

## “Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-Pie:” *Reasserting Creole Identity through Festive Play*

---

*Mardi Gras, in the predominantly Creole and African American 12th Street area of Lafayette, Louisiana, reflects both the cultural diversity of Creoles of color and the dynamics of asserting Creole identity in a region more widely known as Cajun Country. The festive play of this Mardi Gras incorporates Afro-Caribbean performance styles as well as French Louisiana Mardi Gras chants and rituals. Creole identity is reflected, challenged, and celebrated in the intercultural borrowings and negotiations of this carnival performance.*

---

FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER, THE BLACK CREOLE neighborhoods in Lafayette, Louisiana, celebrated Mardi Gras with distinctive masking traditions and street parading, as well as ritual contests, verbal taunting, and dance “showouts.” Groups of masked men, mainly in their late teens or twenties, roamed the streets of the primarily Creole neighborhoods carrying ceremonial whips to threaten young children who taunted the Mardi Gras by chanting the verse, “Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-pie.”<sup>1</sup> They marched through the neighborhoods, seeking “battles” with other groups of masked marauders but, also, as one person put it, “to scare little kids.” Their costumes were typically hand sewn, incorporating fringes, patchwork, and other aspects of costuming typical of Caribbean festival arts. Unlike the Cajun Country Mardi Gras and the rural Creole Mardi Gras, this urban Creole practice was not a begging ritual, and it did not involve riding on horseback or “dancing” for chickens. Nor was there an elaborate float parade. Its roots seem much closer to the street parading and masking of Caribbean carnival and other Caribbean festivals. Particularly during the 1930s and 1940s, the streets of Creole neighborhoods bordering 12th Street and Evangeline Thruway, such as Veazey and McComb, as well as Fightingville and Potrico,<sup>2</sup> were filled with hundreds of revelers, all wearing the colors and costumes specific to their neighborhoods or groups. Mamie Joyce Broussard briefly mentions the Mardi Gras in her M.A. thesis on the Creole and French in Lafayette: “The most important French custom still practiced today is Mardi Gras. As the name indicates it is ‘fat Tuesday,’ a day of heavy feasting and revelry” (1945:5).

Marcia Gaudet is Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette



Figure 1. Francis Babin and Mike Singleton in Black heroes costumes. Chic-a-la-pie Mardi Gras, 1996, corner of 12th Street and Plum. Photo by Irby Gaudet III.

I first heard about this Mardi Gras in 1994 and got involved with Creole Mardi Gras fieldwork in 1996. After the 1994 Mardi Gras, there was an article in the Lafayette weekly tabloid, *The Times of Acadiana*, about the street masking in the 12th Street area. The article referred to this as the “Creole Mardi Gras” (Mouton 1994). On Mardi Gras day, 1996, I went with my son to the McComb-Veazey Masking Competition sponsored by John Lewis, a businessman from the African American community. There was a brief note in the Lafayette *Daily Advertiser* the day before Mardi Gras saying that the competition would begin at 4:00 p.m. at the corner of 12th and Plum Streets. We mainly observed and took photographs. With us were my colleague Carolyn Dural and Maida Owens, director of the Louisiana Folklife Program. Since then, I have interviewed many people involved with this Mardi Gras. I have also been in the McComb-Veazey/Fightingville/12th Street area during Mardi Gras each year since then (1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). Through friends and colleagues in the Creole community—particularly Carolyn Dural and Kathy Ball—I was introduced to others such as Mary Alice Drake and Geneva Phillips, who provided much information on the Lafayette



Figure 2. White-faced Mardi Gras participant twirls whips with streamers while blowing his whistle in McComb neighborhood, 1996. Photo by Irby Gaudet III.

Mardi Gras in the past. I also contacted contemporary Mardi Gras participants Francis Babin, Mike Singleton, and Alton Olivier Jr. I talked with them in their homes as well as on the street during Mardi Gras. Because there has been so little written on this Mardi Gras, I pursued fieldwork in this area in hopes of having members of the African American and Creole community speak for themselves and share their knowledge of



Figure 3. Chic-a-la-pie Mardi Gras participant with mortarboard-shaped hat, streamers, and wire-screen mask, 1998.

this tradition. In this article, I examine the historical background and possible sources for this Mardi Gras performance and look at the contemporary performance of Mardi Gras in the context of the Creole community, focusing on my interviews with Mary Alice Drake, Francis Babin, and Mike Singleton.<sup>3</sup> While this Mardi Gras is certainly influenced by the larger culture, it also serves as a context in which the African American/Creole cultural group can assert its own separate identity through the distinct expressive style of the Mardi Gras performance.

People who lived in or near Fightingville and the other neighborhoods remember the Mardi Gras with very colorful homemade costumes, with strips of material or crepe paper sewed on. Typically, the participants wore the square mortarboard hats with fringes, strips of crepe paper, ball tassels, or streamers sewed on. They also wore stockings



Figure 4. Chic-a-la-pie group, with fringed mortarboards and whistles, posing with the young son of one of the maskers, 1999.

over their faces, covered by painted wire-screen masks, usually with flaps tied under the chin. They walked around with crepe paper whips, actually sticks wrapped in crepe paper with tassels and streamers attached. There were also symbolic sounds. The Mardi Gras participants made a high-pitched sound with their voices as they walked the streets, and there were many bells sewed on the costumes. The maskers would hold out their arms and shake their whole bodies, thus jingling the bells. Folklorist Barry Ancelet remembered riding his bike near the Creole neighborhoods on Mardi Gras in the early 1960s and hearing the bells: "You could hear them a block off." The participants wore brown cloth work gloves so that none of their skin was visible, and they never removed their masks in the streets.

Young men, for the most part in their teens or early twenties, participated. Mardi Gras was usually organized informally in the neighborhoods; usually the same informal group of people marched together each year for several years, though they did not always have matching costumes. According to Alton Olivier Jr., who still participates in the Creole Mardi Gras, they would walk in the streets and look for children to whip. The children, in turn, participated by chanting the traditional verse to tease the Mardi



Figure 5. Mardi Gras participants with mortarboards, capes, and whistles performing in the Lafayette Mardi Gras Association Parade, 1999.

Gras maskers and get their attention. These maskers would walk around in groups of four or five, and sometimes as many as twelve, and when they met young children, they would corral and haze them, sometimes having them kneel down and say their prayers. Olivier said that the Mardi Gras participants would never whip children if they were with their parents, and there was more bluffing and threatening than actual whippings. Some areas were truly dangerous, though, particularly Fightingville, and sometimes



Figure 6. Mardi Gras participants with wire-screen mask and mortarboard hat with streamers, Lafayette Mardi Gras Association, 1999.

scores were settled on that day. A mixture of fear and fascination regarding the Mardi Gras seems to be typical of children who grew up in the neighborhoods, but some were truly terrified. Geneva Phillips, who lived near Lafayette, would come to visit her cousins on Mardi Gras. She commented: "What I remember about those Mardi Gras was that I was always scared to death . . . all the stories we would hear, that they would beat you with their sticks. I never thought about them having beautiful costumes as I do today."

Scaring children, making them say their prayers, and whipping young boys was once part of the Mardi Gras chase in many parts of South Louisiana,<sup>4</sup> and these activities continue in the Cajun bayou communities of Gheens and Choupique, closer to New Orleans (Pitre 1992). A similar tradition in Rayne, a small town about 20 miles west of Lafayette, was described in the early 1980s:

A carry-over from a tribal ritual could be the basis for a Mardi Gras practice which takes place each Shrove Tuesday afternoon in Rayne, Acadia Parish, and in Vermilion Parish. Small groups of masked and costumed people from the black community band together and visit around the neighborhoods. The custom has been observed longer than any Rayne resident can remember.

Dressed in brightly colored costumes decorated with bells, tassels, chenille balls, and shiny sequins, the celebrants conceal identities with grotesque masks made of screen wire, shaped to fit the face, and painted. To preserve anonymity they usually wear gloves, and some even paint their shoes to complete the disguise. Headgear is any type of hat that lends itself to ornamentation. . . . The participants speak in high-pitched voices and make weird whirring sounds by blowing with their tongues against their palates.

Each carries a bull whip, and they walk slightly bent over. With each step they move arms, shoulders, and bodies in a kind of shambling dance-walk. [Fontenot and Landry 1983:176]

In the late 1950s, interest and involvement in the traditional Mardi Gras in the Black Creole neighborhoods in Lafayette began to subside. The increasing rivalry between groups and the perceived threat of violence led to the city's unofficial ban on masking in Creole neighborhoods and the confiscation of whips on Mardi Gras. As in the rest of the South, there were certainly racist elements in Lafayette in the 1950s. It was not, however, a place of open racial confrontations or violence during integration. It is perhaps important to note the context of racial relations in Lafayette at that time—the Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) was desegregated in 1954, before the implementation of *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*. It was the first historically white public undergraduate college in the deep South to integrate. In the fall semester of 1954, 75 African American students were enrolled without protest or national publicity (a remarkable difference from the “federal troops/defiant governor at the door” scenarios of the integration of colleges and universities in neighboring states ten years later, in the early 1960s). These bans on whipping, as well as the city's “invitation” to African Americans to hold a Mardi Gras parade, with floats and marching bands, in downtown Lafayette and the formation of the Black Lafayette Mardi Gras Association, contributed to the diminished presence of the traditional Creole celebration in the late 1950s. It is difficult to say whether the banning of whips was openly racist in practice or enforcement. According to Mary Alice Drake and others, some members of the African American community supported the ban because they felt that the Mardi Gras conflicts had become too dangerous within their own community. Creoles and other African Americans in Lafayette participated in the parade led by King Toussaint L'Ouverture, which “rolled” in the early afternoon on Mardi Gras day, after the parade of the historically all-White *krewe*, led by King Gabriel and Queen Evangeline, which began at 10:00 a.m.

For the past ten years (since 1989), interest and participation in the traditional Mardi Gras have been revived in the old neighborhoods by Creole businesspeople and others, many of whom also participate in the more structured and formal downtown parade. John Lewis, one of the leaders of this revival, grew up in Fightingville. While telling his children about the “old-time” Mardi Gras, he came to believe that something valuable, a part of the community's meaningful past, was being forgotten. He wanted his children to experience what he felt was a distinctive Creole celebration—“Something to keep the culture going,” he says (Mouton 1994:19). He contributed to a resurgence of interest in the Creole Mardi Gras by sponsoring an informal contest he calls the McComb-Veazey Masking Competition each year since the early 1990s. The Mardi Gras is once again a vital part of the old neighborhoods, maintaining some of the old traditions and Caribbean influences, as well as introducing some interesting and important differences. Young men as well as some older leaders still participate, but the main purpose is no longer “to scare little kids” or make them say their prayers. The whips and sticks are only symbolic, used for mock battles with other groups and to “direct” traffic in parody. Another difference is the fairly recent association and identification of the Mardi Gras as *Creole*.



As Nicholas Spitzer notes, the term *Creole* “has a long history of being a semantically elastic term” (1986:31), and *Mardi Gras* can mean several different forms of Carnival play. I will, therefore, attempt to clarify the usage of the term *Creole Mardi Gras* as it is currently enacted in the city of Lafayette. *Creole* is an elusive term that seems to deconstruct upon examination, shifting in meaning even from block to block in one neighborhood. The only thing generally agreed on is that the term excludes Cajuns, descendants of the Acadians from Nova Scotia. Works by Virginia Dominguez, Spitzer, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, James Dormon, and others have illustrated the ever changing usages of the term *Creole*. Dominguez (1986) suggests that being born and raised in the French-dominated Louisiana society was more significant than race as a determination of who was Creole and who was not in the period prior to Americanization. The term *Creole* was originally used in Louisiana to designate French, Spanish, or other European as well as African people born in the colonies and their descendants (as opposed to those who immigrated to the colonies). In the 19th century, particularly in New Orleans, *Creole* came to be used to designate specifically white Creoles, and the term *Creoles of color* was used to designate those of African or mixed heritage. These usages are reflected in the writings of 19th-century authors such as Kate Chopin and George Washington Cable. During the 20th century, usage of the term *Creole* changed dramatically. At present, the term *Creole* is used in Louisiana to designate anything that is “homegrown” or native to Louisiana—for example, Creole tomatoes. When applied to people, it is commonly used to designate people of African and French heritage and culture, particularly those who are light skinned and are part of the southern Louisiana French Catholic culture. This usage is clearly reflected by contemporary Louisiana writers such as Ernest J. Gaines. From the mid-19th century on, the term *Creole of color* was used as a term of somewhat exclusive ethnic identity and pride by a self-aware group of people who were Afro-European, Catholic, historically French speaking, and often property owners (Dormon 1996:166–167). Sometime during the 20th century, this special ethnic identity was more commonly shortened to simply “Creole,” and it tended to be racially defined. Dominguez says that in New Orleans in the 1970s there was a distinction between Creole and Black identity. More recently, as Dormon points out, “the term ‘black Creole’ has come into more common, and less precise usage,” clearly implying a more inclusive usage, he contends, and possibly including “the entire African American (‘black’) population of south Louisiana” (1996:166). Hall concurs: “*Creole* has come to mean the language and the folk culture that was native to the southern part of Louisiana where African, French, and Spanish influence was most deeply rooted historically and culturally” (1992:157).

This more “inclusive” usage also seems to parallel the dynamics of the “Creole” Mardi Gras in Lafayette. It is the distinctive Mardi Gras played in the city by the cultural/ethnic group self-designated as Creoles, Creoles of color, or Black Creoles, including all African Americans with strong cultural roots in francophone South Louisiana. Mary Alice Drake, a French teacher in the Lafayette Public Schools active in promoting Creole cultural awareness, has claimed that *Creole* today really means French and Black culture, and it includes all people who share cultural traits—music, food, traditions, dialects, and so on. She noted that the Mardi Gras was never a *color* thing and that, in fact, it was not typically the lighter skinned Creoles who participated

in it. It was a neighborhood cultural performance, handed down from Caribbean festival tradition with which Blacks identified. Carolyn Dural, who taught French at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and knew the Creole culture in Lafayette from the inside, concurred. In fact, she said, the term *Creole Mardi Gras* has only been used in the last eight to ten years.

### *Mary Alice Drake*

Mary Alice Drake, who when we spoke was 50 years old and had lived on 12th Street all her life, remembered well the neighborhood Mardi Gras from her childhood. She recalled, “I was born there [on 12th Street]. On Mardi Gras, the people were really fearful of the Mardi Gras because you never knew who your enemy was, you know what I mean.” She also said that in the past there was some violence: “Fights—very serious—killings, deaths. ’Cause, you see, you never knew who the person was because they wore gloves, too. It was a chicken wire mask with a little hole in the mouthpiece, but they had a nylon stocking over their head—so they were well masked—and each had a different color, but you never knew what color costume they would wear. They had whips ’cause they used to beat you.”

Drake recalled that as a child she was whipped by the Mardi Gras celebrants and “jumped many fences” trying to escape the Mardi Gras:

And they had a little saying that went like that:

*Mardi Gras Chic-a-la-pie*

*Cassez ton nez sur un pain maïs chaud*

[Mardi Gras Chic-a-la-pie

Break your nose on a hot cornbread]

And then they would start whipping you. We used to tease them with that. We would yell that to them, and then they would run behind you and beat each of you. ’Cause you were teasing them. And you know it was kind of fearful because you could be friends with that person today, but when they were masked, they could be your enemy.

Mary Alice Drake said that “Chic-a-la-pie” was just the name of the Mardi Gras and had no special meaning as far as she knew. This expression is used in different areas of French Louisiana, including New Orleans, with different second lines. For example, in Edgard, Louisiana, in the 1940s, the verse was, “*Mardi Gras, chique à la paille!* Run and run, ti laille laille / Come, I’ll break your nose” (Tassin 1970:76).<sup>5</sup> Others in the Creole neighborhoods of Lafayette report the verse the same as Drake. Geneva Phillips noted that her husband, Ken, who grew up in the St. Antoine area, said that the thing he remembers most about Mardi Gras is the little song, “Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-pie.” He told her, “I used to sing it all the time.” Although several people told me that “Mardi Gras Chic-a-la-pie / Break your nose on a hot cornbread” was “just a saying,” it seems likely that there is a double entendre intended in the second part of the chant. Food as a metaphor for female sexuality is common in African American expressive culture, such as blues lyrics. This occurs as well in zydeco lyrics such as Clifton Chenier’s “J’aime pain de maïs” (“I love cornbread”). Debbie Clifton, an instructor of Creole French at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, pointed out that this may function

on a metaphorical level that is quite obvious to the participants during Mardi Gras but that would not be articulated away from that context.

Drake further described the traditional costumes, sounds, and gestures of the Mardi Gras in her neighborhood:

[All day long] they would walk the streets. . . . And they were fancy, fancy dressers. You know, with the sticks, and the gloves, and the square hats [mortarboards], and they had the capes, fancy capes. And they would have little bells on their shoes, . . . and sometimes they would have bells on their capes, and they always have, like, a club or a diamond to represent the different cards. . . . Ours were fancy dressers. They would buy their material at Heymann's. . . . Each group tried to outdo the others. And the men were tall, fine looking. The wire-screen masks came from the [Caribbean] Islands.

Drake noted that the maskers wore satin capes and on the back of each cape was a suit from a deck of cards (diamonds, spades, hearts, or clubs). She reported that the maskers all wore the square hats with crepe paper streamers hanging from the edges. She believed that the hat represented a diamond: "It was a square, but the way they put it on, it was a diamond." She described their distinctive walk with a rocking, shrugging, halting motion. They also all carried a stick or a whip: "They would walk down the street. You had to move for them. They owned the street." They would make a strange "whirring" sound through the nylon stockings over their faces, and from time to time they made the sound "Ah-ha," with a very high pitch on the first syllable. Drake also claimed that in the 1950s it was a traditional, neighborhood thing without an overt cultural or political agenda: "Nobody used to write on the costumes [e.g., political, Black pride, or cultural statements, and so on]. In the fifties and sixties, it was not too much of a political thing. This was a neighborhood thing. People weren't interested in those things. In those days it was for fun, and revenge, and who was the best in the competition. But to get even with people, not political."

Although masking in the Creole neighborhoods never really stopped, it was subdued for a time, particularly in the transitional period from segregation to integration and also because of restrictions and sanctions from police and other city officials. Drake's memory is that the restrictions changed the Mardi Gras:

It just died down because it wasn't any fun. You couldn't beat people anymore, you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that, you couldn't wear the gloves, you know. That was the way of life for Mardi Gras. You knew what was happening. Look like when integration came, it died altogether, you know. But now people are getting more cultural minded and are trying to redefine some things that are part of the culture because that is part of the Creole culture.

### *Mike Singleton*

Mike Singleton had participated for 11 years in the McComb neighborhood Mardi Gras. When we talked, he was 38 years old; he grew up in the McComb area, and as a child he would tease the Mardi Gras maskers with the traditional Mardi Gras chant: "As a little boy, I would sit on the porch and tease the Mardi Gras: 'Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-pie! Break your nose on a hot cornbread!' Then I would run in the house to hide." He said that the chant was just traditional, claiming that they no longer whip

children. He remembered that the Mardi Gras participants always had bells sewed onto their capes and their shoes; that was how everyone knew the Mardi Gras maskers were coming. Singleton told the following story about Mardi Gras in the late 1960s: “Well, I was young, and one time my daddy was washing his car, and I started hollering: ‘Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-pie / Break your nose on a hot cornbread.’ And I was about seven or eight years old, and they ran after me in the yard, and as soon as I was turning the corner by the car, they hit me, and I peed on myself. I was just a little kid, you know. [Laughs.] My daddy still laughs about that today.” His parents, he said, still enjoy the Mardi Gras. They sit on their front porch and watch.

Singleton also related a similar story told to him by Francis Babin, who was and is the leader of Singleton’s Mardi Gras group and whom he called the “godfather” of the tradition: “Francis said when he was a little boy he wanted to mask so bad, he stole one of his mama’s curtains and put it like a cape with a bag on his head, and, he said, he ran outside with a stick. And the Mardi Gras caught him and whipped him. And he ran back in the house.” Babin, he said, still makes the original square hats and screen masks.<sup>6</sup>

Singleton said that until about the early 1970s the Mardi Gras maskers carried whips and whipped the children they could catch, particularly the children who made themselves targets by chanting “Mardi Gras, Chic-a-la-pie.” The Mardi Gras celebrants have stopped whipping, but they still carry the sticks with streamers. In the past, before the 1970s, if two groups would meet, they would have a confrontation:

When I first masked, I was young. I most probably was about 14 years old. And that was back when they was still whipping. And when I first bust out with the guys I masked with, I think we was in blue and yellow, and I was kind of worried. I say, boy, I don’t want to meet up with them other Mardi Gras. Back in them days, when they’d meet up, they’d strip each other. We never met up with one, and we made it to the parade. And in the parade, they not gonna strip you. But just through the neighborhood, they would strip each other. That was the first time I masked.

Singleton said that his group, led by Francis Babin, has always depicted a theme of cultural significance with their costumes, something they have done at least since the early 1980s. This year his group’s theme was “Paul Breaux—Days to Remember.” Paul Breaux High School was an important Black 1–12 school in Lafayette before school integration. On his suit Singleton wore a sign: “Remember Paul Breaux High School.” He had been a student at Paul Breaux from 1969 to 1971; he then went to Edgar Martin Middle School and came back to Paul Breaux in the eighth grade. Paul Breaux is now a school for gifted education.

Singleton described a typical Mardi Gras day for the group: “We start at 10 a.m., go through the neighborhoods, and show everyone our suits. Then we go through the parade.” He explained that they begin by “busting out”: “That’s when we first come out. One Mardi Gras come out at a time on the street, and then we each follow behind each other. You ‘bust out’ from like, we might say, we gonna bust out at 10 o’clock from Fred’s house or one of the other guy’s house.”

He said that many groups in 1998 wore what he called the original costumes: square box hats (shaped like large mortarboards) with streamers; screen masks sprayed white; stockings over their faces; and costumes with glitter, sequins, fringe, and bells sewed

on. They carried sticks with crepe paper streamers and sometimes whistles. He also said that they took the box hats with streamers off after the parade and then put on their derby hats. The tradition is, he said, that they give away their square hats, and he described the popularity of this tradition. He described "people running beside us, begging us to take pictures with them, wanted to shake our hands." He said that they always go around the McComb area and then "go straight down 12th Street to Simcoe, and take a left on Simcoe, and get by Piggly Wiggly. That's where the parade starts, at Jefferson. On Simcoe strip, a lot of Mardi Gras go there 'cause a lot of people was there." Singleton also described the characteristic auditory signals: "a whirring sound and the bells are a signal that we are coming." He said that they never talk to anyone while in costume, "just make the sound and carry two whips, one in each hand."

Singleton noted that they change the colors of their suits every year and never reuse a costume. The 1998 costumes were purple, gold, and white—the Paul Breaux High School colors. Their capes each had a tiger face on the back, and the screen masks each had a tiger face painted on it, representing the Paul Breaux tiger mascot. The maskers usually start working on their costumes about two or three months before Mardi Gras. They design the costumes, decide on the colors, and then all buy the material at Heymann's Department Store (formerly a landmark department store in downtown Lafayette, now in the "Oil Center"). Usually the young men would find a local woman to make the pants and shirts, but they put on the designs themselves. Singleton said that it usually costs about \$130–140 for an entire suit. Members of his Mardi Gras group also wear the wire screen masks, but first they put stockings over their faces. This is very traditional, according to Singleton, and makes the disguise complete. There is no name for Singleton's group, but in the past some groups had names, like the Green Hornets, who were well known for whipping everyone. Today, it is just a good time, Singleton asserted. His sons, who were in their early teens, had not yet masked. He explained, "I had asked them this year if they wanted to mask, and they say 'we [are] some clowns.' You see, they don't know about that, the real tradition about Mardi Gras. Because all that has changed for a bunch of them young ones. They think it's just to go downtown, and they don't know anything about the real fun of Mardi Gras. . . . Mardi Gras will always be there." He did say, however, that some young people are taking a renewed interest in the tradition.

### *Francis Babin*

Francis Babin was 50 years old when we spoke, and he had masked for over 30 years: "My uncle's the one started me, my Uncle Alfred. He was a Zeno, my uncle Alfred Zeno. His mama was my grandmother. He died in Chicago." Babin grew up on St. Charles Street but left in 1958 (when he was ten years old). He was one of nine children. When his mother died, his father could not take care of them all, so Francis went to Boston, Massachusetts, to live with his aunt. He came back in the early 1960s and went to Paul Breaux High School. He now worked for a local car dealership and also worked part-time as a disc jockey for birthdays, anniversaries, and wedding receptions. His DJ label was "Soul Pimp."

Babin designed the suits for his Mardi Gras group, and he believed that in addition to having the traditional capes, square hats with streamers, bells, sticks or canes, card symbols, screen masks, and painted shoes, they should also incorporate some social or cultural message. In 1991, during the Gulf War, the theme was “Americans at War.” He said, “All the suits I wore had a message.” In the early 1980s, the time of the unsolved murder of Black children in Atlanta, the capes had an appliquéd heart with a knife through it and the caption, “Atlanta, Save the Children.” In 1997, the theme was “Bring Back Yesterday,” and it focused on African American traditions. The 1996 costumes focused on Black heroes and history. The back of each cape had a different caption (e.g., “Million Man March,” “Let Freedom Ring”), and on the inside of each cape was the name of a prominent Black man (e.g., Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Bobby Seale).

Babin said that he believes that people are becoming more interested in the traditional costumes, particularly the costumes with the square paper hats and the screen masks: “That’s the tradition, square hats. . . . Like downtown, the downtown area really looking for the paper hats, ’cause the paper hats is the old tradition. They say, ‘Oh, look, that’s the *real* Mardi Gras right there.’ ” Babin makes the screen masks for his group: “Yeah, get a piece of screen, cut it out like a face, and then you spray it. You used the flesh-colored spray paint [very light tan].” His innovations include installing lights on the hats, along with the traditional bells, and painting a tiger’s face on each screen mask for the Paul Breaux costumes.

Another well-known tradition associated with the screen mask in the Creole Mardi Gras is the belief (or at least the knowledge of the belief) that if one wears the screen mask, one has to continue wearing it for seven years or one will have bad luck. Babin explained, “That’s the tradition that we have. The screen mask is called ‘the devil.’ At one time, they said, if you would get killed with that mask on your face—like they pass you through the church—they wouldn’t ’cause the screen mask was the devil. That’s the reason why when you wear it one time, you got to mask seven years. ’Cause it’s the curse, they call it. I picked it up from him [Uncle Alfred] ’cause I used to go watch him.” In an amateur video Babin made covering several years of the Mardi Gras, he explains the mask’s role in transformation: “And the tradition was running the girls and whipping them. . . . The white [screen] mask is the devil ’cause the image change when you put it on. When you put a screen mask on, it gives you a particular feeling.” While he saw this transformation as a kind of elevation of status, he also recognized the liabilities of abusing this role: “Some of the groups were so mean, they had to put a stop to it. Put a ban to the sticks. Still carry sticks now, but we don’t hit nobody. So they took the fun out of it.” He always makes sure that his group understands the rules and restrictions, saying, “Well, I make a speech because I let them know that the sixties is gone. We can’t do nothing like we did in the sixties. Don’t hit nobody. Always check each man to see that nothing fall off the suits. Every once in a while, we stop and run in the back, look in the back of each one, and see that nothing fall off.” He added, “Long time ago, we would jump on top of cars, and we’d ride.”

Babin also remembered chanting “Chic-a-la-pie” to the Mardi Gras when he was a child: “That was just a tradition we would use to tease them [the Mardi Gras maskers]. Then we would bust out and start to running to tease them. We would say, ‘I know

you Mardi Gras.' My daddy could always pick me out of the crowd. He say, 'Junior, people could tell by how you walk.' " He said that people still know "Chic-a-la-pie" but that it is no longer used as often as a taunt, for the celebrants no longer chase women and children.

Babin's nephew now masks with him, and his two older sons have masked in past years. He said, "We laughed at my little nephew. That was his first time putting on the Mardi Gras. He didn't know what to do." He also said that women occasionally do mask with a Mardi Gras group. One year his wife Maxine masked with his group. His aunt (Uncle Alfred's wife) also masked with her husband. While the Creole Mardi Gras participants are mostly men, there is no customary restriction against women masking, particularly with their husbands (see Ware, this issue). As Babin pointed out, with the costumes and masks, "You can't really tell." He also said that there is no tacit agreement that white people should not mask with them. In 1998, he said, two white boys masked with one of the groups: "This year, Rocky and them had two white boys with them. Rocky had two big white boys. 'Cause I met them in Heymann's. They said, 'Y'all getting ready?' They were in purple and red. . . . If more white people want to do it, let them come."

The majority of people in Lafayette know the Creole Mardi Gras maskers mainly from seeing them in the Lafayette Mardi Gras Association Parade. There is great anticipation from spectators along the parade route, and most of the Creole neighborhood maskers now march (or—more accurately—dance, strut, sway) in the parade. Babin explained that

most of them do. At one time, they had put them out of the parade. They didn't want them in there. But, after a while, the mayor say, "If you look at it, that's what makes the parade. If the float[s] pass, and they pull the Mardi Gras off, they gonna say, 'Well, that wasn't the Mardi Gras.' " <sup>7</sup>

Unlike the maskers on the floats or the krewe members riding in convertibles, the Creole Mardi Gras celebrants do not throw beads or other trinkets to spectators. When the Creole Mardi Gras participants pass by, the spectators' chants are likely to change from "Throw me something, mister," to "Mardi Gras, chic-a-la-pie," particularly at the beginning of the parade, near Simcoe, where the spectators are likely to be primarily African American and Creole. The chasings and whippings are now only memories of the past, replaced by an aesthetic performance of cultural pride, identity, and community.

### *Creole Identity and Festive Play*

Mary Alice Drake sees the Mardi Gras today as a matter of Creole cultural pride: "For cultural reasons, to let the kids know those are the things their parents and grandparents did. The older people really do enjoy it. They do go out [to see the Mardi Gras]. And it was quiet, too. No fights." Aesthetic duels and ritual battles have replaced the weapons of the earlier performances, and the term *Creole* is much more inclusive, embracing darker skinned people who through culture and community are French

Creoles as well as African Americans. Drake agreed, however, that people did not call it *Creole* in the past:

They just called it the Mardi Gras. . . . You see, it was just a Black thing. People are recognizing Creole now—and you have to know—but for a long time (I was brought up speaking Creole) someone my color, my skin tone, was not considered Creole. The Creoles were the light-skinned people, light-skinned Blacks. And for a long time it left a bitter taste in my mouth. But now, since we're going to the 21st century, we're looking at it on another level. But, to me, Clifton Chenier changed everything. 'Cause he was the man who did it, who changed it. Otherwise I was not considered a Creole 'cause I was dark. *Creole* now means French and Black. . . . Long time ago Creole went more on a skin tone color. You had some places around here that I would not go because I was too dark. In nightclubs, in some places, they would have a paper bag and a comb at the door, so, and you know, I couldn't get in there with the hair or the color. And if someone lighter married me, my color, it was because either I had property or a good education. I had to have something going for me: education or property. Someone my color had to have something. Some people don't want to hear the truth. Now they're looking at Creole from an educational point of view, a cultural point of view. We lived Creole, we cooked Creole cuisine, we spoke the Creole language, we did all the same things as those of color did—as they called themselves. . . . That's the way it was. They did not want to admit it. If you don't tell the truth, you'll be in darkness. Now you don't have to look at our color. Forget the color. Look at the music, the cuisine, the dialect, the traditions. Now, the color shouldn't be a big thing. We shouldn't have those barriers in our society or even in our own race.

Creole Mardi Gras reflects both the more inclusive Creole identity and the cultural diversity of the Creoles of color. Their performance style, like the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians, is essentially Afro-Caribbean, incorporating chants and dance into their play. The French European origins of Mardi Gras as well as the Cajun influences are evident in such things as the Mardi Gras chant, “Mardi Gras, chic-a-la-pie.” There is also the Creole participation in the Lafayette Mardi Gras Association Parade—where some of the Mardi Gras participants remove their square hats and don derbies instead. Unlike the Mardi Gras Indians, who do not mask their faces, the Creole Mardi Gras celebrants use either full face masks or face painting. Not all, however, use the painted wire-screen masks, which are also strongly associated with the Cajun Country Mardi Gras.<sup>8</sup> The rituals and costumes have begun to incorporate aspects of the African American New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians, particularly in the use of feathers and elaborate headdresses, as well as other Mardi Gras traditions and some contemporary innovations.

The Caribbean and African roots of Creole culture in Louisiana are evident and well documented (see Hall 1992, in particular). Afro-Creole culture in colonial Louisiana was rooted in Senegambia, but Yoruba influences are also evident. The Yoruba influence came both directly from Africa and by way of the Caribbean, with large numbers of Haitians coming to Louisiana in the early 19th century. Nunley and Bettelheim note the influence of Caribbean festival arts on the Mardi Gras Indians, pointing out that “great numbers of Haitians, including free mulattoes, black slaves, and white planters, fled to New Orleans in the early 1800s to escape the Haitian revolution” (1988:162).

The use of feathers and feather headdresses as a part of Creole Mardi Gras costuming makes it much like the costuming of the Mardi Gras Indians, which combines influences



from Native American Plains Indians with African and Caribbean influences. Feathers were thought by the Yoruba to be “a strong medium for attracting heaven”; feathers, fringes, and mirrors are marks of Yoruba ritual costumes (Thompson 1988:28). The Yoruba also used strips of crepe paper as fringes around headdresses and costumes and whirled them in dramatic turns. Robert Thompson (1988:28) notes that there are songs about the cascading lappets (*alabala*, or strips of cloth) on Yoruba costumes, meant to be whirled around in a spinning motion. These influences are evident in Caribbean costuming, such as the Jamaican Jonkonnu, which includes fringes or lappets, along with fringed trousers, feathered headdress, and wire-screen masks. Costumes are also decorated with sequins and mirrors, which are evident as well in the Lafayette Creole Mardi Gras.

Descriptions of Rara festivals during Lent in Haiti suggest similarities with the Creole Mardi Gras: “Flashing tinsel, mirrors, sequins, multi-colored scarves, and strips of cloth transform their clothing, just as Rara transforms ordinary life for a few precious days” (Yonker 1988:148). Dolores Yonker points out that Rara activities were directed by a “president” or “chief” with a whip and notes the performance style and accoutrements, including shrill whistles, noisy processions, and “hip-twisting” dances. Yonker also points out that, from their descriptions, the 18th-century dances of *vodou* celebrations are similar to today’s Rara, particularly a dance called the *chica* or *calenda*, which she says are today’s *banda* (1988:151). She mentions another Rara dance, the *chairo-pié* or *charges-au-pieds*, which has a constant halt-run movement (1988:154). Katherine Dunham (1983:10) discusses the *chica* and *banda*, familiar in 17th- and 18th-century literature, and says that they were associated with Mardi Gras in Haiti. She also claims that the “Congo Paillette” was a dance of the Congo sect (1983:70). It is tempting, of course, to make a connection between the names of these dances and “Chic-a-la-pie.” It is true that the rural Mardi Gras clowns are called *paillasse* (straw men). If nothing else, these are interesting coincidences.

Performance style in ritual and play among the Yoruba suggests further influences. Among Yoruba, to parade “combines concepts of joining things together and circularity. When the ritual dancers or maskers perform, people form an appreciative circle around them and are entertained by their moves and gestures” (Thompson 1988:19–20). The forming of an appreciative circle to surround maskers is very much a part of the Creole Mardi Gras performance as well. Margaret Drewal points out that the Yoruba conceive of rituals as journeys. She emphasizes the indeterminacy of their improvisation and “moment-to-moment maneuvering,” each unscripted performance creating something new (1992:7). She also emphasizes the transformational capacity of repetition itself.

Sound modification, including pitch modification, whistling, and muffling or masking the voice, is also a typical characteristic of African masquerades, including those of the Yoruba and the Hausa. Linda Hunter (1996:178–179) points out that the transformation of speech sounds is part of African verbal art, especially in performing as spirits and tricksters or in other masquerading ceremonies. These “acoustic signatures” reinforce the actions in the transformation and creation of meaning (Hunter 1996:190 n.2). Sound modification, particularly the “whirling” or “trilling” sound, is an “acoustic signature” of the Creole Mardi Gras and seems to be an important dimension of the performance.

The voice sounds are changed to the pattern of something that is unnatural and super-human, thus reinforcing the transformation.

Native Caribbean, European, and African ritual traditions combine with African rhythms and Native American motifs to create the Mardi Gras Indians performance which is unique to New Orleans. The Lafayette Creole Mardi Gras incorporates masquerading and performance styles from those same sources, combined somewhat differently, as well as apparently more recent influences from New Orleans Mardi Gras. It is important to note that street masquerading in neighborhoods has long been an important part of New Orleans Mardi Gras in both white and Black neighborhoods. Spitzer also notes “neighborhood marches” as one of the modes of Mardi Gras celebration in Lafayette and other cities in French Louisiana (1996:87).

The cultural and political statements made directly through words, names, or statements appliquéd or glued onto capes of the Creole Mardi Gras participants are an innovation of the last few years. For example, the references to the Million Man March, Nelson Mandela, Bobby Seale, and other sociopolitical personalities and issues address directly the African and African American component of Creole identity. These changes have been incorporated at the same time that increased importance is being given to the square hats (mortarboards), a parody of scholars with clearly European origins.

In addition to the interweaving of multiple facets of identity in costuming and performance, the Creole Mardi Gras maskers interweave multiple symbolic cultural spaces as well. They take a break from the old neighborhoods to dance their way through downtown Lafayette in the African American Lafayette Mardi Gras Association Parade (modeled after the urban Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans, Lafayette, and other cities). On some parts of the parade route, they are performing for a very different audience racially, primarily white. Then they again cross Evangeline Thruway, returning to the historically African American Creole neighborhoods for the last event of their day, the costume judging, and an audience that is almost 100% Black.<sup>9</sup> It is relevant that for many of the younger Mardi Gras participants who have moved away, it is a symbolic return to the neighborhoods of their ancestors.

The enactment of Mardi Gras in Lafayette seems to be a performance that, rather than collapsing any boundaries or borders, acknowledges the boundaries and borders—symbolic and real, historical and contemporary. The Mardi Gras maskers strut across the old borders with the border guards cheering them on. In southwest Louisiana culture, there are intercultural borrowings and lendings, “blurred zones,” and cultural boundaries of power and inequality as well, necessitating, in the words of Renato Rosaldo, “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (1993:217). As Rosaldo has noted, “More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kind. Social borders frequently become salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste” (1993:207). Rosaldo goes on to claim that “such borderlands should be regarded not as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation” (1993:208). Lindahl has called the Cajun culture in southwest Louisiana as “nonhierarchical a traditional society as can be found in the U.S.” (Lindahl 1996a:63), and the region has a reputation for a high tolerance for differences—racial or otherwise. It is also an area of

creativity—particularly in traditional music, food, and festival—and of distinct ethnic identification and pride.

An important issue is not only how the Creoles have been influenced by the larger culture but also how African American/Creole cultural groups have asserted their own separate identity through the forms and expressive styles of their performance. The assertion of a distinct Creole identity is particularly important in an area that in the last two decades has focused attention on the enhancement of cultural pride of another historically marginalized group—the Cajuns.

As Spitzer points out in regard to the rural Creole Mardi Gras, “Black Creoles are faced with the fact that Cajuns dominate the public image of the region within which they live. The area is known as ‘Cajun Country’ ” (1986:218). There are also exclusions. As with the racial polarization in the Cajun and Creole Country Mardi Gras, many Creoles and African Americans in Lafayette, for so long not invited to participate in the krewe of Gabriel, now choose not to do so. Though King Toussaint L’Overture has his own parade and route, some feel that it is not a sufficiently distinct tradition. As Alton Olivier told me, “The Mardi Gras parade is just modeled on the white Mardi Gras.” But the Creole Mardi Gras, many feel, is truly a unique thing, *their* thing, based on *their* traditions and memories of the past. As Carl Lindahl has argued, “The most effective aspect of the past, the *remembered past*, informs the actions and emotions of the players” (1996b:126).

Creole identity is reflected, celebrated, and challenged in the intercultural borrowings and negotiations of this carnival performance. In the process, participants are continually crossing real and symbolic borders, not only those that have separated white and Black, Cajuns and Creoles, but also those that have traditionally separated African Americans within their own communities. As Rosaldo has noted, “Creative processes of transculturation center themselves along literal and figurative borders where the ‘person’ is crisscrossed by multiple identities” (1993:216). The result is not confusion of identity but, rather, a creative space where there is real potential for elements of identity to “dance together.”

### Notes

Special thanks go to Kathy Ball, director of “Louisiana Routes” and “Summer Cultural Arts Series,” for her help and introductions in the Creole community.

<sup>1</sup>This is a phonetic spelling of an expression well known in several areas of French Louisiana. It is variously rendered phonetically as *Chic-a-la-pie*, *Chick-a-la-pie*, *Chique à la paille* (in French, roughly, “Chew the straw”), *Chooka la pie*, and *Chooka Lapai* (Reinecke 1970). There is no consensus regarding its origins or meaning.

<sup>2</sup>Fightingville was the historically African American neighborhood in the St. Antoine and Washington Street area. According to oral tradition, people went to this area on the edge of the city to settle scores in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. “Potrico” is a phonetic spelling of the neighborhood name for the area around Stevenson and Lamar Streets. It is across Evangeline Thruway from 12th Street. None of my informants could remember seeing it written, and I could not find a record of it in print.

<sup>3</sup>The interviews with Geneva Phillips (10 August 1998), Mike Singleton (25 July and 1 August 1998), and Francis Babin (1 August 1998) were conducted and taperecorded in their homes in Lafayette. I also spoke with Babin on Mardi Gras day in 1999, both as he was finishing his costumes at his home and later

at Clark Field. I spoke with Mary Alice Drake (24 July 1998) and Carolyn Dural (7 October 1996) several times, both at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and during Mardi Gras. Interviews with Barry Jean Ancelet and Alton Olivier Jr. were conducted in Lafayette on 30 September 1996 and 17 September 1996, respectively.

<sup>4</sup>This tradition of scaring and beating children on Mardi Gras may be an example of what Stallybrass and White call “displaced abjection,” “the process whereby ‘low’ social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even ‘lower’ (women, Jews, animals, particularly cats and pigs)” (1986:53). The fact that the children traditionally have had the role of taunting and teasing the Mardi Gras participants with the “Chic-a-la-pie” chant seems to mitigate the idea of displaced abjection in this case.

<sup>5</sup>As George Reinecke points out, “Dr. Tassin’s half-line, ‘Ti-laille-laille,’ means nothing much in French or English” (1970:78). Reinecke, however, suggests that it may be an attempt to render into French the Choctaw verb *tilaya*, meaning “to run.”

<sup>6</sup>There are differences between Cajun and Creole masking traditions, even when both groups are using screen masks. One difference is that the Creole screen masks were traditionally painted white. This is the screen mask that is called “the devil,” the *white* screen mask. This is much more clearly a carnival inversion—playing the other—rather than an overt racist statement. The Creole Mardi Gras maskers intend it to be funny, not racist. Because there is no historical background of racist whiteface stereotyping, it does not have the same emotional gestalt as blackface. Blackface during Mardi Gras, whether intentionally racist or not, cannot truly isolate its historicity from the offensive and insensitive use of blackface in other contexts, such as minstrel shows.

<sup>7</sup>Babin had said that 1998 was his last Mardi Gras to mask. His partners thought that he would change his mind. After 30 years of masking, he said, “The only thing that’s bad, this is like a guy whose been boxing for years, and he got too old, and he can’t stand up or he can’t swing, or he’s not fast like he used to be. It’s the same thing. Because after a while, see, ‘cause it takes a lot of walking. In the parade, I’d run a little piece and then I’d walk. I was tired.” Babin did, in fact, mask again in 1999.

<sup>8</sup>Spitzer notes that “Black French Creoles of rural south Louisiana have sociocultural affiliations and aesthetic practices that link them to Afro-Caribbean, Afro-American, Cajun, colonial French and Spanish and Native American groups among others” (1986:1). This is true for the urban Black French Creoles as well. However, the Creole Mardi Gras in Lafayette seems much more closely related to carnival/festival in the Caribbean than to the *courir de Mardi Gras* of the Cajuns and rural Creoles.

<sup>9</sup>In 1999, the mask competition was held at Clark Field, a city recreation site adjacent to the old neighborhoods. The event, sponsored by Harambee Records, featured live zydeco, blues, and rap music as well as food (jambalaya, sausage po’-boy sandwiches, popcorn balls) and drinks for sale. There was a \$5 admission charge for spectators. Francis Babin and Dolly Broussard (an entrepreneur from the community who arranged the event) were the king and queen, and they presided over the costume contest. There was not a large crowd, possibly because there was little prior publicity, and the event reportedly did not make a profit. However, many of the Mardi Gras celebrants did participate in the contest. The audience was again almost 100% Black.

## References Cited

- Broussard, Mamie Joyce. 1945. *The Creole and French of Lafayette, Louisiana: A Comparative Study*. M.A. thesis, Atlanta University.
- Domínguez, Virginia. 1986. *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Dornon, James, ed. 1996. *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Drewal, Margaret Thompson. 1992. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dunham, Katherine. 1983. *Dances of Haiti*. Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California at Los Angeles.
- Fontenot, Mary Alice, and Julie Landry. 1983. *The Louisiana Experience*. Baton Rouge: Claitor’s.

- Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. 1992. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Hunter, Linda. 1996. Transformation in African Verbal Art: Voice, Speech, Language. *Journal of American Folklore* 109(432):178–192.
- Lindahl, Carl. 1996a. Bakhtin's Carnival Laughter and the Cajun Country Mardi Gras. *Folklore* 107:57–70.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996b. The Presence of the Past in the Cajun Country Mardi Gras. *Journal of Folklore Research* 33:101–129.
- Mouton, Todd. 1994. The Creole Mardi Gras. *The Times of Acadiana*, 6 February: 19–20.
- Nunley, John W., and Judith Bettelheim, eds. 1988. *Caribbean Festival Arts: Each and Every Bit of Difference*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Pitre, Glen. 1992. Mardi Gras Chase. *Louisiana Life* 12(1):54–60.
- Reinecke, George. 1970. Mardi Gras, Chooka Lapai: A Probable Meaning. *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 3(1):77–79.
- Rosaldo, Renato, ed. 1993. *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Spitzer, Nicholas R. 1986. Zydeco and Mardi Gras: Creole Identity and Performance Genres in Rural French Louisiana. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. Mardi Gras in L'Anse de 'Prien Noir: A Creole Community Performance in Rural French Louisiana. In *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*, ed. James Dormon, pp. 87–125. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. 1986. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Tassin, Anthony. 1970. Mardi Gras in Edgard: Some Random Notes. *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany* 3(1): 76–77.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. 1988. Recapturing Heaven's Glamour: Afro-Caribbean Festivalizing Arts. In *Caribbean Festival Arts: Each and Every Bit of Difference*, ed. John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim, pp. 17–29. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Yonker, Dolores. 1988. Rara in Haiti. In *Caribbean Festival Arts: Each and Every Bit of Difference*, ed. John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim, pp. 147–155. Seattle: University of Washington Press.