envoi

Africa in New Orleans

Creole Complexities in Racist America

Henry John Drewal

Call/respond, give/take, elevate/denigrate, toast/roast—and in all things *improvise*—be playfully serious, and seriously playful. These are some of the ways of being black in racist America—the strategies and tactics of survival that include signifyin', transculturalism, and multiconsciousness. And that goes for those who hope to understand the complexities of black life and art in these United States and especially in that most complicated of Caribbean-American cities—New Orleans. Not "insiders" or "outsiders," we are mostly "in-betweeners" traversing cultural worlds as we try to make sense of it all.

The essays in this special issue consider the expressions of an imagined Africa in the minds, streets, museums, markets, homes, and festivities of New Orleans. They also point to new ways of learning and knowing as they demonstrate a shift away from the myth of "objectivity" in cultural research, to one of subjectivity, engagement, active participation, and reciprocity. Participant observation has given way to engaged, observant participation. The essays deal with issues of identity, self-definition, and especially *agency* that I define as "the instrumentality of creating one's reality, the process of turning aspirations into practices and products" (Drewal 2000:241). This agency is shared, exchanged, and realized between researchers and researched. We see the analytic lens turned in both directions—subjects become objects, and objects subjects. Take the premise of the Neighborhood Story Project of Rachel Breunlin and Ronald W. Lewis about the House of Dance & Feathers to facilitate people telling their own stories. And the conversation among Jeffery Ehrenreich, Victor Harris, Wesley Phillips, Jack Robertson and the words of departed spirit Collins "Coach" Lewis that interrogates an ethnographer's role as a part of the stories he tells. These accounts are multivocal collaborative endeavors.

The stories, projects and performances of black New Orleanians (and these essays about them) embody an interactive, egalitarian aesthetic of the streets. They are mostly neighborhood/community based and they live by the energy they create among their followers, and that energy makes possible the international extensions and elaborations of the Jazz Fest and African Marketplace as described by Helen Regis.

In contrast, white New Orleans Mardi Gras performance is one of distanced observation by passive crowds lining the boulevards as huge floats ride by dispensing "throws" to spectators—a racial and social hierarchy enacted with references to the KKK and enforcers on horseback. The same dichotomy can be seen in the West Indian Parade on Labor Day in Brooklyn, NY—between the neighborhood-based acoustic steel bands and their posses that control the streets from about 3 AM till 10 AM as part of J'Ouvert, versus the massive policed and barricaded event—the "official" afternoon parade down Eastern Parkway where fanciful groups ride high on floats and blare electronic music to the crowds corralled behind barriers.

Smith traces the wonderfully complex and complicated transformations of Zulu (and its members' intentions) as it confronted the changing social, racial, political, and economic landscape of New Orleans from it beginnings in 1901 to about 2009. African Americans adopted blackface minstrelsy while it was still a white carnival masking tradition in the late nineteenth century, believing, as Smith tells us, they could perform in a style that would improve upon white "imitators." They engaged in "semiotic cannibalism." With Zulu, they tried to turn it into a festival performance genre with a difference (or was it for a different audience?). Questions remain. Does it pander to and reinforce white racist stereotypes or does it successfully mock white

Chief Shaka Zulu of the Yellow Pocahontas placed two patches on the back of his suit modeled after a Chi Wara headdress, Mardi Gras, 2007.
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ignorance? Subversive agency or accommodation? It all depends on where you stand to view the spectacle (as the Igbo proverb teaches us). While the answers are uncertain, Zulus have managed to occupy a public space previously denied to them—they are among the in-betweeners, insinuating themselves in venues of dominance.

As Becker points out, performance is about process, whether Zulu, Mardi Gras Indians, Jazz Fest or storytelling. Black Indian suits are on the move from the backstreets to the main streets, and into museums and galleries. The Indians are in-betweeners, liminal actors who are cultural heroes in their communities and potential "fine artists" in elitist arts establishments. Becker traces this history of struggle to find a place in both worlds. She is also the first to detail the history and elaboration of Indian costumes from their sources in the 1880s to the twenty-first century (Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West spectacle, Caribbean festivals, Creole gingerbread architecture, the "flash" of African aesthetics, and the shape of Egyptian mummies), defining the differences between Downtown Creole and Uptown Anglo styles and the various forces shaping these distinctive aesthetics. To "mask Indian" means to assume another identity by enveloping the entire body in a transformative costume—the suit. And that suit enlarges literally and figuratively a person's ancestry. It's about celebrating those who came before, like Darryl Montana's suit depicting his father Tootie and his fifty years as Big Chief. Whether Downtown/Creole or Uptown/African, it's about links to resistance and warrior-hood, as well as family ties, whether by blood or a sense of belonging. Black Indians wage war with needle and thread. Their battle cry: "Sew, sew, sew."

Regis demonstrates that heritage is being envisioned and created by hybrid players—cultural in-betweeners like Quint Davis, Allison Miner, Oscar Kidjo, and Alex Amoussouvi. Regis, like Becker, focuses on these actors and on process, for the results are ever-changing in this diasporic dialogue. The Jazz and Heritage Festival is an attempt to extend the roots and branches of jazz from Africa to New Orleans to contemporary twenty-first century global musics—a new Pan-Africanism based on the arts in this neocolonial era of stark asymmetries in power and equality.

These are all part of the gumbo that is Africa in New Orleans. That gumbo (a Bantu word for okra) is a rich and flavorful stew of countless ingredients that maintain their distinctiveness as they contribute to the textures, aroma, and taste of the dish. So too, Zulu, Black Indians, JazzFest, Congo Square African Marketplace, and the House of Dance and Feathers are all part of the New Orleans gumbo mix—rich, complex, contradictory, fraught with all kinds of competing forces and tensions based on race, class, gender, politics, ideologies, etc.—all the things that can divide as well as unite and enliven communities and cities like New Orleans. And all these actors, whether as individuals or as organizations (social and pleasure clubs, tribes, festivals, museums, or storytellers) have adopted an incredible array of strategies and tactics to assert and insert themselves as part of this New Orleans stew using their agency: from a Zulu member's "just want to have fun" (that is, poke fun at white ignorance); to forging international and trans-Black Atlantic links between ancestral musical arts and faiths in Jazz Fest; to making a neighborhood repository of memories at the House of Dance & Feathers; to the deeply meditative "spiritual work" of chanting and sacred healing where a Black Indian beader's blood is sewn into his suit to bring it to life. Art is medicine to heal wounds and to gather strength for the battles to come …

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