

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<sup>112</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

<sup>113</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

<sup>114</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

<sup>115</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

<sup>116</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 38.

<sup>117</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

instance, even, a criminal trial's jury deliberated "over six bottles of claret, a bottle of brandy, a bottle of champagne and a few glasses of absinthe."<sup>118</sup>

Even worse than the effects of alcoholism, though, was the yellow fever epidemic that hit New Orleans in 1853. The disease was especially haunting, as it affected both the rich and the poor. All in all, eight thousand residents died. Since the cause was unknown, or yet to be determined as mosquitoes, New Orleanians tied the disease to "unhygienic conditions" and "the crowded and unsanitary" conditions in impoverished neighborhoods.<sup>119</sup> The city itself took a huge toll, as the streets piled with garbage and dead animals, and human feces collected in public. Consequently, the water supply was continually contaminated, or blocked by carcasses. Before, New Orleanians turned to Mardi Gras as an outlet, but as discussed above, this event had become tainted. Immigrants, prostitutes, and violence tainted the festival, and the Creoles were tied to this negativity.

1856's Mardi Gras demonstrated the state of the city and of its inhabitants. This year, hoodlums and thieves dominated the celebration. In particular, "Irish hooligans" took to the streets in participation.<sup>120</sup> In the same vein, prostitutes ruled Mardi Gras, and "rode through the French Quarter in open carriages" as "gangs of thugs pursued their murderous feuds and the police recorded widespread mugging."<sup>121</sup> This behavior led the more respectable dwellers to stay home; attendance greatly decreased. As in past years, this decline was blamed on a particular race, and in this case it was the immigrant population in New Orleans.

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<sup>118</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 40.

<sup>119</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 41.

<sup>120</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 43.

<sup>121</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 43.

*L'Abeille* legitimized this accusation. A 1856 issue declared that “In old times, this was the greatest holiday in the whole year round in the Crescent City, but of late years its observance has been gradually falling into desuetude before the march of new people, customs and ideas.”<sup>122</sup> These feelings of disappointment and anger, on behalf of the Creoles, were understandable. The decline of Mardi Gras was related to the decline of Creole influence in New Orleans, and the decline of Mardi Gras was related to insurgence of immigrants’ unsavory conduct. However, this clash preceded a shift in Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and in the city itself.

John Pope was the leader of this transformation. His apothecary, located in a popular area of town, became a crucial meeting place nicknamed “The Club.” It gathered many New Orleanians, particularly merchants and professionals, who chatted and smoked together. Pope gathered these people, and worked to create a new name for Mardi Gras. Rather than depending on a certain group or race, Pope hoped to “prove *L'Abeille* wrong by making new people and customs the salvation rather than the death of Mardi Gras.”<sup>123</sup> At this low point, Creoles were willing to make concessions, in order to improve their status in New Orleans. Thus, Pope called upon thirteen men, of seemingly varied backgrounds, to form the first Carnival organization. This organization, and the future organizations to come, were called “krewes,” or the French word for crew. In the end, the krewe did not have any formal racial quotas, but was predominantly white. Pope’s views reflect a common theme in white thought at the time. On the outside, white men claimed they wanted the security and deliverance of each man, despite his race. But

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<sup>122</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 43.

<sup>123</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 44.

on the outside, non-whites were pushed out the picture, and discriminated against. In the end, many leading white men were only looking out for the protection of their own race.

1857's Mardi Gras introduced this krewe, under the name "Mistick Krewe of Comus."<sup>124</sup> The krewe emerged at daybreak, took to the streets for two hours, and ended the day with a private ball. Thomas Herndon, one of the original members of the krewe, described his view of Mardi Gras and its role in New Orleans: "It was reserved for the Crescent City to mold the Carnival festivities into one grand and comprehensive system and plan for the enjoyment of the people, without fee or reward, public spectacle and pageants as splendidly brilliant as the genius of man and the lavish expenditure of money could make them."<sup>125</sup> There were mixed reviews of the production, with the division, once again, along racial lines.

As there were only a few Creole members of Comus, the remaining Creole population was displeased with the lack of representation. While the establishment of Comus molded Mardi Gras tradition for years to come, it was made clear that the krewe was "not driven by any desire to heal ancient rifts."<sup>126</sup> Either way, the krewe made it an extravagant and memorable Mardi Gras year, as it kicked off the krewe tradition. To further stabilize the organization, Comus members created a constitution, a motto, an initiation fee, and an oath.<sup>127</sup> With time came the establishment of an annual ball. Below is an image of an invitation to the Comus Ball in 1899, painted by Jennie Wilde, exemplifying the extravagance of the krewe.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 44.

<sup>125</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 45.

<sup>126</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 46.

<sup>127</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 50-51.

<sup>128</sup> Henri Schindler, *Mardi Gras: New Orleans* (New York: Flammarion: 1997), 76-77.



The Mardi Gras krewe advancements were soon shaken up by some tumultuous months. Mid-1857 brought a startling change to Louisiana state legislature. A law was introduced that “banned the manumission of any slave, and two years later adopted a resolution urging free people of color to find a master.” Accordingly, a large number of blacks left New Orleans. Nevertheless, this news did not limit Comus’ future. Two years after its establishment, the krewe contained 150 members, which was deemed its maximum.<sup>129</sup> More and more, Comus seemed to represent the white, wealthier section of

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<sup>129</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 56.

town. The first krewe's lack of diversity reflected the politics of the city, but paved the way for the diversified krewes to come.

As previously mentioned, New Orleans carried on as a city that lacked books and theater, making it a “cultural wasteland.”<sup>130</sup> The idea of it being a cultural wasteland overlooks the culinary and musical passion of the city, by focusing solely on educational standards. Also, for the most part, the city's people were satisfied with occupations as clerks, craftsmen, and public servants, rather than attempting to move up in the workplace.<sup>131</sup> Still, New Orleanians had become proud of their city, and saw promise and potential in it. In the early 1860s, New Orleans had already begun its cultural transformation, beginning with its French Opera House and popularized sporting games. Also noteworthy, New Orleans had a railroad system, and a progressive streetcar system, which marked it “as a great metropolis of the modern world.”<sup>132</sup> Assuredly, New Orleans was a city on the move. It saw monumental changes in the nineteenth century, demographically and politically. Many of these changes were most readily seen through the racial contention between Creoles and Americans, and its effects on Mardi Gras. This trend continued into the twentieth century, which had its own share of racial clashes and their corresponding Mardi Gras.

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<sup>130</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 57.

<sup>131</sup> Hirsch and Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, 163.

<sup>132</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 58.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE WHITE-BLACK DIVIDE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The nineteenth century brought its fair share of racial conflict to New Orleans and its Mardi Gras, as evidenced by the American-Creole struggle. However, the twentieth century was highlighted by white-black controversy. Much of this controversy stemmed from unresolved issues in the late 1800s: the nation's Reconstruction period and preceding Civil War. An especially significant period in New Orleanian history began in 1874, with the creation of the White League, which influenced the city for the coming century.

In the following paragraphs, I will explore New Orleans in the years preceding and at the start of the twentieth century. In this period, the clash between blacks and whites is ignited, once again. The organization of the White League and the Robert Charles Riots of 1900 were critical elements of the conflict. Also, New Orleans embodied the national struggles of the time, including war and economic depression. More than in other years, New Orleans' divide felt irreparable.

Before delving into 1874, it is necessary to briefly examine the years leading up to it. 1861 marked the start of the Civil War, and ignited New Orleans' passion for the fight. Several war leaders hailed from New Orleans, including Pierre Beauregard, "a Confederate general, who, three months later, led the successful defense against the initial Union charge at the first Battle of Bull Run."<sup>133</sup> While New Orleanians were

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<sup>133</sup> James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 59.

passionate, the war drastically affected the city. Over twenty thousand men fought in the war, on the side of the Confederacy, leaving the city empty and lifeless.

In 1862, New Orleans' typical Carnival celebration was cancelled, as local families felt it would be disrespectful to those serving and those lost. These same families were hurt economically, and were forced to rely on government help for food and necessities.<sup>134</sup> The city surrendered in the same year, and was composed of 170,000 habitants, made up of 14,000 slaves and 11,000 free people of color. This composition distinguished New Orleans, as it had a three-part structure, with "a colored middle class somewhat ambivalent toward the prospect of emancipation."<sup>135</sup> The war continued on, as these classes started to pull away from one another.

The Civil War came to a close in 1865, due to General Robert E. Lee's surrender.<sup>136</sup> The end, though, did not signify a solution or unification of thought. Instead, the divergent opinions of the Confederacy and the Union raged on. This discrepancy was especially apparent in New Orleans, as the "returning soldiers voted en masse to produce a legislature dominated by former Confederates who were able to run for office."<sup>137</sup> Legislators, for the state of Louisiana, quickly approved the resolution stating: "This is a Government of white people, made and to be perpetuated for the exclusive benefit of the white race."<sup>138</sup> Concurrently, the legislature worked to push New Orleanian blacks down in the ranks.

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<sup>134</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 60.

<sup>135</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 72.

<sup>136</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 75.

<sup>137</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 75.

<sup>138</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 76.



While Mardi Gras quieted down during the Civil War years, it picked back up again in 1866. Comus participated for the first time in five years, projecting the image of an undivided New Orleans, with a promising future. It became clear, still, that these ideas of prosperity and peace were intended for the white population, alone.<sup>139</sup> A constitutional convention was called in the same year, to resolve issues of “Negro suffrage.”<sup>140</sup> On July 30, a shooting broke out, culminating in thirty-four blacks dead and one hundred and fifty others wounded. The culprits were policemen, augmented by a white mob.<sup>141</sup> New Orleanians both supported and opposed the riot, perpetuating the city’s division. In response, the congressional committee proposed, “a provisional government established and maintained by military power.”<sup>142</sup> The following year, Congress split the South into five pieces, to be ruled militarily, as the Confederate states refused to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>143</sup>

In 1868, Louisiana’s legislature made steps forward, provoked by the military rule. A bill of rights was drafted, intended to give “blacks the right to vote and hold office and denied the franchise to former Confederate soldiers and anyone who had voted for or signed Louisiana’s ordinance of secession.”<sup>144</sup> As in previous cases, steps forward split the black and whites even deeper. New organizations began to crop up in New Orleans, including the Crescent City Democratic Club, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Knights of the White Camellia. The three groups had similar goals, mainly to expel Unioners and maintain white rule of the city. 1868’s presidential election between Horatio Seymour

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<sup>139</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 76.

<sup>140</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 78.

<sup>141</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 78.

<sup>142</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 82.

<sup>143</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 84.

<sup>144</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 86.

and General Ulysses S. Grant shook up New Orleans in particular. Louisiana saw suspicious activity leading up to the election, including the deaths or injury of more than two thousand people, violence in the streets, and the tampering of ballots.<sup>145</sup> Despite New Orleanians' best efforts, Grant came out on top and won the election.

Mardi Gras in New Orleans continued annually, and gained more krewes and traditions with each year. 1872 was no different, as it featured various parades and a variety of participants. More than three thousand people walked the streets, constituting a true mix of people. An article in *The Picayune* attested to the blending of "Ku Kluxes, Chinamen, Japanese, brigands, clowns, monkeys and Knights of McGraw."<sup>146</sup> This year marked the start of commercialization of Mardi Gras, as it became associated with particular restaurants and hotels. These trademarks of Mardi Gras, in New Orleans, developed over the next few years, as well.

In 1874, white supremacy and its activists were alive and well in Louisiana. Blacks, on the opposite side, were displeased with their lack of status and place in society. As follows, there was major racial contention at the time. In one instance, a group of white supremacists forcibly removed "prisoners from the Colfax jail for a mass lynching that left fifty-nine blacks and two whites dead."<sup>147</sup> After the massacre, only eight of the ninety men involved were put on trial, and no verdict was ever reached. This further propelled anger and frustration, on either side of the race line.

At the same time, the entire country's economy fell into a depression. Economic worries contributed to the citizen's circumstances affected by the Civil War. William Pitt

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<sup>145</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 87.

<sup>146</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 98.

<sup>147</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 105.

Kellogg, Louisiana's governor, further provoked the racial conflict, as he appointed an increased number of black men to his administration. A white group emerged that called its members "regulators," who lynched blacks accused of crimes.<sup>148</sup> These happenings blazed the way for a notable group to materialize, called the White League.

The White League quickly developed a reputation for itself, as its members rode "unmasked and in broad daylight, with hangman's nooses dangling from their saddles, to the doors of parish courthouses."<sup>149</sup> The organization aimed to encourage the resignation of blacks from public office, which implied compliance or death. Some officers even left the state, on top of their resignations. Before a certain group of them could escape the state, though, the White League lynched all six men. As the White League suddenly dominated New Orleans, it became tied to Mardi Gras, too.

As the twentieth century approached, Mardi Gras became increasingly controlled by clubs and krewes. Within these clubs and krewes, the white-supremacist groups were stakeholders. The White League manipulated this position to symbolize "a mark of manhood and resistance to a northern government that sustained Negro and carpetbag tyranny."<sup>150</sup> The principal complaint that New Orleanian whites had, was that the new government insisted on disarmament. This resentment was expressed mainly from the White League, and is explicitly stated in its motto: "Where the white race rules, the negro is peaceful and happy; where the black rules, the negro is starved and oppressed."<sup>151</sup>

While the above phrase seems ignorant and unfeeling, the League's members wholeheartedly believed in its validity. More and more, the White Leaguers began to see

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<sup>148</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 105.

<sup>149</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 106.

<sup>150</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 107.

<sup>151</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 107.

it as their duty to save blacks, by preserving their white-dominated society. They realized, though, that they could not convince blacks of their perspective, as the blacks had “become maddened by the hatred and conceit of race.”<sup>152</sup> The League made clear that its goal was to protect and uphold the rights of whites, but not to meddle in the rights of other races. However, this aim was quickly disproven, as members took violent action against numerous blacks in their community.

A major objection to the “Africanization” of New Orleans came in 1874, in the form of an appeal to New Orleanian citizens. A group of fifty-five men compiled a statement, published in the *Daily Picayune*, designed to jolt the white people of New Orleans. It spoke to “the silent but indignant sufferers of outrage after outrage heaped upon you by an usurping government.”<sup>153</sup> The statement continued on to demand white New Orleanians to reclaim their lost rights and status in their community, by assembling at an upcoming meeting. This inspired some opposition from the blacks, in the form of a fleeting Black League.

When September 14, 1874 came, J. Dickson Bruns’ appeal proved to be successful. At the start, six thousand white men came together, but not only American whites. Instead, “Creoles and Americans, Germans, Italians and Irish” convened.<sup>154</sup> This is a critical piece of New Orleans’ race history, as it marked the first time that a diverse group of whites converged under a common cause: to strip black rights. There was a distinct division in the city, between blacks and everyone else. The preceding issues

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<sup>152</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 107.

<sup>153</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 109.

<sup>154</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 111.

between Americans and Creoles seemed to take a back seat, as this racial concern took precedence. This split deepened further in the next few days.

White leaguers led the rally, and persistently preached their mission. According to them, they were working to uphold everyone's rights, white and otherwise. However, they wanted to punish "thieves, plunderers and spoliators of the State," which coincidentally, in their minds, meant blacks.<sup>155</sup> Quickly, though, this rally turned into a colossal assemblage. As the day wore on, around 28,000 democratic White Leaguers assaulted the city's republican metropolitan police. After hours of confrontation, "the White League inflicted a stunning defeat on the Metropolitans and forcibly deposed Governor William Pitt Kellogg."<sup>156</sup> The White League fighters' intended to stop Reconstruction in the state and they named the event "The Battle of Liberty Place."<sup>157</sup>

At this point, obviously, the White League commanded New Orleans. President Grant sent a message to New Orleanians, telling them to take up arms and defend themselves against violent threats from the black community, if necessary. Kellogg was replaced with McEnery as the governor, and the *Daily Picayune* was quick to report on the city's transformation. On September 15, an article asserted the people's delight with the new situation, and the change in power. It even expressed that, "had Kellogg remained in power, 'the state would have been Africanized' and that 'nothing could have been darker, bleaker and more hopeless than the prospect of Louisiana under such a

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<sup>155</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 112.

<sup>156</sup> Know LA: Encyclopedia of Louisiana, "The Battle of Liberty Place," <http://www.knowla.org/entry.php?rec=757> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>157</sup> "The Battle of Liberty Place."

government.”<sup>158</sup> These articles persisted, claiming that the city had the best interest of all its citizens at heart.

The new governorship, however, was a brief one. In the following days, Grant took control of the state. Instead, Grant commissioned his troops to head to the city to resume regulation of the people, and he continued to augment with more troops as needed.<sup>159</sup> Grant intended to manage the rising racial hostility, despite his allegiance to the white side. An altercation between Kellogg and Major Edward Burke, who led the White League in Battle of Liberty Place, embodied the New Orleans’ clash. Burke punched Kellogg as he passed by in taxi, and Kellogg responded by firing a shot.<sup>160</sup> The shot did not hit Burke, but reflected the intensity in the city.

As the turn of the century neared, the white-black fragmentation endured. In 1890, former U.S. Senator B. F. Jonas gave a speech detailing the White League and its presence in New Orleans. Even broader, though, he talked about the position and rights of both whites and blacks. Jonas suggested that the city was on the brink of “a war of races,” with the opposition of white and black militia groups. With the Jim Crow laws’ introduction of lawful segregation, tensions built and built, spreading the idea of a race war.<sup>161</sup> This led the powerful New Orleanian whites to fight the enfranchisement of blacks, by appealing to legislature.

The appeal to legislature took the form of now Governor Murphy Foster, initiating a constitutional convention in 1896. It coincided with the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “upheld a Louisiana law requiring separate railway coaches for

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<sup>158</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 117.

<sup>159</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 118.

<sup>160</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 119.

<sup>161</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 156.

whites and blacks.”<sup>162</sup> Cases like these, and the dispute of enfranchisement, brought into question the definitions of “white” and “black.” *Plessy v. Ferguson* deemed a Negro any person with “a traceable amount of black blood.”<sup>163</sup> Yet, this was a blurry line, as New Orleans was home to many mixed race people.

Soon it became clear that New Orleans’ whites were adamant and invested in distinguishing white from black. Much of this division defined the city, by streets, neighborhoods, and activities. The division was carried though to Mardi Gras. Working-class New Orleanians and upper-class New Orleanians had distinct Carnival roles to play. The lower class typically lived in a district called Jefferson City, where a group initiated a Mardi Gras marching club dubbed the Jefferson City Buzzards. From then on, the “practice of marching to the beat of accompanying bands from barroom to barroom” was linked to the working class.<sup>164</sup>

On the other side, the upper-class similarly defined its function. In the 1890s, numerous Carnival societies cropped up, which were predominately white, and did not participate in parades. For the most part, the societies took their names from ancient mythology.<sup>165</sup> The existence of societies created a more exclusive and private celebration, not designed for all New Orleanians to enjoy. The white society ladies, or the women of lower New Orleans status, oftentimes wore masks, to gain access to balls outside of their classes. Conversely, New Orleans’ madams started the first women’s’ club in 1895, called the Society of Venus and Bacchus.<sup>166</sup> Thus, the 1890s demonstrated a distinct

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<sup>162</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 156.

<sup>163</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 157.

<sup>164</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 157.

<sup>165</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 157.

<sup>166</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 158.

relationship between race and Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Race divided the city, its government, and ultimately affected the way in which Carnival was commemorated.

This time period also marked another change in New Orleans society. Before, prostitution had always been a part of the city. Prostitution greatly expanded during the nineteenth century. This expansion brought with it both positives and negatives for the city. Positively, the trade lent itself to “glamorous surroundings...and the astonishing number of fine early jazz musicians.”<sup>167</sup> Alternately, prostitution also conceived “filth and disease and a population habitually befuddled with cocaine, opium and alcohol.”<sup>168</sup> New Orleans embodied the two extremes, as it “was at once the shabbiest and the most alluring of cities.”<sup>169</sup> This also encouraged thievery, violence, and the reputation of corrupt policemen, which remain to this day.

The aforementioned constitutional convention came to light in 1898, and had massive impacts on the Crescent City. The convention is most known for its establishment of the “grandfather clause.” Essentially, this meant that those who had registered to vote before January 1, 1867 maintained their right to vote, as well as their sons and grandsons. Yet, those outside of this “had to demonstrate an ability to fill out a tricky form, which required the applicant, for instance, to give his age in years, months and days, and to own property assessed at three thousand dollars.”<sup>170</sup> Between 1897 and 1900, this reversal took effect, and transformed New Orleans and its people.

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<sup>167</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 159.

<sup>168</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 159.

<sup>169</sup> William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 69.

<sup>170</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New*, 160.



In 1897, the state of Louisiana had 164,088 registered white voters, and 130,344 registered black voters, striking a nearly equal balance. In 1900, Louisiana had 125,437 registered white voters, alongside 5,320 registered black voters. This meant a reduction of more than 125,000 enfranchised blacks.<sup>171</sup> Assuredly, this enforced white superiority in the state, as blacks had a miniscule percentage of the vote. Like before, the translation of black was further questioned, as the difference between black and white held more weight than ever.

Furthermore, the strain between blacks and whites was exacerbated by economics. Depression still affected the city, but unemployment weighed heavily on the black population. Blacks did have an employment advantage, though, as they generally accepted “lower wages and harsher working conditions.”<sup>172</sup> Racial segregation infected New Orleans, including in the streetcars in 1900. The city’s major newspapers conveyed prejudice against blacks, as pronounced by the *Times-Democrat*’s series of articles, entitled “The Negro Problem.”<sup>173</sup> These shifts and changes added up, and sparked the Robert Charles Riots of 1900.

The story of the riot begins with Robert Charles, who lived in Mississippi, but moved to New Orleans in the late 1800s. On July 23, 1900, a routine interaction with police officer August T. Mora, turned into “one of the bloodiest, most anarchic weeks in New Orleans’ history.”<sup>174</sup> It is unclear why Mora confronted Charles in the first place, and it is implied that the communication was targeted. The conversation got heated quickly, and both parties pulled out their guns and began to shoot. Mora was hit twice,

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<sup>171</sup> Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, 161.

<sup>172</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 137.

<sup>173</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 141.

<sup>174</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 119.

and Charles disappeared, sparking a widespread police search on July 24. As the news spread, whites and blacks fought to defend their respective sides in the Charles dispute. By the evening, New Orleanians had gathered in the streets, begetting a mob.<sup>175</sup>

At this point, the city was in a state of riot. There was violence on both ends, and on July 26, a state militia group assembled to resume rule. On that day, two black men and were killed and fifteen black men were injured, due to white rioters.<sup>176</sup> Charles was still nowhere to be found by the police, as he hid at 1208 Saratoga Street with the Jackson family, only one block away from the riot. On July 27, thousands of white mob members congregated, as the police discovered Charles' location. A shootout commenced, as "Charles would appear for an instant at one of the windows and fire at his attackers."<sup>177</sup> After becoming fed up, the crowd set fire the house, forcing Charles to come to the front door. Initially, Charles A. Noiret shot Charles.<sup>178</sup> Then, a stampede of many more rioters continually shot and beat Charles' body. The images below are sketches of Charles' hideout and place of death, on Saratoga Street; they were originally featured in the *Daily Picayune*.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 152.

<sup>176</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 155.

<sup>177</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 169.

<sup>178</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 187.

<sup>179</sup> Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, 112-113.



From the account, it is reasonable to assume that the only voices heard and opinions recognized, regarding the riots, would be from white New Orleanians. Surprisingly, though, the *New York Times* published a letter to the editor, concerning the Robert Charles Riots. Jack Thorne's blurb pointed out the dissimilarities between the North and the South. The following excerpt is especially powerful, as it gives strength and authority to the blacks in New Orleans:

But who were the desperadoes? That mob of devilish men and boys who terrorized New Orleans and trampled upon law and order. The conduct of the police officers themselves would make them unfit to perform such duty in a Northern city. Looking over that eventful tragedy I can see but one hero-one man-and that was Robert Charles. If this calm, nerry, deliberate black man, facing certain and ignominious death and yet using his rifle with such deadly effect, is not a hero, then let the names of the martyrs of the Alamo be erased from the page of history. One hundred and fifty negroes like Robert Charles, and armed as he was, would have brought that mob to its senses. When we consider that every peaceable means has been exhausted by the Southern negro to obtain and enjoy his just rights in the South, that brave act of Robert Charles points a new solution of the race problem. The Southern white does not love death so well when it

comes to tasting of it himself, and the negro's war record is ample proof that he can die like a man.<sup>180</sup>

This time period signified great turmoil between blacks and whites in New Orleans. Unlike before, the city was truly divided along that line, without the discrimination of other races. The legislative and everyday changes in New Orleans and their Mardi Gras reflected this intolerance. The country, though, seemed to be taking note of the southern injustices. Due to the nation's progress, it looked like New Orleans would see more racial changes in the future, shaping and reshaping the city again and again.

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<sup>180</sup> Jack Thorne, "The New Orleans Race Riot," *New York Times* (August 8, 1900), 6.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISASTER AND RESILIENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The twentieth century brought many changes to New Orleans' annual Carnival. In these years, the celebration became a marketable, money-making tool that caught the attention of those outside of the city and the state. People began to travel to New Orleans for the festivities, which were tied to particular streets, restaurants, hotels, foods, and drinks. Even further, New Orleans' Mardi Gras began to leak into popular culture. This was seen through novels set in the city, such as *Pylon* by William Faulkner and *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* by John Dos Passo. Renowned author Andrei Codrescu was told, in the late twentieth century, that "No book set in New Orleans ever lost money".<sup>181</sup> As evidenced, New Orleans was a city on the minds of many Americans, noted as a place of wonder and excitement.

In the following paragraphs, I will investigate New Orleans in the most recent years. Particularly, Hurricane Katrina put Mardi Gras and the race relations of New Orleans to the test. The reaction to the catastrophe, though, speaks directly to the identity of the New Orleanian. New Orleanians were resilient and celebratory in the following year's Mardi Gras. Yet, racial tensions continued to shape the responses and sentiments of those affected by the storm.

Despite its notoriety, the city was not in the best condition in the twentieth century. It was often portrayed as a poverty-stricken shanty, and this portrayal was mostly accurate. Thus, Mardi Gras became a means of boosting the economy, and of

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<sup>181</sup> Anthony J. Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," *Southern Cultures* (Summer 2008): 113.

boosting the personal wealth of Mardi Gras' leaders. Near the start of the twentieth century, it was typical for 35,000 visitors to come "into the city at the time and [stay] from two days to three weeks."<sup>182</sup> The mere traffic that New Orleans' Mardi Gras generated an upgrade in the city's international status. For the first time, New Orleans had "claims to regional, national, and even international leadership—a role deemed natural to the business leaders and politicians of the South's largest metropolis."<sup>183</sup>

Due to the financial and spirited aspects of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, other American cities attempted to copy the Mardi Gras tradition. New York City, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Los Angeles, California; and Memphis, Tennessee tried to emulate the celebration. Certainly, the cities drew crowds that had heard fantastical stories and accounts from New Orleans' Mardi Gras. Yet, these cities lacked authenticity, as they fell into the trap of commercialism.<sup>184</sup> Undoubtedly, "New Orleans remained the standard by which to judge the success of other festivals."<sup>185</sup>

Twentieth century technological advancements shifted Mardi Gras in new ways. Most notably, people now had access to "personal cameras, radio, film, television."<sup>186</sup> As follows, "national radio networks carried broadcasts from commentators placed in downtown New Orleans on Fat Tuesday" in the 1920s.<sup>187</sup> Also, producers began to make

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<sup>182</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 114.

<sup>183</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 115.

<sup>184</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 117.

<sup>185</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 118.

<sup>186</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 118.

<sup>187</sup> Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination," 118.

movies in the city, demonstrating its unique spirit, to show in nationwide theaters. New Orleans even became a destination for Hollywood celebrities, and the inspiration for *Saturday Night Live* and musicals.<sup>188</sup>

Another Mardi Gras phenomenon of the twentieth century was the use of beads. First, krewes purchased glass beads made in Czechoslovakia and Japan in the 1920s. Then, they started the tradition of throwing the beads from their respective floats.<sup>189</sup> This created a relationship between the people on the streets and the people in the floats, as the practice heightened the “excitement within the crowds as well as serving as souvenirs.”<sup>190</sup> At the same time, it reflected the racial hierarchy of the city. Black participants were required to pass their beads onto whites. After, white men would use the beads to socialize and meet women.<sup>191</sup>

The tossing of beads changed in the 1960s, when plastic beads were introduced. They were made in China, and were tossed alongside other goods in the 1970s and 1980s. In these decades, candy, “plastic cups, Frisbees, plastic cigars, and nylon panties” joined beads as the representative trinkets of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras.<sup>192</sup> Next, the trinkets

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<sup>188</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 119.

<sup>189</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 120.

<sup>190</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 120.

<sup>191</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 122.

<sup>192</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 122.

became strategic methods of advertisement, promoting teams, krewes, and bars.<sup>193</sup> Along with these material developments, Mardi Gras became split into two categories.<sup>194</sup>

The split in Mardi Gras came from the types of participants, and occurred in the 1970s. First, the French Quarter, and especially Bourbon Street, had a wilder, and perhaps more vulgar, Mardi Gras. Typically, “the neighboring downtown drew hedonistic tourists and adventuresome locals.”<sup>195</sup> The second form of Mardi Gras presented a more wholesome experience. It happened in the “outlying parts of the city,” as it “catered to area families with tamer tastes.”<sup>196</sup> Due to the different groups of people, they meant two distinct events. The first developed into the Mardi Gras many picture today, involving nudity, promiscuous, and sex.<sup>197</sup>

As the twenty-first century approached, New Orleans would continue to celebrate Mardi Gras. However, the city would encounter multiple disasters that would test its strength. The most devastating blow came in 2005. Katrina hit the Gulf Coast on August 29; needless to say, the city would never be the same again. In addition to the factual proceedings of the hurricane, it is also essential to examine the New Orleanians response, regarding to racial relations and Mardi Gras.

On August 29, Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. It chiefly affected Louisiana and Mississippi, with the greatest emphasis on New Orleans. Before it came to land, Katrina

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<sup>193</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 123.

<sup>194</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 124.

<sup>195</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 124.

<sup>196</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 124.

<sup>197</sup> Stanonis, “Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination,” 124.



was rated as a category five storm, making it the “most dangerous,” but was then demoted to a category four.<sup>198</sup> Because New Orleans is below sea level, its inhabitants were instantly distressed. As soon as it touched down, the city experienced “100 m.p.h. winds and water surges of up to 15 feet” and “early in the day...more than 20 buildings had been toppled.”<sup>199</sup>

The hurricane did not let up for the next eight hours, and overtook the levees intended to protect against such storms. The power went out, roofs were ripped away, and nuclear plants were shut down. People evacuated, climbed to their roofs to escape, and fled to the Superdome for shelter. Those less fortunate drowned and died in the streets. According to a *New York Times* article published on August 30, an estimated forty thousand homes were flooded, eighty percent of New Orleanians evacuated, and 1,464 people died in Louisiana, due to Katrina.<sup>200</sup> Together, these statistics combined to make Katrina “potent enough to rank as one of the most punishing hurricanes ever to hit the U.S.,” inflicting billions of dollars in damage.<sup>201</sup>

The evacuation processes directly reflected the racial boundaries of New Orleans. An article from the *Los Angeles Times*, entitled “Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina Resettle Along a Racial Divide,” speaks to this issue of New Orleans’ physical racial division.<sup>202</sup> For the most part, white New Orleanians from the suburbs evacuated to close areas,

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<sup>198</sup> Joseph B. Treaster and Kate Zernike. “Hurricane Katrina Slams Into Gulf Coast: Dozens Are Dead,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/30/national/30storm.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>199</sup> Treaster and Zernike, “Hurricane Katrina Slams Into Gulf Coast: Dozens Are Dead.”

<sup>200</sup> “Reports of Missing and Deceased: Aug. 2, 2006,” and Treaster and Zernike, “Hurricane Katrina Slams Into Gulf Coast: Dozens Are Dead.”

<sup>201</sup> Treaster and Zernike, “Hurricane Katrina Slams Into Gulf Coast: Dozens Are Dead.”

<sup>202</sup> Tomas Alex Tizon and Doug Smith, “Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina Resettle Along a Racial Divide,” *Los Angeles Times*, December, 12, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/dec/12/nation/na-migration12> (accessed April 4, 2011).

“similar to their neighborhoods, which minimized the disruption to their lives and left them in a better position to return as soon as circumstances allow.”<sup>203</sup> On the other hand, black New Orleanians from poorer neighborhoods left in government buses and planes, to faraway, foreign places.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, 100,000 blacks evacuated to the Superdome, which provided less than desirable conditions.<sup>205</sup>

The main body assigned to assist New Orleans and New Orleanians, during and after the storm, was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The problem with the agency, and others similar to it, was that its “decision makers were [far] from the daily rhythms of the city.”<sup>206</sup> Aid, support, and everyday necessities did not come quickly, or at all. FEMA money was given to citizens, and temporary trailers were set up, which are still seen today. But, this seemed to be the extent of the aid. Clearly, the city was in desperate need of rescuing that did not happen. As Stephen Verderber suggests in *Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City*, “Generations of racial- and class-based wounds were laid bare by Katrina.”<sup>207</sup>

As Katrina hit New Orleans at the end of August, the next year’s Mardi Gras was only months away. As if the people of New Orleans had not been through enough, Mardi Gras instigated another painful debate. New Orleanians weighed the positives and negatives, with respect to the recent, tremendous tragedy. They considered the destruction of the physical city and the relocation of many citizens, in addition to personal sentiments. Ultimately, though, the party won out.

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<sup>203</sup> Tizon and Smith, “Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina Resettle Along a Racial Divide.”

<sup>204</sup> Tizon and Smith, “Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina Resettle Along a Racial Divide.”

<sup>205</sup> Tizon and Smith, “Evacuees of Hurricane Katrina Resettle Along a Racial Divide.”

<sup>206</sup> Stephen Verderber, *Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press: 2009), 165.

<sup>207</sup> Verderber, *Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City*, 166.

New Orleans' 2006 Mardi Gras signified the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city's merrymaking. In its history, Carnival and Mardi Gras had only been skipped thirteen times, each time to honor the U.S.' involvement in war.<sup>208</sup> An article in *USA Today* grappled with the idea of the New Orleans celebration, but ultimately succumbed to the spirit of the city. It proposed that the main reason for rejoicing should be an emotion one: "Residents need this one for themselves. Think of New York City celebrating New Year's Eve in Times Square less than four months after 9/11...perhaps this undertaking provides a model for the city's (New Orleans') more daunting challenges. Scale back on dreams of re-creating a pre-Katrina city. Seek creative financing. Be flexible. Above all, don't lose what is quintessentially New Orleans."<sup>209</sup> The article recognized that Carnival is an important part of New Orleanian culture that must be lauded, rather than buried, in difficult times.

Understandably, 2006's Mardi Gras was not to the scale of typical years' festivals. As such, many of the most extravagant parades were not included, and the typical tourist crowd did not make the trip. The celebration, though, was much more than a superficial stint. Instead, it spoke to what Mardi Gras symbolizes for the city. Chris Rose, a well-known New Orleanian writer, proclaimed the necessity of the tradition in December of 2005. Rose wrote, "We're having Mardi Gras and that's final...Let the whole damn country hear Al Johnson yelling, 'It's Carnival Time' and let them know we're not dead and if we are dying, we're going to pretend like we're not."<sup>210</sup> As Rose

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<sup>208</sup> Verderber, *Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City*, 165.

<sup>209</sup> Verderber, *Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City*, 165.

<sup>210</sup> Reid Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," *The Journal of American History* (December 2007): 792.

suggested, the continuation of Mardi Gras was not simply due to its party-like qualities, but because of its part in the identity of the city.

In Reid Mitchell's article "Carnival and Katrina" in *The Journal of American History*, he examines the significance of the event, and argues that it provided a necessary escape for New Orleanians. He sees Carnival as a means of exhibiting "self-expression, group identity, and satire."<sup>211</sup> Even further, Carnival had become a time and place to articulate issues and opinions. More than ever, 2006 was a time to address the state of the city, and the nation's response to Katrina. Unfortunately, as time would tell, the hurricane's tangible ruination of the city was not the biggest injustice that New Orleans faced.

The greatest injustice, instead, was the government's reaction to Katrina. Rather, the government's lack of reaction was excruciatingly painful for New Orleanians and all Americans to see, in person and through the media. Essentially, this delay marked the difference between life and death. For 2006's Mardi Gras, the message became about "incompetence at every level of government."<sup>212</sup> Katrina, and its aftermath, was adopted as a theme for the Krewe du Vieux, as it was "one of the newer and more satiric organizations."<sup>213</sup> In place of throwing out traditional beads or goodies, the krewe tossed out fake checks from FEMA.<sup>214</sup> While these demonstrations might have seemed disrespectful or crass, they provided an outlet for New Orleanians, who had each been dramatically hurt by the circumstances.

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<sup>211</sup> Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," 792.

<sup>212</sup> Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," 792.

<sup>213</sup> Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," 792.

<sup>214</sup> Mitchell, "Carnival and Katrina," 792.

The commentary, expressed through Mardi Gras, did not stop with Krewe du Vieux. At the time of Katrina, Michael Brown was the director of FEMA. The inadequate work of FEMA led New Orleanians to abhor Brown. Thus, a crew of “Brownies” assembled for Mardi Gras and marched through the city, mocking Brown. These men walked alongside women dressed as the cocktail, margaritas; their margarita reference came from an email Brown sent during Katrina, pleading for a margarita.<sup>215</sup> Other participants, similar to the “Brownies,” donned United Parcel Service uniforms, with “What Did Brown Do For You Today?” splayed across their fronts.<sup>216</sup> New Orleanians’ scrutiny of the handling of the tragedy impelled the city’s levee inspectors to walk around discreetly, as they “wore sunglasses and carried canes” to avoid scrutiny.<sup>217</sup> The image below shows Gilbert R. Buras Jr., a New Orleanian, outfitted as a “Brownie,” wearing “a brown skirt and...a brown-smudged nose.”<sup>218</sup>



<sup>215</sup> Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” 793.

<sup>216</sup> Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” 793.

<sup>217</sup> Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” 793.

<sup>218</sup> Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” 793.

Like the rest of New Orleans' history, race played a role in Katrina and 2006's Mardi Gras. In response to Katrina, Ray Nagin, the city's Mayor, gave a speech on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, in January of 2006. His words became instantly controversial, as he called for the city to rebound as a "chocolate New Orleans."<sup>219</sup> Nagin went further, by saying, "I don't care what people are saying Uptown or wherever they are. This city will be chocolate at the end of the day. This city will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be."<sup>220</sup> Nagin's comments referenced the fact that most New Orleanians who escaped the city, before and during Katrina, were white. As a result, New Orleans' remaining citizens were predominantly black.

Immediately afterward, and upon receiving criticism, Nagin apologized for his racially charged statements. Nagin, then, said that by chocolate, he meant a combination of dark chocolate and white milk. In his eyes, this meant he was calling for a diverse and harmonious city.<sup>221</sup> Reasonably, most people did not understand it in this way. Once again, the city was divided along racial lines. Nagin's speech was followed by months of analysis of FEMA's actions, with respect to these racial lines.

The analysis stemmed from the evidence that the hurricane affected certain parts of the city more than others. Generally, the impoverished and black neighborhoods were worse off. It became more evident that "race mattered in a rather singular fashion, one that cast in it black-and-white terms and located it within impoverished areas of New

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<sup>219</sup> "Nagin Apologizes for 'Chocolate' City Comments." *CNN* (January 18, 2006), [http://articles.cnn.com/2006-01-17/us/nagin.city\\_1\\_majority-african-american-city-mayor-ray-nagin-dark-chocolate?\\_s=PM:US](http://articles.cnn.com/2006-01-17/us/nagin.city_1_majority-african-american-city-mayor-ray-nagin-dark-chocolate?_s=PM:US) (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>220</sup> "Nagin Apologizes for 'Chocolate' City Comments."

<sup>221</sup> "Nagin Apologizes for 'Chocolate' City Comments."

Orleans.”<sup>222</sup> These sentiments, while widely felt, were not expressed outright until September 3, 2005. That evening, NBC hosted *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, intended to raise money and awareness of New Orleans’ suffering.

Kanye West, a hip-hop mogul, was a key guest at the event. In an effort to fundraise, with other celebrities, West took the microphone to talk about the tragedy, and soon went off script. His words reverberated in the studio and throughout the country, and will forever be associated with Katrina. West remarked:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family and they say we are looting, you see a white family and they say they are looking for food. And, you know, it’s been five days because most of the people ARE black. And even for me to complain, I would be a hypocrite because I would turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right to see what is the biggest amount I can give. And just to imagine, if I was down there and those are my people down there. If there is anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help about the way America is set up the help the poor, the black people, the less well off as slow as possible. Red Cross is doing as much as they can. We already realize a lot of the people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way. And now they've given them permission to go down and shoot us...George Bush doesn't care about black people.<sup>223</sup>

Directly after he spoke, NBC stopped the program. For the first time, Americans saw a truthful, honest response to Katrina, which the news had not offered. West’s commentary, of course, was not only critical of President George W. Bush, but of New Orleanian leaders as well.

All in all, Mardi Gras became an answer and acknowledgement of the whole catastrophe. New Orleanians who survived the storm, demonstrated their personal

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<sup>222</sup> Richard C. King, “George Bush May Not Like Black People, but No One Gives a Dam about Indigenous Peoples: Visibility and Indianness after the Hurricanes,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (2008): 35.

<sup>223</sup> NOLA Indymedia, “Kanye West on NBC,” <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2005/09/4117.php> (accessed April 4, 2011).

strength and resilience. Concurrently, they showed their pride in their city, in spite of the blunders and mistakes made. Essentially, “observing Carnival hardly meant forgetting Katrina. Instead this particular Carnival memorialized Katrina.”<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Mitchell, “Carnival and Katrina,” 793.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Since the devastation of Katrina, New Orleans has continued on its rollercoaster-like trajectory. In February of 2009, New Orleanians rallied around the New Orleans Saints football team, leading them to Super Bowl victory.<sup>225</sup> Cheers of “Who dat!” quickly infected the city, as the win served as an immeasurable morale boost for New Orleans. Then, onlookers began to see New Orleans as a rebounding city on the rise. This sense of excitement was not universal, though. M. Endesa Juakali, a New Orleanian activist, disagreed with the celebration. Juakali remarked, “We’re poor, we’re suffering, we have nothing. We need to focus on struggle and not entertainment right now...I’m not a ‘Who dat.’ I’m a ‘Who is that?’”<sup>226</sup> Evidently, many New Orleanians were still struggling with questions of identity and purpose, following the storm.

This Super Bowl high was then followed by a destructive low. In April of 2010, “the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico because of a runaway oil well.”<sup>227</sup> It continued to flow for three months, as those in charge wrestled with potential solutions. All in all, eleven workers died, and five million barrels of oil spilled.<sup>228</sup> New Orleans, and the rest of the nation, watched impatiently as damage incurred. Aside from the lives affected, the gulf’s beaches, animals, and tourism

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<sup>225</sup> Nancy Franklin, “Unnatural Disasters,” *The New Yorker* (August 30, 2010): 82.

<sup>226</sup> Franklin, “Unnatural Disasters,” 82..

<sup>227</sup> John M. Broder, “Obama Marks Anniversary of BP Disaster,” *New York Times*, (April 20, 2011) <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/20/obama-marks-anniversary-of-bp-disaster/> (accessed April 4, 2011).

<sup>228</sup> Broder, “Obama Marks Anniversary of BP Disaster.”

businesses were deeply hurt by the spill.<sup>229</sup> Once again, New Orleans' spirit was depressed by another disaster.

Wil, who I introduced earlier, came into the twenty-first century as well. By 2000, Wil's marching band had expanded to one hundred students or one-quarter of George Washington Carver High School's student body. In fact, this "meant that one in four kids had to show up at school every day, earn at least a 2.5 grade point average, and stay out of trouble with the police."<sup>230</sup> Clearly, Wil was making a huge impact on his students and their day-to-day lives. Belinda felt the brunt of his commitment, and asked Wil to quit his job.<sup>231</sup> For Wil, this was simply not an option.

In 2003, Wil realized that his educational impact was not as extensive as had once thought. His principal handed him a list of students who were failing classes, which included twelve of his band kids. Wil immediately laid into the kids, expressing the value of one's education, telling them, "Band. Does not. Supersede. Your education. If you don't pass, you don't graduate. If you don't graduate, you don't go to college."<sup>232</sup> The following year, Belinda left Wil, as she felt worthless next to his band.<sup>233</sup>

2005 brought trauma to all New Orleanians, including Wil. On August 27, Wil's band was scheduled to march at a big game, when they heard the evacuation warnings. Wil seemed unruffled, but eventually heeded the warnings, and evacuated with Ma to Beaumont, Texas.<sup>234</sup> For the time being, Wil took a teaching position at Beaumont

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<sup>229</sup> Broder, "Obama Marks Anniversary of BP Disaster."

<sup>230</sup> Dan Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), Location 3396-7111.

<sup>231</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 3682-7111.

<sup>232</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 3881-7111.

<sup>233</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 4134-7111.

<sup>234</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 4146-7111.

Central High School.<sup>235</sup> A few months later, he was able to return to his beloved New Orleans.

Understandably, Wil was shocked by what he found. Rather than familiar sites and faces, Wil saw “His once-beautiful block of trim homes and neat lawns...gone, trashed, smeared with filth as though a regiment of evil six-year-olds had finger-painted it to death.”<sup>236</sup> Even worse, the inside of his hard-earned house was completely destroyed. In the face of tragedy, though, Wil overcame. He met estranged Belinda at their house on Dreux Avenue, they made amends, and agreed to make it work. Once again, Wil’s ambition and outlook overpowered his circumstances.

Finally, in 2006 Wil resumed teaching at a different school: O. Perry Walker High School.<sup>237</sup> Mike Ricks, or “Big Mike,” sought him out for the position. Wil soon learned that Walker was known as the worst of the worst, in terms of schools. The majority of Walker’s students was without parents or grandparents, and struggled to make ends meet. Baum concludes Wil’s story with a definite challenge, and a powerful quote from Big Mike:

“But listen here,” Big Mike said. “Before the storm, this school graduated half its senior class. It lost half to the streets, to drugs, to whatever. Last year? After the storm? We graduated more than 80 percent, and we only opened in December.” Big Mike hoisted himself to his feet. “You got things to do.” He laid his hand on Wil’s shoulder. “It’s up to you, but I can tell you that I don’t address these children by their first names. I call them Mr. and Miss. I say ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am.’ We serve *them*. We are here because of *them*. We pay our bills because of *them*.” He shuffled off, dragging his heavy feet along the linoleum with a soft soughing noise.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 5676-7111.

<sup>236</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 5893-7111.

<sup>237</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 6195-7111.

<sup>238</sup> Baum, *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, Location 6220-7111.

Knowing Wil, the reader finishes knowing that Wil will not only persevere, but succeed with his students.

While Wil and his life accurately represent the flaws and issues of New Orleans, he also represents the attitude exuded by New Orleanians. Through trials and tribulations, Wil maintained a sunny demeanor and believed in his capacity to make change. In some ways, Wil even pushed beyond the typical New Orleanian, with his professional and monetary aspirations. As the 2005 poll suggested, Wil and his fellow New Orleanians live more satisfying and satisfied lives, than the rest of the country. Wil is the picture of embracing chaos and finding peace within it.

This New Orleanian chaos is driven by the disorder of Mardi Gras and race relations. The Crescent City's history is evidence of this, as Mardi Gras and race hold a paradoxical relationship. These two concepts are able to jointly draw together and push apart the New Orleanian community. This unique combination of events creates the New Orleanian identity: living a slower, relaxed lifestyle; appreciating life's simpler luxuries; and indifference to wealth and status. Another aspect of this identity was exemplified in the last century: resilience, against all odds.

An additional part of this identity involves the New Orleanian opinion of the city. Along with the sense of satisfaction in chaos, New Orleanians express pride in New Orleans, and all that it stands for. This includes its problems with poverty, the education system, the police force, and the economy. Rather than rejecting or working to fix these problems, many New Orleanians have to come to embrace the troubles of their city. A recently released rap song, entitled "Welcome to my Hood," exhibits this pride in New Orleanian dilemmas. One of the song's rappers, Lil' Wayne, hails from New Orleans and

boasts “I’m from the murder capital.”<sup>239</sup> Clearly, New Orleanians have a distinct pride in New Orleans, for better or for worse.

To conclude, the city of New Orleans has three moving parts. First, it has its annual Mardi Gras celebration, which allows for merriment and self-expression. Second, it has its continual racial strains that shift with the city’s politics. Then, the third part is a product of the preceding parts: the New Orleanian identity. Of course, this identity is characterized by increased levels of satisfaction in increased levels conflict. The people of New Orleans synchronously unite and divide.

Lastly, these findings have informed me, as a future resident of New Orleans. I am aware of the challenges that face the city, especially regarding its public school system. I better understand the history of the racial conflicts, and their role in today’s society. I can now visualize the proceedings of Mardi Gras and know its value in the eyes of the people. But, more than anything, I know what it is to be a New Orleanian, wearing a paradoxical mask. This, most of all, I am anxious to experience for myself.

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<sup>239</sup> Metrolyrics, “DJ Khaled – Welcome to my Hood Lyrics,” <http://www.metrolyrics.com/welcome-to-my-hood-lyrics-dj-khaled.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

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