

CARNIVAL ON THE CLIPBOARD: AN ETHNOLOGICAL STUDY OF NEW ORLEANS MARDI GRAS¹



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Ethnological methods determined that New Orleans Mardi Gras is a time for socializing with friends and family, as opposed to an opportunity to engage strangers in acts of fellowship or *communitas*. People prefer to be wild or silly within the confines of their own group. Outside of costumed performers or those engaged in ritualistic head exchanges, the norms of pedestrian behavior are maintained. This study is methodologically innovative as it is the first to obtain a nonfestival baseline in order to distinguish standard, culturally appropriate behavior from that which results from a change in the normative order. Moreover, it is the first to identify the interpersonal contexts in which behavior is inverted, intensified, or remains neutral in street interactions among strangers. (Carnival, *communitas*, ritual, New Orleans)

In 1991, ABC's television program, *Good Morning America*, traveled to New Orleans to cover Mardi Gras, interviewing tourists concerning their perception of the city and the carnival. From their vantage point, in the safe confines of the television control booth on Canal Street, hosts admitted that they had not yet had the courage to enter the French Quarter and see what one woman described as the "craziness of the day." The implication was that farther within the Quarter, anything goes and one would see the unmentionable on television. It is conventional wisdom that Mardi Gras is a special kind of festival or carnival which not only tolerates but encourages people to bend, invert, and ignore the standard norms of public conduct. Within this setting, participants experience feelings of playful excitement, good cheer, and warm fellowship that ensure an open posture toward anyone attending the festival. Social scientists, for the most part, have upheld this image of the urban festival.

Anthropologists have long speculated on how ordinary daily activities have evolved into ritual performances, keying on social structure or the highly differentiated organization of social statuses, social roles, and their interrelationship. This analytical orientation contributed to carnival as being conceptualized as a ritual of inversion (Bakhtin 1968; Da Matta 1979; Gluckman 1956, 1962) in which "the proprieties of structure are lampooned and even violated, blasphemy is encouraged, and kings of misrule are crowned" (Rappaport 1999:218). For others, carnival is best seen as an arena for status intensification (Edmonson 1956) whereby social structures are reified and maintained. Most often, carnival is seen as a dialectical dance around the interplay between the processes of inversion and intensification, a paradoxical ritual of rebellion where social rules are seemingly protested or abandoned, seeming

to mock social order while actually preserving or even strengthening that order (Cowley 1996; Eco 1984; Kinser 1990; Turner 1977).

Carnival manifests as a "time-out" phase, a time for play (Babcock 1976; Falassi 1987; Manning 1983). Carnival provides an occasion for the representation of stylistic, formal humor (Bricker 1973; Cox 1969; Leach 1961; Steward 1929, 1931) and informal humor (Kugelmass 1994; White 1998). It is a venue for theatrics and spectacle (Beeman 1993; MacAloon 1984; Schechner 1985) and a highly charged political event (Cohen 1993; Davis 1988; Gill 1997). Finally, in its more contemporary gloss, carnival is an arena characterized by social flux and ambiguous meanings (Beeman 1993; Da Matta 1979).

Leach (1961), building on the observations of Mauss and Van Gennep, illustrated how periods of festival correlate with the generalized rules of *rites de passage*, beginning with a symbolic death, a period of ritual seclusion, and a symbolic rebirth. For Leach (1961:134), festival time is marked by four corollary phases. In the first, the "moral" participant is "transferred from the Secular-Profane world to the Sacred world; he 'dies.'" Then comes a marginal state, a time out of time, as it is often called, which is the heart of the festival and where the real fun begins. Another transition follows, as the reveler is reincorporated into normalcy, leading to the fourth and final "phase of normal secular life, the interval between successive festivals" (Leach 1961:134). In this light, the alternation of intensification/inversion and sacred/profane are the means by which we not only measure but "*create time by creating intervals in social life*" (Leach 1961:135).

Contributing to the study of carnival by introducing psychological attributes that often are associated with transformation in the social structure that occur during this time out of time, Turner and Turner (1978:31) noted that festivals often engender a sense of well-being among participants that he called *communitas* (the feeling of fellowship). *Communitas* is characterized by the loss of status distinctions, boundaries, and a sense of merging that manifests itself in a profound sense of emotional fusion or psychological state that results from participating with "the hidden oneness of all" (Rappaport 1999:381).

Anthropologists, working primarily in the domains of rituals, festivals, and religious events, have incorporated *communitas* into their analytical tool kit and extended it to include most forms of group associations. Thus it was declared to be present in sports arenas, stock car rallies, and Times Square's New Year's Eve celebration. Given the looseness with which the concept was applied and defined, much of its utility was lost. Yet, as Rappaport (1999) reminds us, the concept of *communitas* or its equivalent is necessary in order to explore the relationship between the rules of social expression with psychological realities of private experience. Ritual serves to enhance *communitas* by intensifying and reaffirming the relationship between the social and the personal. Moreover, this mutuality is present in both the symbolic and behavioral domains (see also Watanabe and Smuts 1999).

Wanting to determine the extent to which *communitas* (or fellowship) flourished or was inhibited during Mardi Gras in New Orleans, we assumed that if *communitas*

was an artifact of the festival experience, then it would manifest behaviorally in expressions of warmth, trust, and openness toward friends and strangers alike. To this end, we focused on whether an individual's orientation tended to be directed outward to other spectators or was more inwardly directed to friends and family. In addition, we sought to record the frequency with which an individual within the public sphere engaged in co-operative or antagonistic acts.

To those ends, this article explores whether there are noticeable changes during Mardi Gras in public behavior, especially regarding co-operative behaviors and readiness to acknowledge and interact with other people encountered on the street, all of which are an index of the degree of *communitas*. Which behaviors are altered while attending this modern festival? Which domains are inverted, intensified, or remain the same? Specifically, we explored the degree to which behavior during Mardi Gras changes when compared to a nonfestival summer Saturday evening and a noncarnival festival (Christmas parade). In addition, we wanted to determine the applicability of the conceptual constructions derived from a small-town festival setting for understanding the contemporary American urban festival.

METHODS

This research project, carried out in New Orleans in 1991, was designed to determine the degree to which normative behaviors change within both festival and carnival environments. To study the suitability of *communitas* for conceptualizing what does and does not change in the New Orleans carnival, we decided to focus only on one aspect of the festival experience: the role of the spectator or onlooker. We therefore did not focus on the performer or the relationship between the performer and the spectator. Nor did we attempt to identify a sense of *communitas* that people, who through the act of attending the event, may have experienced consciously. Rather, we wanted to determine the degree to which formal ritualistic scripts are suspended, enabling spectators to interact with others in a radically different way.

Thus, we focused on groups on the streets of New Orleans; the ones watching the festivities yet not riding on floats or performing on balconies. The defining characteristic of the audience is that "they do not participate in the performance: they watch and they listen" (Rappaport 1999:39). In New Orleans, most spectators stood behind police barriers and sought to catch beads thrown from passing floats. They wandered around the French Quarter with wide eyes, observing various scenes. With exception of Fat Tuesday (or Mardi Gras day), spectators do not wear costumes and thus are relatively easy to observe. In this way, New Orleans carnival is much easier to observe and code spectator-to-spectator interaction.

We assumed that if the scholarly and popular conceptions of the festival were accurate, then the behavior of the spectators, who are the most numerous and most commonly encountered festival personae, would be changed the most. If *communitas* was applicable, then the spectators' behavior should be less atomistic and more

communal, much like the behavior observed at a religious revival, Grateful Dead concert, or contemporary desert "rave." The spectators should therefore exhibit greater openness toward and willingness to interact with each other, even strangers.

The frequency of stranger interaction was utilized as a diagnostic tool for evaluating the intensity of *communitas* present within this festival setting. We measured the presence or absence of fellowship (or, inclusiveness or exclusiveness) by coding the frequency with which individuals greeted, interacted with, or ignored one another. Specifically, we coded the emblems of fellowship by noting the frequency of handshakes, touches, hugs, verbal greetings, and in-depth conversations that took place between strangers and among friends and family members.

To assess whether fellowship was present during Mardi Gras, we first established a nonfestival Saturday-night baseline. Previous studies of festival have neglected to establish such a comparative base. We needed to determine the frequency of ordinary interaction or acts of fellowship found in a noncarnival setting so that we could determine what, if anything, changed during the carnival season. In this way, we were also able to recognize the more common patterns of conduct in ordinary life. For each event, researchers were assigned a given area (e.g., Canal Street, Napoleon Avenue, Bourbon Street), with the principal investigator moving between all three areas in the city. Each researcher used a prepared code sheet where he or she recorded the type of group composition (e.g., gender, race, and age), the type and frequency of a specific kind of interaction, and whether the subject wore a costume or some kind of decorative prop (e.g., mask, beads).

The three specific events observed and coded were Saturday night (non-Mardi Gras); the (first annual) Christmas parade; and Mardi Gras, including Bacchus Saturday night and Fat Tuesday. We studied Saturday night first in order to gain some understanding of ordinary nonfestival behavior. We then studied the Christmas parade to determine how a festival event may alter the way people interact with one another. After completing our analysis of these two events, we were in a position to investigate how behaviors changed during the city's two-week carnival. For all three events, the geographical location of our study remained the same.

The research assistants concentrated on individuals alone or in different kinds of group formations (e.g., dyads, triads, or larger groupings). They were instructed to follow a sample unit for ten minutes recording the following kinds of behavior: touching, hand-holding, kissing, conversations, and types of gift exchanges (e.g., beads, etc.). Afterwards, each researcher scanned the immediate vicinity for atmosphere and evidence of unusual behavior, and recorded his or her observations. Upon completion of that task, another sample unit was selected for observation. Each researcher was instructed to select ten or more units for each of the five possible sample units (e.g., solitary individuals, heterosexual dyads, unisexual dyads, unisexual triads, larger mixed or same-sex groups of four or more). In this way, each researcher was able to gather information from 50 or more sample targets. Most researchers tended to focus more on groups because a great majority of people

attended these events in groups. The enormous density of the crowd served to hide the researchers' presence and thus they had no noticeable effect on public behavior.

Five geographical areas were studied: Napoleon/ St. Charles Avenue (composed mostly of local residents), Canal Street Municipal Auditorium (composed mostly of local African Americans), the French Quarter (mostly but not entirely composed of tourists), lower Bourbon Street, and Royal/St. Louis Cathedral. We did not attempt to monitor behavioral changes within private or semipublic arenas (such as bars, hotel lobbies, or private parties), nor did we explore subcultural and class differences in performance styles. While we did record a subject's apparent age and ethnicity, we did not explicitly focus on issues of age, ethnicity, or sexuality; admittedly, each of these would have colored our perceptions somewhat.²

RESULTS

Recorded observations of the first annual Christmas parade and a nonfestival Saturday evening in the French Quarter were used to establish a baseline for normative noncarnival public behavior. For both events there was a very limited number of out-group interactions. For example, during the Christmas parade, only six of the 86 groups under observation (7 per cent) had any kind of outwardly oriented interaction, and it was of a very limited nature. Two of these interactions were acts of assistance (e.g., requesting and giving directions). The four remaining involved efforts to attract the attention of a member of the opposite sex (e.g., greetings or yelling from across the street). Only one interaction was obviously sexual, thereby making the Christmas parade a very nonsexual event.

The degree of outward interaction was equally muted for the nonfestival Saturday night. For example, of the 74 groups observed, there were only nineteen out-group interactions (26 per cent). The majority of these ranged from flirtatious cat-calls (most often men to women) to polite requests for directions or assistance. The few encounters that were not sexual in nature often involved the use of some kind of prop or the influence of drugs (e.g., asking about the researcher's clipboard, a drunk calling to a couple who left behind a discharged beer bottle, a street dealer soliciting potential buyers for drugs). The lone exception was an occasion when fifteen to twenty females in a boisterous mood actively called out to people as they walked down Bourbon Street. In this case group size appears to serve as a security border for women to engage in assertive behavior.

During Mardi Gras we noted 23 out of 74 groups observed (44 per cent) showing some kind of out-group interaction. Of this total, 21 involved interaction with someone in costume, eight involved "begging" for beads (i.e., exchanging beads for other beads, a hello, or a kiss). In sum, 21 out of 23 out-group Mardi Gras interactions (or 91 per cent) involved festival-specific props; costumes or sets of beads were used to broach contact. The two exceptions involved interactions between members of the opposite sex, whereby one or more males called out to a female or group of females walking down the street. Although the frequency of outward

Table 1: Degrees of Interaction

Event	Total Individuals	Total Groups	In-Group Interaction	% In-Group Interaction	Out-Group Interaction	% Out-Group Interaction
Non-Mardi Gras Saturday Night	188	74	54	73%	19	26%
Christmas Parade	185	86	50	58%	6	7%
Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras Saturday Night	188	74	41	55%	26	48%

Table 2: Within-Group Contact/Intimacy

Event	Total Groups	Kissing In-Group	Hand-Holding In-Group	Arm-in-Arm In-Group
Non-Mardi Gras Saturday Night	74	7 (9%)	17 (23%)	7 (9%)
Christmas Parade	86	3 (3%)	11 (13%)	4 (5%)
Fat Tuesday/Mardi Gras Saturday Night	74	5 (7%)	7 (9%)	3 (4%)

Table 3: Significance of Props on Out-Group Interactions, Fat Tuesday

Event	Total Groups Observed	Out-Group Interaction	Costume Involved	Beads Involved	Balcony Interactions
Fat Tuesday	60	26 (43%)	20 (33%)	8 (13%)	7 (12%)

interaction increases during Mardi Gras, compared to Saturday evening and the Christmas parade, this has more to do with the use of some kind of prop than it does with the type of festival milieu. Thus it did not matter whether the encounter took place on a noncarnival Saturday evening, Bacchus evening, or on Fat Tuesday (i.e., Mardi Gras day). Everyone's behavior remained remarkably consistent.

DISCUSSION

The degree of fellowship or *communitas* does not vary by the type of celebration. Whether it was a Saturday evening out, the Christmas parade, or a Mardi Gras weekend, people's public conduct remained remarkably consistent across seasonal and environmental circumstances. Only 12.7 per cent ($n=32$ out of 234) of strangers not in costume interacted with someone outside their group. Moreover, the 32 incidences recorded in no way resemble anything akin to a *communitas* experience. Listed below are observations taken from the researchers' field notes. The examples are representative of the atomistic, often aggressive sexual overtones found in most public interactions between strangers.

The Noncarnival Baseline: Stranger-to-Stranger Outward Interaction

The survey found that there were outward interactions in seventeen of the 79 groups recorded. Saturday evening was filled with couples (53 per cent) and single men. The exchanges were brief and guarded in tone and quality. Below are some representative illustrations:

1. Seven black men tease/flirt with one white woman. Three white men and two white girls come upon the exchange. They call out, "Leave her alone!"
2. Two men shout at three women in a passing car.
3. Three men shout at two girls standing on a balcony.
4. A man asks another man who is walking by to take a picture of him and his wife.
5. Several men call out to four young women walking down the street.
6. A middle-aged woman, obviously intoxicated, calls out to everyone who passes by. They only nod at her.
7. A man hits another man who was trying to pick his pocket.
8. Two young women yell at a man who is beating his dog.

These examples illustrate that sexual flirtation, albeit often couched in an aggressive posture, is often present in Saturday-evening chance encounters with members of the opposite sex. The gender roles are clear: young men call out to young women who for the most part seem to ignore them.

Mardi Gras Week: Stranger-to-Stranger Outward Interaction

Of the 74 groups recorded during Mardi Gras, there were only 26 out-group interactions (48 per cent). Like the nonfestival Saturday night, the between-group

exchanges were brief and impersonal in tone and content. The exceptions resulted from bead exchanges and interactions with persons in costume. Below are representative illustrations of the types of exchanges observed:

1. A girl gives beads to a man, smiles, and then walks away.
2. A woman squeezes a (gay?) man's buttocks
3. A female standing on a balcony calls to a group of men and asks for beads
4. A young man wearing many beads walks up to a young woman who also wears many beads and asks, "A kiss for some beads?" She nods. He then gives her a string of white plastic pearls and she kisses him longingly. They part, walking in opposite directions.
5. A group of young women who want to receive beads calls out to a group of young men, "Only true men can throw this far "
6. A group of young men yell out aggressively at passing women: "Show us your tits!"
7. A man walks up to a policeman and asks for directions, receives them, and says, "Thank you."
8. A man leaving a store holds open a door for another person who is entering. The man entering says, "Thanks."

These cases reveal verbal exchanges that are sexual and voyeuristic. They tend to be individualistic transactions that are noncommunal in overtone (e.g., swearing at another, yelling insults at passing women). Only two of the three bead exchanges recorded suggest some kind of fleeting emotion between strangers.

Not found during Saturday evening or the Christmas parade in the French Quarter were bead exchanges, which function to enhance a sense of fellowship. Again, the importance of a material prop seems necessary for a feeling of communitas to emerge from ritual. When the bead exchange was between members of the opposite sex, it served to mute more overt or crude forms of sexuality. In this way, people's understanding of sexuality's place in Mardi Gras may serve to transform it from a kind of impulsive sexual rawness into a more structured and therefore anticipated, albeit risqué, encounter. By following a ritualistic script, sexual crudeness is rendered predictable, understandable, and thus tolerable (Shrum and Kilburn 1996). The Shrum and Kilburn (1996) study of exhibitionistic Mardi Gras balcony performances notes that individuals, primarily women, strip in exchange for plastic beads. In contrast, at street level, where women and men were interacting in close proximity, they recorded only a few incidences of beads-for-breast-flashing exchanges. The absence of the bead exchanges appears to render direct sexual overture into more crude outbursts that are commonly articulated by males calling unsuccessfully to females walking about.³

This should not be surprising. Contrary to conventional wisdom and unexpurgated video images, Mardi Gras does not appear to increase the frequency of unregulated sexual overtures or displays. Rather, the implicit notions of exchange appear to guide the sexual impulse into more manageable and thus predictable forms of expression. Many tourists may believe that during Mardi Gras "anything goes." They thus arrive with heightened expectations which are seldom fulfilled. Consequently there might be much frustration, anger, and outwardly directed aggression

targeted primarily at members of the opposite sex, if not for the recently adapted Mardi Gras tradition of the bead exchange.⁴

Fat Tuesday: Strangers in Costume Interacting with Strangers

Of the 60 groups observed on Fat Tuesday, only 25 (43 per cent) engaged in some kind of outward interaction. Of these, twenty (77 per cent) of the out-group interactions involved persons in costume, eight (31 per cent) involved bead exchanges, and seven (27 per cent) involved interactions with people on balconies. Below are representative illustrations:

1. A woman smiles at a costumed man walking by. Later she gives money and says, "nice" to a singing street artist
2. A transvestite man begs on the street. "Give me some beads."
3. A man wearing a mask dances alone in the street. Suddenly another man walks up and briefly dances alongside him.
4. People wearing costumes pose for a picture and talk to a child standing to the side watching.
5. Three men in costume take each other's picture, then ask a passing young woman if she wants to join them
6. One man walks down the street in costume and greets another person in costume, "Happy Mardi Gras."

In contrast to the stranger-to-stranger interactions found for a noncarnival Saturday evening (26 per cent) and the noncostume Mardi Gras weekend evening (48 per cent), the frequency of out-group interaction on Fat Tuesday for individuals wearing a costume increases to almost 77 per cent ($n=20$ out of 26). Surprisingly, the frequency with which people on Fat Tuesday interact with strangers not in costume was lower than that found for a nonfestival Saturday evening ($n=19$ out-group contacts compared to only 6 non-costume/bead Mardi Gras out-group contacts). The frequency of outward interaction, then, was not determined by the type of festival but rather by whether people were in costume.

Goffman (1963) observed that humans in every culture use a form of "civil inattention," which encourages an avoidance of prolonged eye contact and a minimization of body contact, minimally acknowledging an awareness of others. This orientation provides a safety zone for individuals within which they can selectively disattend or even flee from interaction with others (Lofland 1973:200-01). Goffman's observation suggests that it is difficult, if not impossible, to bracket or ignore norms of public interaction. He (Goffman 1963:124) further noted that people require a reason for entering into engagement. It appears that wearing a costume or other kinds of decorative props, whether during Mardi Gras or at a contemporary Halloween party (Kugelmass 1994), provides people with a theatrical face that recasts them into the role of performer. It is a transformation that invites onlookers to engage people in that persona without fear of being perceived as too intrusive (see Table 2).

For those in costume, the standard was to enact the object, animal, or persona represented. This spectator-cum-performer ritual was less sexual, aggressive, or

egoistic than the other rituals so far discussed. The costumes provided a familiar facade to what would otherwise be a sea of strangers, a prop by which persons could interact and mingle without violating another's sense of privacy or security. As *communitas* requires a shared cultural script and values, the costumes may be the most essential and time-honored means by which atomism is transcended and a feeling of solidarity inspired.

As mentioned, outward interactions between strangers were muted unless there was some sort of ritualistic script (as in bead exchanges) or common cultural theme (as signified by the costumes). However, such guarded fellowship stands in sharp contrast to the more unified fellowship evident within groups, which remained remarkably consistent among all three events and was consistently marked by courtesy and cheer.

Familiar-to-Familiar Inward Interaction

Although the anticipation of novel encounters during New Orleans Mardi Gras is high, people's actions remained predominantly oriented toward friends rather than strangers. There is little evidence that suggests an increase in anonymous intimacy or fellowship directed toward strangers. Only familiars, especially couples, appear to experience an intensification of their emotional bonds while attending the festival and nonfestival events, thereby heightening the intimacy that existed prior to attending the festival. Some examples of behavior indicative of in-group coalition follow:

1. A man hands beads to a group of surrounding children (Bacchus evening).
2. A large group of women dance at an intersection and sing "The Yellow Rose of Texas" (Saturday evening)
3. Eight women dressed like Madonna form a circle and mimic Madonna's music video, "Vogue" (Mardi Gras day)
4. Four women in costume take pictures and chat (Saturday evening)
5. A young man with a group of friends calls out, "Look at me!" He then jumps into the air and runs after his friends (Bacchus evening).
6. Two males walking together call out "Whee!" and laugh as they stroll down the street (Bacchus evening)

As festival is a time to inspire in-group cohesion, it is especially effective at enhancing the pair bond. For example:

1. A girl kisses her boyfriend (Saturday evening).
2. A girl takes pictures of a friend (Mardi Gras day)
3. Two gay men kiss and touch on the street (Bacchus evening).
4. Two couples walk down the street, point to various places, and then walk into a restaurant (Saturday evening).
5. A man and woman walking down the street holding hands stop to hug and fall to the ground with the woman on top. The crowd of onlookers yells out. The girl stands and raises her hands. The crowd cheers, applauds, and then disperses (Mardi Gras day).

Though Turner (1977) never indicated whether the feeling of *communitas* was immediate or extended, Gregor and Collins (In press) note that events have lingering, almost *communitas*-like effects in the retelling. Their research found that couples use events as a way of reaffirming their emotional intimacy and thus the viability of their relationship. Mardi Gras is an excellent vehicle to intensify the romantic bond. Through sharing a common experience, lovers reaffirm their sense of commitment and belonging (see Table 3). Here, the shared remembrance never ends, for in the nostalgic retelling of what Gregor and Collins call "anchoring events," the couple relives and revives their own sense of unity, a *communitas* that exists at the level of the pair bond and not the group in mass.⁵

When couples touch or kiss in public, they "are making an open declaration of unity which serves only to further exclude others" (Weitman 1973:222). That is why couples, regardless of the type of event, act and are perceived as if they are autonomous islands of privacy. When the integrity of the couple or the group is violated it is usually accidental (e.g., encountering a drunk or being bumped into). This pattern held for all three events under study. In this way, the American festival is a time to rejuvenate and reaffirm ties with friends and lovers, but not an avenue for meeting strangers.

Our findings stand in sharp contrast to the popular notion that American carnival is a special time of behavioral license. To the contrary, we found that spectators, who may be of good cheer, exhibited little interest in meeting or conversing with strangers. Moreover, we found very little interest in attending a festival with individuals from outside of one's age cohort, altering one's sexual orientation, or reversing one's gender role (e.g., women becoming sexually aggressive and men sexually timid).

IMPLICATIONS

Anthropological theories of festivals arose from studies conducted in small-scale, tightly organized, often religiously governed communities where most people knew one another, or at least their place within the social order. There, festivals were breaks from daily life when friends, neighbors, and acquaintances dressed up and played with social custom. In this context, familiars interacted with familiars. This continues to be the pattern in Cajun Mardi Gras in Lafayette, Louisiana, where people in costume and on horseback visit neighbors' homes to engage in mock kissing of wives and unmarried women, teasing family members, and doing fictional theft. Even in this context there are restrictions to the degree to which pretense can be carried out. Since everyone's identity is known, no one can act too roughly or outlandishly. If this happens (and on occasion it does), the individual is criticized by everyone in the days or weeks that follow (Marcia Gaudet, pers. comm.).

In contrast, New Orleans Mardi Gras is characterized by a million or more tourists visiting the city. In this setting people often interact with others who may or may not share similar values or beliefs. Locals and tourists alike position themselves

behind police barriers that line the major parade routes. Standing in lines often twelve deep and with arms outstretched, they yell for the costumed performers riding on slow-moving floats to throw them candy, beads, or a trinket. They form an audience with attention fixed on the performers. In this way the New Orleans Mardi Gras has become an urban American spectacle with clearly bifurcated roles of performer and spectator (Kinser 1990).⁶

In sum, whatever expectations tourists have of the New Orleans Mardi Gras, their behavior was strikingly consistent: they focused inwardly on familiars and ignored strangers. We found that whenever strangers interacted with strangers (as is the case in large urban festivals) people followed standard conventions of civil inattention found in everyday public interaction. With the exception of those engaged in bead exchanges or wearing costumes, there was nothing unique about people's behavior during the New Orleans Mardi Gras, Christmas parade, or any other festival event. If *communitas* is signified by individuals, alone or within groups, interacting and bonding in some fashion, then the New Orleans festival was decisively noncommunal. With the exception of those who wore a costume or engaged in the exchanges of beads, the normal rules that structure pedestrian behavior are seldom inverted, intensified, or neglected.

In contrast to the common assumption that carnival is a "time out of time" in which "anything goes," a host of sociological studies of small-group interactions suggest that humans have an intensely difficult time altering the everyday rules of social etiquette. As Rappaport (1999:41) has noted, "It is very difficult to transform audiences composed of strangers whose status as such is protected by rules of etiquette to such a degree that to address a person in an adjacent seat is regarded as forward, into congregations." It is thus axiomatic that individuals do not readily participate in activities that violate their socially constructed ideals of decency and dignity (Latane and Darley 1957). For example, urban social scientists who have examined the conduct of subway riders (Levine et al. 1973), beach-goers (Edgerton 1979), bar behavior (Cavan 1966), and behavior within the proxemics of public space (Emerson 1970) all document the existence of implicit social rules that provide a protective boundary for the self (Ashcraft and Schefflen 1976; Birenbaum and Sagarin 1973; Mehrabian 1976).

The study of social order at a California beach (Edgerton 1979) yields similar findings; i.e., that people tend to establish "private territories [and] rarely, except for innocuous greeting, interact with strangers" (Edgerton 1979:198). Like urban studies of pedestrian behavior, Edgerton found that beach-goers encapsulate their groups by focusing their attention inward and tend to be very hesitant to become involved with outsiders. At the Greenwich Village Halloween parade the conventional boundaries separating spectators from performers are made concrete with police barriers (Kugelmass 1994). Like Mardi Gras, the Greenwich Village Halloween is a kind of theater, with the spectator assuming the role of theater patron (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996). The focus as well as the suspension of disbelief hold only for the performer and not for the spectator, who is expected to follow standard rules that govern public

interaction. In this way carnival spectator behavior is no different from that found at a county fair or a baseball game. New Orleans Mardi Gras, if not Mardi Gras everywhere else, is at best an exercise in guarded fellowship.

CONCLUSION

The implicit ethos of the American festival remains what it has always been: an intensely individualistic endeavor. In this way, American Mardi Gras constitutes another urban festival filled with strangers who share nothing in common except an agreement not to interfere with one another (Rappaport 1999:41). Within this arena the spirit is intensely self-centered, individualistic, and, with the exception of performers and the familiar folk that one arrived with, studiously noncommunal.

The absence of a shared ideology, along with personal anonymity, dampens an individual's ability to experience an intense emotional fusion (Illouz 1997:136) and thus undermines the ability to engage in uninhibited fellowship or *communitas*. For those attending New Orleans carnival, the proper posture toward strangers is respectful detachment and studied civil inattention. For those who come with costume, beads, or friends, however, there are more intense forms of interaction, including playful exhibitionism. It is in the latter context that a restricted *communitas* continues to flourish in the American festival—a time when friends and lovers, but not strangers, use the public arena to intensify their unity and fellowship with one another.

NOTES

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2. The demographic composition for the Saturday nonfestival night was 129 (79 males and 50 females), comprised of 47 heterosexuals, 42 male dyads, 12 female dyads, 19 male triads, 2 female triads, with 22 solitary males and 5 solitary females. For the Christmas parade a total of 58 (30 males and 28 females) were observed. They were comprised of 30 heterosexual couples, 3 male dyads, 3 female dyads, 12 mixed groups, and 8 solitary males and 2 solitary females. For Mardi Gras Week (e.g., Bacchus evening) our sample population was 353 people (228 males and 125 females): 47 heterosexual couples, 42 male dyads, 12 female dyads, 10 male triads, 3 female triads, with 22 solitary males and 5 solitary females. For Mardi Gras day or Fat Tuesday, 234 (162 males and 72 females) individuals were observed. When sorted by group composition there were 52 heterosexual couples, 19 male dyads, 7 female dyads, 9 male triads, and 1 female triad, 6 mixed-sex groups, with 40 solitary males and 2 solitary females. In the French Quarter, 120 people under observation did not wear a costume, while 51, or 42 per cent, were in costume. In other areas of the city few people were in costume. For example, only 8 out of 150 individuals, or less than 18 per cent, wore a costume in the CBD district area.

3. The French Quarter becomes, especially during the Bacchus Saturday night parade, filled with out-of-town college students who, while not in costume, wear bunches of beads that are used as props to begin a conversation that may extend to exchanging beads for a kiss or something else.

4 According to longtime resident and anthropologist Harvey Bricker, the ritual of bead exchange is predominantly a tourist phenomenon. Locals are more reticent to engage in this type of sexual display. The recent emergence of the bead exchange also supports Rappaport's notion, as articulated by Watanabe and Smuts (1999:101), that "it is the behavioral simplicity, not the symbolic elaborations, of ritual that lies at its core and enables otherwise autonomous individuals to communicate their willingness to co-operate with each other even in the absence of language."

5 This is not new. Robert and Helen Lynd's 1930s Middletown study found a "tendency to engage in leisure-time pursuits by couples rather than in crowds . . . the unattached man and woman being more 'out of it' in the highly paired social life" (cited in Illouz 1997:56).

6 The carnival photos taken by Jankowiak and other researchers show people's eyes directed exclusively at the performers, be they riders on the floats or wearing outlandish costumes. No photos show audience members—people who are not in costume—interacting with other observers.

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