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THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST IN THE CAJUN COUNTRY MARDI GRAS

Until recently, nearly all folkloric accounts of Mardi Gras and related festivals sprang from two opposed approaches. *Ancients* have seen in such festivities the shadows of prehistoric rites of fertility, death, and resurrection and have sought to peel away the skin of the present to lay bare the aged core of the game: in knowing the nature of the first Mardi Gras we would know all that we needed to know about the present celebration. A second group, the *moderns*, viewed the celebration only as it is currently enacted. In exclusively synchronic fashion, they have plotted carnival's outer shape, internal structures, and place in a larger social world. All that a folklorist could see on a Mardi Gras day was all that mattered.

Ancient and modern perspectives differ irreconcilably in their choices of the "right" time for viewing Mardi Gras. For the ancients, origins define purpose: the earliest enactments are far more significant than anything that now remains for us to witness (Frazer 1922:347–66, 679; Oster and Reed 1960). For the moderns, however, the event immediately under scrutiny is far more important than any unseen predecessor.

For all their obvious surface opposition, the two views remain remarkably alike in two respects. First, both characterize carnival as an agon. While ancients define it as a symbolic battle between winter and spring, moderns stress a social rather than a natural battleground upon which public order and disorder, high and low strata go to war. In the moderns' view, carnival rests on a series of "balanced oppositions" (Abrahams 1963; cf. Abrahams 1983:108): "through the symbolic means of the festival, oppositional values like order and disorder, . . . public and private space, and respect and aggression are played out" (Ware 1995:138).¹

A second similarity linking ancients and moderns is lack of historical depth. Scholarly accounts of Mardi Gras have tended to depict the celebration as timeless in two senses. Trapped between two paradigms—the first a

search for ancient origins and the second a synchronic account of what happens on any given Mardi Gras day—we have created our own agon, pitting prehistory against a-history without paying sufficient heed to the vast stretches of recoverable past between these poles. As a characteristic example, Harry Oster and Revon Reed meticulously described the Mamou Mardi Gras as they observed it and then derived it from ancient Celtic fertility rituals (1960). We have shifted back and forth between prehistoric origins and present-day performances as if the first Mardi Gras could really explain the most recent, as if simply by watching people we could determine their thoughts and feelings better than they themselves could express them.²

Lately, however, a dual motion has opened up the space between the two synchronic poles of “first” and “now.” An academic interest in historical change and its interplay with developing festive traditions has inspired a creative partnership between folklorists and historians. Susan G. Davis’s *Parades and Power* (1986), Samuel Kinser’s *Carnival, American Style* (1990), and Roger D. Abrahams’s *Singing the Master* (1992) all fuse historical and folkloric methods to add chronological depth and dynamism to festival studies.

Yet like the ancients and the moderns, even the best recent historical-folkloric studies have tended to ignore the role of verbalized memory. Even more important than our recent interdisciplinary partnerships is what we have gained from listening, from attempting to share the experience of the festive actors themselves. Arguably the most effective aspect of the past, the *remembered past* informs the actions and emotions of the players. Henry Glassie has brought such a past most fully to bear upon festival studies. Employing oral memory to reconstruct folk festival, Glassie’s *All Silver and No Brass* (1975) provides the informing premise of this essay: “Events in the past, held in the memory, can be as influential upon people’s actions as events in their immediate contexts. Memory is a behavioral reality” (1975:57). Unfortunately, the County Fermanagh community described in Glassie’s work had discontinued its mumming practices before Glassie began his fieldwork, leaving him no opportunity to trace the influence of older mummers’ memories on younger performers and their performances. In contrast to the Fermanagh mummings, Cajun country Mardi Gras possesses both a vividly remembered past and a vitally enacted present. As folklorists begin to call upon the speech of past players to illuminate present Mardi Gras actions, powerful new readings are emerging (Mire 1993; Spitzer 1986; Ware 1994 and 1995).

Here I take Mardi Gras’ verbalized past in two relatively unexplored directions—emotional interpretation and narrated memories, two of the most common types of discourse that accompany the celebration. Attempts to explain how Mardi Gras feels and stories of Mardi Gras past act palpably upon the revelers. In emotional interpretation, participants respond most

directly to the festival. In narrated memories, older celebrants actively transform past acts into scripts for action as young people compete to play the roles modeled in their elders' stories.³

To add the dimensions of the emotionally experienced and narrated past to the folkloric record, this essay examines one Mardi Gras community: Basile, Louisiana. In this town of approximately 1,700 people, the festival known as the Cajun country Mardi Gras, or *courir de Mardi Gras* ('Mardi Gras run'), is yearly enacted. During the past sixty years, the Basile Mardi Gras has engaged as few as a dozen riders and never more than 110. Such a small procession of masked men (and women, since the 1960s) bears little resemblance to the far larger and better known urban Mardi Gras of New Orleans, Mobile, and Galveston (Kinser 1990). Yet Cajun country Mardi Gras has attracted a significant literature, most of it informed by the ancient and modern approaches I have outlined.

To help fill the gap between "first" and "now," I begin by juxtaposing two synchronic accounts of Mardi Gras viewed in two different frames: the horseback processions of past generations, reconstructed from the memories of former riders; and today's celebration as seen by outsiders. After outlining the most obvious changes in the festival, I hope to illumine the Mardi Gras community's own sense of the past as well as its sense of change by examining the Mardi Gras stories of a few of the most respected older participants and by noting the effect of these stories on the community. This insider's history reveals that the people of Basile are concerned with both the first Mardi Gras and the most recent. Yet the most important festive time for them may well be neither the ancient past nor the present, but the remembered past. The agons—the wars between order and disorder pitting whip-carrying *capitaines* against outlaw *sauvages*—perceived as so important by outsiders are often relatively unimportant to insiders for whom the festival is far more orderly and unifying than to the unmasked. In short, the people of Basile combine ancient, modern, and local historical perspectives to see beneath the surface of their Mardi Gras. To begin to understand their festive vision, we must do the same.

THE FORM OF MARDI GRAS: AS IT IS, TO OUTSIDERS; AS IT WAS, FROM WITHIN

At first sight, there is only misrule and disorder. Swarms of masked men, so thoroughly disguised that their mothers would not know them, break the boundaries of an ordered environment. They spill into the farmer's yard, charge his house, intimidate his family, grab his wife, and force her to dance. They run off with bicycles, wheelbarrows, food, and anything else they can find, including children. Their breath, voices, and lurching motions feed suspicions—sometimes founded—that they have been drinking for days.

Viewed from a distance (as it nearly always has been, by tourists and even by folklorists) and then rendered even more distant when treated in print or on film, Mardi Gras appears to be pure riot, mad play. Outsiders see Cajun Mardi Gras as a rustic, only slightly less licentious cousin of the most lurid enactments of the more familiar New Orleans Mardi Gras in which barebreasted women walk the streets (only the men have tops on their dresses), screaming adults wrestle plastic coins from the hands of sobbing children, and mobs start fights resulting in injuries and even deaths as they clamor over strings of beads. Outsider interpretations of Cajun Mardi Gras (for example, *Time* 1985), like those of New Orleans's, have emphasized the mindless drunkenness, but as Cajun insider Barry J. Ancelet has said, Cajun Mardi Gras offers "mindless drunkenness with a history," a history that ultimately makes festive action anything but mindless (Ancelet and Lindahl 1975–1996; Mire 1993). The authoritative history of Cajun Mardi Gras can be provided only with the help of its most ardent practitioners.

To what lengths would a young man pursue this "mindlessness"? After visiting thirty houses, dancing two dances and singing a song at each, chasing one or more chickens at many, and committing continual acts of slapstick trickery all along the way, the Mardi Gras returns to the center of town, where the members dance, parade, beg and dodge the strokes of whips for another hour. Then they file to the Woodman Hall in Basile to eat a gumbo cooked from the chickens, rice, and other food that they have gathered.⁴

After the 1993 Basile Mardi Gras, I stood outside the Woodman Hall and listened to the Mardi Gras review their day. I listened as five young men talked about losing their jobs for participating in the festival. Their employers had told them that if they did not come to work on Tuesday morning, they would not be coming back. And that is exactly what happened. One of the riders at the same Mardi Gras had just been released from the hospital with a serious knee injury. After a day of chicken chasing, begging, and trickery, his pants were red with the blood of his injured leg. Another man, nearly fifty years old, also had a leg injury and was unable to walk at the end of the day. A third man, who had been scheduled for neck surgery, instead chased chickens, climbed trees, ran through fields for eight hours, and was chosen best all around Mardi Gras at the *bal* that night. Some of these men sacrificed their livelihoods, others arguably risked their lives, for one day of calculated madness.

What is it that these Mardi Gras risk their jobs and health to do? Once the physical and emotional costs of this game are weighed in with the riot, a dual image emerges. At the same time that the festival unleashes disorder on the outside, it also subjects itself to an often punishing discipline from within. At the roots of this perceived tension is a particular order embedded in the day, an order whose form is easily charted. The pattern explained here is a conservative one. It is the Mardi Gras as performed one or two generations

ago, the one that is most often described when one asks the older men of Basile what Mardi Gras is.⁵

A visitor in the 1940s or '60s would see the festival unfold as follows. Masked men and boys assemble in the early morning under the leadership of the *capitaine*, a temporary despot who will play the "most important single role" (Spitzer 1986:455) in the festive drama by standing in full command of the day's proceedings. He and his *co-capitaines* are the only unmasked riders. The group leaves from a central location in the town, moving to its rural outskirts. When they reach a farmhouse, the riders begin a cycle that will be repeated perhaps thirty times before the day is out. The *capitaine* stops the masked horsemen on the road, then rides forward alone to ask the owner's permission to enter the yard. When consent is granted, the leader waves a flag signaling his masked followers into the farmyard. Dismounting, the men begin to sing and dance in a ritual of supplication:

*C'est les Mardi Gras, c'est tout des bons jeunes gens,
Des bons jeunes gens, ça devient de toutes des bonnes familles. . . .
C'est pas des malfaiteurs, c'est juste des quémandeurs.*

The Mardi Gras, they are all good people,
Good people who all come from good families. . . .
They are not evil-doers, they are just beggars. (Putnam and Ancelet 1996)

When the troupe has groveled to the farmer's satisfaction, he presents a chicken or two to the *capitaine* who summons the masked men behind an imaginary line where they await the chase. The *capitaine* throws the chicken into the air and the men pursue. The one who catches it is hailed as a victor (fig. 1), and the entire troupe celebrates his victory with various acts of play—climbing trees, running off with children, daring the host to guess their identities—until the *capitaine* blows a horn calling them back to the road. This pattern of action is repeated at various farmhouses until the Mardi Gras has circled the town, at which time the *capitaine* leads the group back to its center. The whole town then shares a gumbo cooked from captured chickens and ends the evening with a *bal masqué*. Next morning is Ash Wednesday, day of atonement, beginning of Lent, and as



Fig. 1. At the core of the Mardi Gras drama: Helena Putnam salutes the chicken she has just caught, Basile, 1993. Photograph by Maida Owens.

more than one rider has told me, "If you do Mardi Gras right, you'll have enough to pray about when you get up early and go to church."

It does not take long to trace the shape of Cajun Mardi Gras, but describing its meanings and purposes would take much longer. The following brief sketch of the festival's signal functions reflects the views of older people from Basile and neighboring Cajun prairie communities.

First, Mardi Gras maps shared territory. The riders leave from and return to the *moyeu*, the hub, the center of their community.⁶ On their ride, they circle their town, marking with horses' hooves the boundaries of their common interests. Within the palpably precise physical circle marked by the ride, there is also a series of selections and negotiations, a sifting process that separates insiders from outsiders. The Basile Mardi Gras, for example, generally skips the houses of Protestants, African Americans, and new arrivals in town to affirm its longstanding ties to older, Catholic Cajuns.

Mardi Gras marks manhood. Older riders remember it as an all-male affair, a rite of passage incorporating boys into the adult community and accentuating the skills most prized by male Cajun adults: horsemanship, resourceful farming, prowess at racing and dancing, hard work, hard play—all combined. The boy who plays well is accepted as a peer, and when he catches his first chicken he becomes a provider in a very real sense for the first time by adding his own chicken to the gumbo that will feed the group that night.

Mardi Gras presents a moving image of interdependence: anonymous masked men, symbolic of anyone who may be hungry, beg for food and receive chickens, rice, and other foodstuffs given impartially by the farmers. Theoretically at least, this is a feast in which everyone gives and everyone gets. The hosts sacrifice the chickens they have worked to raise (but only after a fight), and the riders beg, sing, and struggle with each other to win those chickens. At the *bal* that night, all share the food thus earned, lost, and earned again. In the early modern France that the Cajuns abandoned for the new world, sharing was a strategy of survival. Droughts and crop failures created widespread famine ensuring that half the time, more than half the people had less than enough to eat (Braudel 1981:74).

Finally, Mardi Gras defines the vitality and promotes the continuity of the group. At the end of the day-long ride, the boys who have become men through their adventures join the older men at the *bal*. Here, for the first time, the "new" men participate in accepted social interaction with females. They dance with, court, and ultimately marry the girls and women who have witnessed and admired their holiday feats.

Yet an enormous gulf divides the Mardi Gras just described from the Basile of the 1990s. The celebratory circle just described can only be forced with difficulty upon the contemporary Cajun cultural landscape. For example, although much of Cajun country experiences economic trouble,

winter starvation is no longer a fear. And while the oldest Mardi Gras runners remember when all courtship took place during chaperoned dances, today's Cajun teenagers enjoy much the same range of dating options and sexual freedoms available to most other American teenagers.

These and other changes in Cajun lifestyle have made their marks on Mardi Gras, because this festival, like any other living tradition, has changed with—and in ways reflective of—its community. Though Cajun Mardi Gras clearly follows a rural paradigm that celebrates the interdependence of village and farm, the Basile ride is now restricted almost exclusively to town because the countryside has largely been abandoned. After visiting more than two dozen homes and businesses inside Basile, the Mardi Gras takes a long loop into the countryside to invade one lone farmhouse. In terms of time spent both in travel and at the house, the visit to the farmhouse is the longest of the Mardi Gras visits. As if in compensation for all the food that the countryside once provided the Mardi Gras, the owner of this house annually provides lunch for the entire troupe.

Older riders remember a time when they could see a dozen other farmhouses, visible in all directions, from their own front porches. Today's landscape reveals miles of fields between farmhouses. The subsistence farm has largely disappeared, replaced by giant (often corporate) fields of specialty crops such as rice and crawfish. Boys whose fathers worked their own farms now live in town and travel to these fields to work long hours for little pay on other people's land.

Though the old Mardi Gras were almost exclusively horseback processions, the lack of farms, the dearth of horses, the now longer distances between rural dwellings, and the fact that riding is a vanishing art have caused many Mardi Gras to exchange horses for horsepower. The celebrants now travel from house to house on truck-drawn wagons.

Though older celebrations reflected a male-dominated world from which unmarried women were strictly excluded, several contemporary Mardi Gras now have female runners. In some towns these girls and women rival the men in rowdiness, drunkenness, and sexual play, performing feats of exhibitionism unthinkable to their mothers. At Basile, the tradition of women running Mardi Gras is older than in most places. In fact, women are credited with reviving the entire Basile Mardi Gras in the 1960s after the men's run had been discontinued. Since the late 1970s, Basile's women and men have run Mardi Gras together—that is, riding separate trucks to visit the same house at the same time and to perform nearly identical antics (Ware 1994 and 1995).

As the demonstrably ancient form of Mardi Gras absorbs the newest cultural developments and changes shape to accommodate them, the clash between the archaic and the contemporary is visible everywhere within the celebration. The innovations appear so striking and sometimes so discordant that one must question why the older forms continue to exist at all.

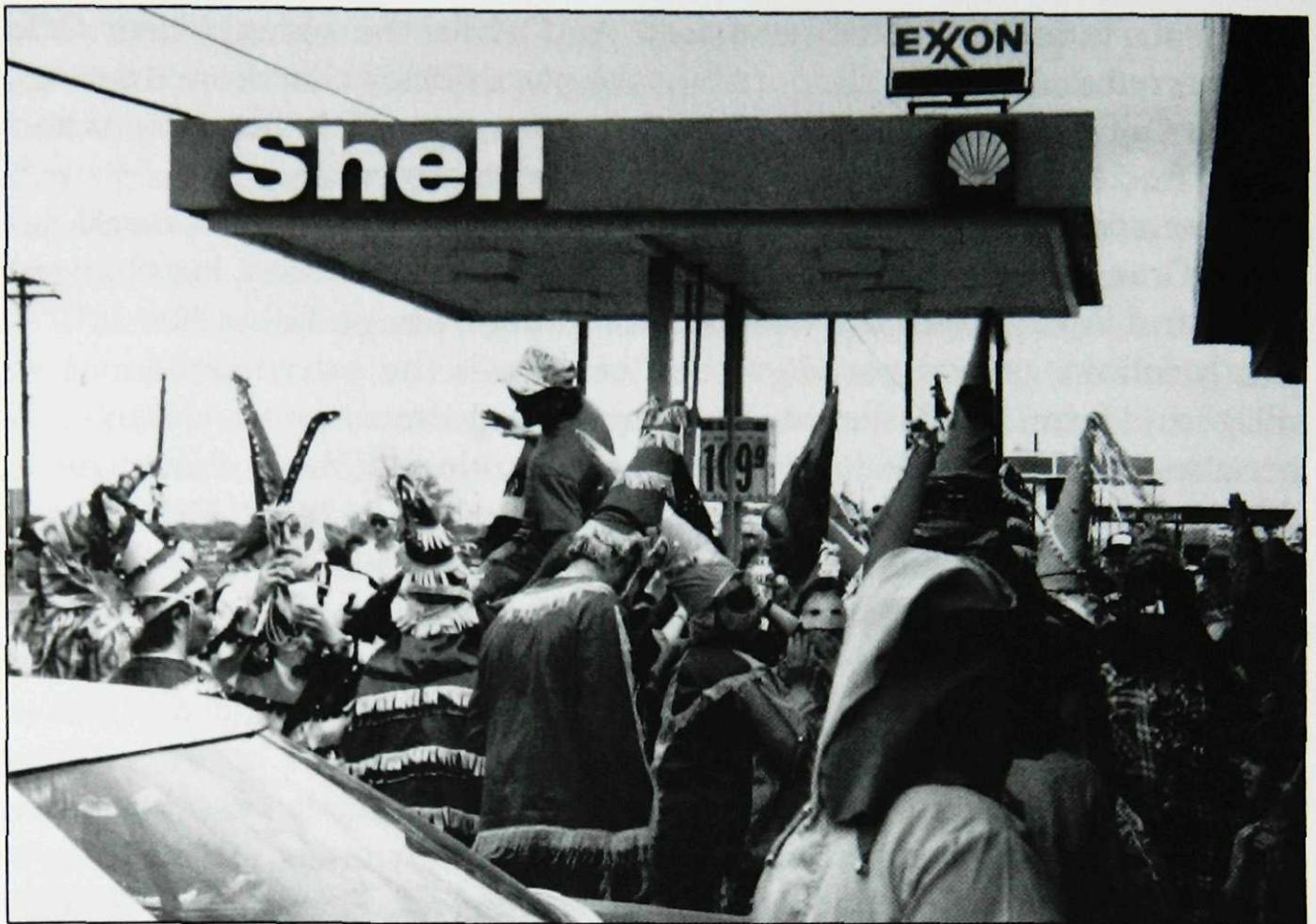


Fig. 2. Ancient dance on a postmodern stage: the Basile Mardi Gras overruns a gas station on U.S. 190 and hoists a customer on their shoulders, 1992.

Why would the celebrants want to keep alive a form of play that bears only a passing—if not thoroughly past—resemblance to their current lifestyle?

The extraordinary disjunction between the festival's "archaic" form and the current shape of the community it celebrates is primarily an outsider's problem. The people of Basile do not limit themselves to such choices. They are both ancients and moderns. Many of Basile's core Mardi Gras do in fact nurture theories about Mardi Gras's origins, theories that are very important to them. Furthermore, even the oldest of the corps tend to find themselves so excited by the Mardi Gras immediately at hand that they have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep on Mardi Gras eve. With a fabric of narrated memories, these same Mardi Gras participants bind together the first and the most recent Mardi Gras, thus investing the festival with three temporal dimensions. Scholarly speculation about ancient origins or contemporary structures receded, as did all that I had witnessed over thirty Mardi Gras, as past and present players shared with me the memories and emotions they don along with their masks as they enter the celebration.

REVELERS' ROLES

The people who can best explain what happens at Mardi Gras are those who seem to let nothing stand in the way of what they do, like the five young men who lost their jobs and the three injured men at Basile in 1993. The best

time to hear their explanations is late in the evening of Mardi Gras itself when they stand outside the hall and speak animatedly among themselves.

Mardi Gras excludes some. In many cases, Protestants and African Americans do not desire and are not invited to participate. For Cajun Catholics, the festival is an option: some consider it a pleasant, occasional game while others show little interest. But for those who catch the most chickens, clown the most effectively, beg for the most money—in short, for the tight group of core families and lifelong friends who constantly recharge the festival—participation is not optional. They have been dedicated to the tradition for generations. When Debbie Andrus and Vories Moreau say “Mardi Gras is in the blood,” they are referring to those few core families. Theirs is not the community’s only definition or characterization of Mardi Gras, but it is the one most relevant to what goes on behind the masks on Mardi Gras day. For the core riders, as their words will reveal, Mardi Gras is the most important day of the year, more important than Christmas.⁷ Furthermore, it is a family celebration in two distinct senses. First, it allows some families such as the Bellons, Fontenots, Moreaus, Riders, and Youngs to draw together and celebrate all their family resources. Second, it brings together a voluntary family, created by those core players who see themselves as constituting a kind of brotherhood or sisterhood.

I have not asked people why they run Mardi Gras, but they have often told me. Their words tend to emphasize the mystery of the celebration by labeling its magic inexplicable. They talk about their inability to express how Mardi Gras moves them, but their self-judged failures are far more powerful than any outsider’s explanation. Some simply describe the ways in which they are moved, and offer no interpretation. One Mardi Gras *capitaine* said, “Every Mardi Gras morning before I go out, I have a good cry,” and left it at that.

Others speak in powerfully poetic images. At the end of seventeen hours of songs, dances, processions and after revelers half his age had been carried home, Potic Rider (fig. 3), the sparkplug of the Basile run, stood in the dance hall, the last of the Mardi Gras remaining at the *bal*. His fortieth Mardi Gras was over. He was surely feeling the old wounds—the broken back, the knee and neck injuries—that ensured he would be walking with a cane tomorrow morning. He was drinking the last of the day’s many beers—the last beer he would drink before Easter, for Lent was just minutes away. No one asked him for an explanation, but he wanted to talk about feelings that words cannot name:

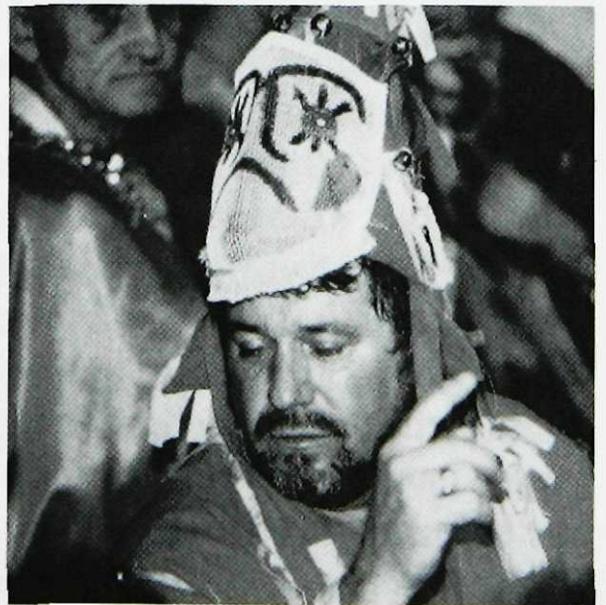


Fig. 3. Potic Rider at the Mardi Gras *Bal*, Basile, 1993: “I am that I am. . . . I run Mardi Gras.” Photograph by Barry Jean Ancelet.

I can't explain it. Mardi Gras doesn't come from the head; it comes from the heart. It's in you. You can take anyone off the street and make him a clown, but you can't make him a good clown. You can't make him a Mardi Gras. You have to live it. I can talk, but I can't explain it. Where it comes from . . . it's very deep. It's like Moses going to the mountaintop and seeing the burning bush. And the burning bush said, "I am that I am." Well, "I am that I am": Potic. *I run Mardi Gras*. (February 1993)

Few equal Potic's poetry, but there are many who speak their feelings less directly, through narrating events from Mardi Gras past. At the end of the day when celebrants face not only Lent but a full year's wait for their favorite day to come again, all remembered Mardi Gras tend to run together. The people in the hall often talk about the relatives or sponsors (Mardi Gras fathers, we could call them⁸) who drew them into the game.

Behind each of the core runners can be found at least one man like Vories Moreau, Potic Rider's Mardi Gras father, who lived for Mardi Gras. His commitment was unshakable and nonnegotiable. Every employer he met in his youth got the same speech from Vories:

I'll work for you Christmas. I'll work for you Sunday. I'll work overtime everyday. But I won't work on Mardi Gras. That's my day. (December 1991)

What drives Vories and the Basile Mardi Gras to stake so much on one day's play? An answer may be suggested in the forms and functions described earlier, but it must also be sought in details of the day's play and in the roles of the riders. Although the general forms of the Mardi Gras have changed in most of the rural enactments, the specific parts played by the riders on that day apparently have changed less than most other aspects of the festival.

Jan Vansina found that certain communities fix their collective memory in ritual form. Looking cursorily at the form of Cajun Mardi Gras, we see that the celebration has moved from country to town, from horseback to trailer, from all-male to mixed-sex participation. We could claim that because the game has changed so fundamentally, few lifelong memories must endure. Yet at a microcosmic level, within the various communities I have studied the individual roles of the runners have maintained a remarkable stability. A boy is very likely to play the same tricks, in the same way, as his Mardi Gras father. This is all the more remarkable because Mardi Gras roles vary so greatly from town to town and from district to district. These festive roles, then, seem to follow a pattern well known to folklorists: they exhibit "major variation over space and minor variation through time, while the products of popular . . . culture exhibit minor variation over space and major variation through time" (Glassie 1968:33).

Each community's Mardi Gras embraces elements of many overlapping roles: outlaw, trickster, beggar, thief, and fool. Every local celebration will engage all of these roles to some extent, yet each group creates its own identity by elevating one or more above the others (see also Ware 1995:153).

The outlaw role is most pronounced in the horseback rides of Church Point, Evangeline, Mamou, Oberlin, and Ville Platte (see Lindahl 1996). Young horsemen sometimes wear bandanas over their faces to play the stereotypical outlaw. They break away from the processions, invade public space, stop cars, abduct children, and even carry off photographers. Everything these outlaws encounter is fair prey for their game. The Mardi Gras absorbs everything in its path, transforming it into more Mardi Gras.

This mock terrorism tests the outer boundaries of playfulness. Outlaw Mardi Gras not only embody toughness but also project a real sense of menace. While viewing an outlaw Mardi Gras, a friend of mine was approached by an old friend, unrecognizable behind his mask. The masker distorted his voice and delivered these unsettling words: "*C'est dur ça, quand le Mardi Gras connait toi et tu connais pas le Mardi Gras*" ['It's tough, isn't it, when the Mardi Gras recognizes you, but you can't recognize the Mardi Gras'].]

In some of the prairie celebrations (for example, at L'Anse Maigre) all of the riders were known as *sauvages* (pronounced *chauvages*), the Cajun word for "Indians." They played the roles of tribes beyond the borders of civilization, bent on unraveling the fabric of society. This identification with Indians remains paramount at Basile where the *capitaine* still summons a masker with, "*Viens, sauvage*" and where, in 1993, one of the female Mardi Gras wore a shirt with the name *Chauvage* sewn in hand-cut cloth letters across the back.

Although a few Mardi Gras resemble mainstream America's stereotypes of Indians by wearing feathers, buckskin and warpaint, most shape themselves to a long-established Cajun image of the Indian role. The old-style Mardi Gras costumes, made largely of burlap feed sacks, signaled Indian dress by the fringe along the arms and legs. Today's costumes are more elaborate, but the fringe remains. Dismounting from their horses or piling off the wagons, the *sauvages* steal forward, crouching and lurching, emitting high-pitched whoops, trying to look simultaneously conspicuous and stealthy. It is a funny and disconcerting combination.

The outlaws attack from without, but the tricksters upend from within by subverting authoritarian roles. Among the oldest such upside-down roles are those of the mortarboard-wearing scholar and the mitre-wearing bishop. Such "play bishops" and "play scholars" ridicule certain symbols of social status with a kind of ceremonial pomp very uncommon in daily Cajun life. Such headgear is seen only a few times a year: at graduations, bishop's visitations, and Mardi Gras. Thus, ceremony feeds upon ceremony, but while the parodic costuming is aimed at pretense and pomposity, the daily pursuits of clergy and scholars are seldom mocked.

Yet when the players begin to parody more familiar and respected community actions and roles, they deliberately add a note of internal discord to the game. A masked bishop, for example, can be a frightening anomaly

when he is seen pronouncing mock prayers. In some Mardi Gras, the revelers apply grease paint to each other's foreheads in mock anticipation of the penance soon to be imposed by real-life clergy (Ancelet 1993). The mock churchmen who intimidate their neighbors on Mardi Gras will be in church early the next day, Ash Wednesday, kneeling before their priests. So at the same time that the riders are playing Indian savages, attacking the town from without, they are also turning town life inside out and upside down, momentarily making what has been most familiar disturbingly strange.

Cross-dressing adds another major element to this strangeness. Unlike New Orleans Mardi Gras (where drag displays merely intensify the presence of an established transvestite tradition), Cajun Mardi Gras marks the one day a year when transvestites parade through the prairies. Among the Cajuns, the ideal is not for a man to appear female—this is a very “straight” society—but for him to appear conspicuously male (with exposed hairy legs, for example) at the same time that he reshapes himself to caricature female form, most notably by fashioning enormous breasts borne so clumsily that no one can be fooled about the sexual identity of the player.

Racial inversions also figure parodically during the day. In addition to the role of *sauvage* which all play, there are the established roles of *Nègre* and *Négresse*—a black couple. Although blackface has been documented Mardi Gras tradition as far back as early modern France (Kinser 1990:215–49), Cajun celebrations are colored by the racial stereotypes of the American South. The *nègre* is often a stereotypic woman chaser preying on white women. Tony Johnson, the *nègre* at Basile from 1992 to 1995, leaned on a cane as he walked and wore a natty black suit jacket which he periodically spreads open to reveal pinup photos of voluptuous young white women. The *négresse* is usually a mammy figure with pendulous breasts and swollen buttocks who kisses all the males she can catch, leaving splotches of grease paint on their faces.

A final inversion has to do with age: Young riders assume the identities of wizened old men, and old riders sometimes mask as children.

The beggar role occurs in all Mardi Gras. After scaring their neighbors, masked men often dance, sing, and beg for a chicken. In some communities, begging for money is at least as important as catching a chicken. When money is the object, every passerby or bystander, not just the farmer, is fair game. At Basile, a Mardi Gras will often approach you on his knees, with one palm extended and a finger from his other hand pointing into the empty palm. “*Tit cinq sous*” (‘five little pennies’), the masked men say in their high-pitched “Indian” voices. At first, this groveling game may seem to be a pure pitch for charity. But a strong undercurrent of extortion can surge into intimidation and theft as the Mardi Gras, pretending to shine your shoes for pennies, unlaces them instead, then unbuckles and strips off your belt, removes your hat, and pulls the rings off your fingers. The beggar becomes a thief and merges into the outlaw as the range of roles comes full circle.

All of these parts, calculated to confuse and entertain their spectators and victims, are controlled by the *capitaines* who whip and otherwise punish those runners who test the limits of their game. *Capitaines* usually lash errant players with burlap whips that look more frightening than they feel, but at Basile the *capitaines* use rawhide whips that often leave welts on the backs of their victims. Any outlaw, trickster, or beggar can be transformed into a fool when the *capitaine's* ritual punishment provides relief and entertainment for intimidated spectators. The beatings provide a capsule drama of authority against disorder with insanity seemingly in control until the *capitaines'* whips drive the Mardi Gras off the farmer's land and back to the road.

MARDI GRAS ROLES MODELED IN ACTION AND STORY

In order to understand why Vories Moreau and other *grands Mardi Gras* would risk their jobs to play these often apparently masochistic games, we must know something about which roles they chose. Mardi Gras' core participants tend to adopt roles that accord with their sense of place within the community and their conviction of what is important about that community.

Potic Rider, Vories Moreau, and their friends were willing to sacrifice every other day of the year for this one day of supreme indulgence, but they are quick to point out that this is not *self-indulgence*. Potic Rider says:

You're not doing this for you, now. The Mardi Gras's not doing this for them, now. It's for the town. So they can eat one last good meal before Lent starts. *That's what it's all about.* (December 1991)

At the 1995 Basile Mardi Gras, after the group had returned triumphantly to the hall to eat the gumbo made from chickens they gathered that day, Potic drew the maskers to him and pronounced:

You were a great Mardi Gras, but we want the people to know that we're *their* Mardi Gras. We didn't do this just to have a good time, we didn't do this for us. We did it to feed the people of Basile. (February 1995)

The Mardi Gras cheered in response.

The idea of "one last good meal" still drives the actions and memories of the older, often retired cheerleaders who in turn inspire the actions of contemporary Mardi Gras. Hunger is not a current problem for older men like Vories Moreau, but it is a persistent memory. The Cajun winter and his father's small farm did not yield much food. Vories's father was a very resourceful man who worked both as a farmer and a carpenter, but being crippled and short of land, he could not provide as well as he would have liked. As a boy Vories went to school without shoes, and he went through winter without a coat until his elementary school principal discovered his condition and bought him one. As a boy Vories learned as many skills as he

could, all part of a complex survival strategy driven by simple, basic needs. Today, at age seventy, he can list more than forty jobs and skills that he has learned and practiced, not in any middling fashion, but with great expertise.

Folklorists have their theories about where Mardi Gras originated, but Vories Moreau and Potic Rider have their own accounts that explain their actions better than all the frames we as observers have superimposed upon their festive actions. Potic says:

Mardi Gras started in France when the people didn't have enough to eat. They went to their neighbors to beg for food, and they wore masks so their neighbors wouldn't know who they were. (December 1991)

From the varied, overlapping roles available to them—trickster, beggar, outlaw, thief, fool—Vories, Potic, and their friends in Basile chose to be trickster-beggars, roles that distilled their sense of Mardi Gras and the conditions of living in their community.

Trickery was most readily apparent in the disguise. The costume was crucial, and Vories, his male friends, and their female relatives made these suits themselves. The perfect costume would cover but not fully conceal the runner. Masks made from window screens and painted with frowning faces were confusing but penetrable. The identity of the Mardi Gras remained transparent enough that all his skills as an actor were required to conceal his identity. Good Mardi Gras had to distort their voices and their motions so effectively that they could dance with their own wives and mothers and still remain strangers. Vories was such a good actor that he would be revealed only by the outrageousness of his tricks:

We went to one house—they had a lot of chickens. And they threw out a chicken, and we caught it and we started playing around. The woman—was looking kind of suspicious, like maybe we were going to get some more chickens out of their yard. So I went behind the barn out of sight, out in the field. And I picked up this big, dry cow patty, and I stuck it under my suit, you know.

I started walking back toward the road, looking like I had something to hide. That old woman called me: "Come back here, Mardi Gras—I know you've got my chicken." I made like I was going to run, and the *capitaine* came and whipped me back to the porch. I was clutching the side of my suit. The old woman said, "Okay, Mardi Gras, show me what you got."

I got on my knees and bowed my head down. Then I pulled out that cow patty and laid it right at her feet. She started yelling, "Vories, *maudit!* Get out of my yard!" (November 1992)

Vories's tricks were so much a part of his Mardi Gras identity that they revealed him to his neighbors. Yet good begging—providing for the town—was his main goal. For Vories, it remains essential for the Mardi Gras to go to great lengths to get food:

The Mardi Gras always asks for more than what it gets—and they get as much as they can. I'd kneel down and I'd kiss their hand and I'd shine their shoes and I'd kiss their feet, and if they'd give me a chicken I'd want the rice, and if they give me the rice I'd want the grease [lard]. If they give me the grease, I want the roux. . . . I'd never give up. I always wanted something else, you know.

I'd sing and I'd ask them, I'd tell them, "Look, the Mardi Gras didn't get no chickens today." And I was lying, but I'd tell them that, you see. I'd say, "We didn't get no chickens." And they'd tell me, "Well, we're going to give you some rice." And I'd say, "Well, we have plenty of rice, but nobody gives us a chicken." (April 1993)

Performing and working hard for small change were not activities limited to Mardi Gras. At one point in his childhood, Vories's major source of income was playing the fiddle for his neighbor:

This fellow would come by the house and we'd sit on the porch and he'd say, "Vories, get your fiddle and play me a song."

"Oh, no, Mr. Ortego, I can't play the fiddle." I was real shy. So he'd reach in his pocket and he'd put a quarter on the porch. And then I'd run for that fiddle, because a quarter, that was like if you'd give twenty bucks to a kid *now*, you know. I'd play him a couple of songs and I had to sing too. *He made me sing.* (November 1992)

Two dance tunes and a song are exactly what the Basile Mardi Gras still perform at every house when begging for a chicken. For Vories, Mardi Gras was a socially accepted—one could say, socially exalted—means of practicing the rituals of begging and entertainment that were part of his continual community experience.⁹

Vories's memories also shed light on theme of order vs. disorder that past interpreters have often seen as an essential aspect of Mardi Gras and related festivals (Abrahams 1963 and 1983). The festival presents an undeniably vivid image of conflict. Masked figures who seem to transgress all social boundaries face off against authority figures who pursue them and lash them with rawhide whips. First-time observers tend to see a violent conflict and little else. Yet folklorists who have listened at length find as much order as disorder behind this agonistic mask. Nick Spitzer sees a good measure of both "the established order and chaos of everyday life," with chaos ultimately in the foreground (1986:437). Carolyn Ware challenges the old paradigm by identifying a huge range of Mardi Gras behaviors, from active rebellion against, to active affirmation of, established social roles (1995:157).

Vories Moreau's interpretations often eliminate any polarization, for Vories sees the master and the *sauvages*, the whippers and the whipped, in total collusion toward the end of providing charity for the entire town. The core of Mardi Gras is located in the relationship between the *capitaine* and the masked men, in the way these two extremes engage to create a space of

play between themselves, and in the ways in which they meet and almost melt together when carrying their pageant of orderly disorder to the farmhouse and then back to town.

Their mutual goal is charity. As they approach a house, the Basile Mardi Gras still sing, "*Les Mardi Gras, ça vient une fois par an demander la charité*" ('The Mardi Gras come once a year to ask for charity'). But who was asked, and what was asked for, varied according to one's status. For some poor households, a single chicken was a treasure, and the Mardi Gras would not try to force such families to give more than they could afford. If the farmer offered a small bag of rice, it would be accepted. Other, relatively wealthy farm families had no interest in sharing, and they refused to let the guisers into their yards. Vories and his friends would pass by the house singing, "*Le Mardi Gras, ça souhaite que toutes tes petites poules gras crève pour un autre année*" ('The Mardi Gras wishes that all your little fat hens will die this coming year'). Other households would welcome the Mardi Gras, but they would not yield nearly as much as they could afford. At such times the clowns and their *capitaine* would work together to realize a common goal of *enforced charity*. Vories and his friends cast themselves in Robin Hood roles to level the economic inequities of the town. This is Vories's favorite Mardi Gras story:

[When Noncle Jules was *capitaine*, there was one man, Ben,] who never gave us a chicken. But he had a *yard* full of chickens. And he always came to town to eat the gumbo [that night]. One year I decided I was going to get one of those black hens, somehow. We went to his house and danced and begged and begged, and he gave us some grease. Well, that was fine, we needed the grease. But we *really* needed the hen, you know. So Hadley and them went up and hugged old Ben and started messing with him, and I ran out around the house and stole a black hen and stuck him under my coat.

So that night when we was eating gumbo, they was sitting and eating gumbo, him and his wife. And I went by him and I said, "Ben, is that gumbo good?"

"Oh, *boss*," he said. "That's the best gumbo I ever ate."

And I said, "Boy, those black hens, they make some good gumbo."

He said, "You son of a bitch, you stole my hen!"

But we had a lot of fun. (November 1992)

The role of beggar, even of begging thief, predominated, but the outlaw element was also present in Basile. Again, the *capitaine* and the riders together would work out a plan of vigilante violence. This was a conspiracy, not a fight between the forceful leader and the rebellious mob.

Noncle Émile was captain. . . . We were [marching back into town] and they had a bunch of . . . kids, you know, teenagers, and they'd holler all kind of things at us. Here we were trying to sing this song . . . to the people and these . . . kids would follow us . . . hollering and telling us all kind of crazy stuff. . . .

So I told the captain, I went up to Noncle Émile and I said, "Noncle Émile, if I catch one, you're not going to whip me?"

He said, "No." He said, "I'm tired of them heckling us. . . . If you catch one, that's okay; I'm not going to see you."

So I picked me one out. I found a pretty tall one, I guess he was sixteen years old. He was a grown boy. And I said, to myself, "You're going to come with me, Papa."

So I broke loose from our line and I took off after him down the street. I could run. And I could run fast. I reached over and I grabbed him by the seat of the pants. I pulled him down, and I put him on my shoulder, and I brought him back to the truck, and there was three other guys there waiting for me. So they opened the cage—we had a big chicken cage, made out of wire . . . and I dragged him in there.

The captain pretended he didn't see us, you know. . . . Someone said, "They've got a . . . guy in the cage."

Noncle Émile went to the truck and he said, "What you doing in that cage, boy?" That boy said, "One of the Mardi Gras put me in here."

Noncle Émile said, "I'm going to turn you loose, but you better leave them Mardi Gras alone."

He opened the cage, and he let him go, and he left us alone after that. They quit, they quit, they left the Mardi Gras alone, *I promise*. (November 1992)¹⁰

Only on very rare occasions would rifts threaten the shared purpose of ruler and ruled. And only at such points would the *capitaine* and the riders work against each other. In Basile, and at every other successful Mardi Gras, the *capitaine* always won:

[One Mardi Gras] there was a guy working, doing carpentry work in a building and I creeped up and hollered you know, like a Mardi Gras. I had a high voice, and I let out a screech, but he turned around and he did like he was going to hit me with a hammer. And that didn't go over very big.

I took that hammer away from him, and I was going to work him over. And Noncle Émile come down. He said, "Vories, that's enough." I said, "Okay." I just turned him loose, and I walked out, and that was the end of it. But, if Noncle Émile hadn't been there, I'd have really worked him over. But I backed off because I respected the *capitaine*, and I knew he was doing the right thing. (November 1992)

In twelve years, I have only seen one man sent home from Mardi Gras for losing his sense of play and challenging the *capitaine's* will. The collusion between *capitaine* and *sauvage* is so thorough that no matter how rough the *capitaine's* whip-strokes or the rider's play, the two men are simply stronger friends by the end of the day.

The fifty-year-old memories I have evoked belong not just to Vories, but to his town. The story of Ben and the gumbo, for example, has been told to me by many riders. The story of Vories's caging the obnoxious boy has also been told many times in Basile and told *about* many people. Whether many people

duplicated Vories's action by caging spectators or simply duplicated his *words* by retelling the tale and recasting themselves as heroes is irrelevant. What is relevant is that the story is told over and over again and invoked especially during Mardi Gras season by residents of Basile to characterize Mardi Gras for each other. Such tales supply a presence for the past. Young riders are driven largely by memories invisible to us but palpable to them.

Mardi Gras stories are most often told at special times and places that ensure their relevance and effect: before the event when people congregate to discuss the coming celebration and work together on their costumes or on Mardi Gras night after the revelers have performed their last dance together. Tales told in January or February are much like "training films," functioning to build the excitement as well as to instill in inexperienced Mardi Gras the importance of their future roles. The stories told after the event, usually toward the end of the *bal*, not only provide a retrospective of the high points but also help build or add to a family's festive history. Often when a Mardi Gras is congratulated on how well he chased chickens or climbed trees that day, he will respond that his father or Mardi Gras father taught him how and add a story to illustrate that fact.

The way in which such stories are typically told testifies to the closeness of the community that shares them. The teller begins by naming the *capitaine* or another central character ("When Noncle Énos was *capitaine*") or by referring to a general phase in a well-known Mardi Gras' career ("One of the last years Charles Fontenot ran"). Such cues provide listeners all the background they need to place the storied event in chronological context.

Furthermore, this field of memories is remarkably circumscribed. One of the most important aspects of Basile's shared Mardi Gras past is that it stops short of the range of *living memory*, let alone the potential limit of an oral history. Indeed, Basile's oldest Mardi Gras memories are younger than many of its other recollections. Many people, for example, invoke oral traditions dating back to World War I and even to the Civil War, but they don't seem to remember the Mardi Gras that took place before the late 1920s.

Although everyone in Basile concurs that Mardi Gras were celebrated long before the 1920s—when Noncle Tom Young became *capitaine*—and even though some of the older people were born before Noncle Tom became *capitaine*, none of the central figures currently engaged in Basile's Mardi Gras can recall the name of his predecessor or the nature of Mardi Gras activities before Tom's arrival. I have heard a man state that Noncle Tom was his hero and a woman add that "Noncle Tom was everyone's hero."

I suggest that Noncle Tom defines Basile's "golden-age" Mardi Gras because he is perceived as embodying some of the most important positive characteristics shared by the celebration and the town.¹¹ Tom embodied generosity: all who recall Noncle Tom mention that, although he was

wealthy by Basile's standards, he neither flaunted nor hoarded his wealth. He continually gave money, food, and other forms of material assistance to neighbors in need. Tom's daily role was much the same as the Mardi Gras's self-perceived roles of feeding the town, and of taking a little something from the well-off for the poor.

Tom also embodied gentle but forceful control. All those who talk about his performance as *capitaine* mention that he commanded total respect; he was never crossed. Such *grands Mardi Gras* as Potic Rider and Vories Moreau repeatedly stress that Mardi Gras is *both* a wild and a controlled event and that, above all, the Mardi Gras should never vandalize the house of the hosts who receive them. Noncle Tom could be hard, but he always channeled wildness into the path of order. Today, especially in situations when older runners perceive the Mardi Gras to be losing its discipline, Tom is invoked as the essence of what Mardi Gras should be. Just as many invoke Vories as the star Mardi Gras of decades past, many invoke Noncle Tom as the star *capitaine*.

Yet for all its importance, Basile's body of institutionalized, moralized, and dramatized memories cannot provide all the intensity of drive apparent in Mardi Gras: there must also be some continuity of experience. Physical hunger may be gone from contemporary Cajun life, but something of the old drive seems to remain as vital as it ever was.

In Vories's youth Mardi Gras broke a cycle of constructive hard work and equally intense but destructive hard play by combining the two forces in improbable ways. The same tricksters, outlaws, and fools who intimidated their neighbors also worked *for* their neighbors and fed them at the *bal* that night.

Vories worked hard at everything: farming, butchering, shopkeeping, building roads and houses, roughnecking in the oil field, hunting, fishing, making music, dancing, drinking, fighting. He still works hard. Remarried at age sixty-six in 1991, he devoted the days immediately following his wedding to a building project. His wife asked him when they would finally have their honeymoon. He answered, "When I'm too old to work."

But in his youth, Vories played the provider and the destroyer, roles that worked against each other. During the day he did the work of two men to feed his family; every night, drinking, dancing, and fighting, he came close to losing everything:

I'd go home sometimes . . . at two or three o'clock in the morning, drunk . . . really drunk, you know. [My Mama] was saying the rosary, because—she'd tell me all the time, "I know somebody's going to kill you." But it wasn't that hard for me to get drunk and fight two or three times a night.

My mother said I was *maudit* [cursed]. . . . She didn't love me more than her other kids, but [she thought about me more] I guess. Maybe she felt sorry for me because I was so bad. (November 1992)

Vories the provider and Vories the troublemaker were the same man only on Mardi Gras. On that day, all of his prodigious power as an outlaw blended with his strengths as a giver. This one man's life illustrates much about how Mardi Gras works in the community at large. It was more important than all the other days of the year because it harmonized those warring factions of order and disorder that created great and often tragic confusion at other times. Mardi Gras was the one day that excused, sanctioned, even glorified Vories's outlaw tendencies. He could act just like the young man who worried his mother half to death, but on this day his actions made his mother proud.

Those who see the Basile Mardi Gras exclusively as an agon have not seen Vories Moreau on any other day of the year. As Vories has often said, he obeyed his *capitaine* absolutely even to the point of pulling a punch he had started to deliver. Only on Mardi Gras day, and only on his *capitaine's* orders, has Vories ever obeyed anyone's command to stop a fight he has begun. To insiders, Mardi Gras antics are playful and not violent acts. To Vories, the control of the *capitaine* during Mardi Gras is far greater than the control exerted by anyone at any other time.

Vories respected his *capitaine* not only to follow the rules of the game but, more importantly, because the *capitaine* validated Vories's lifestyle. Vories himself became a great *capitaine* at Basile. Given the dynamic interdependence of order and disorder both during Mardi Gras *and* in the lives of the young men who run Mardi Gras, it is no surprise that aging Mardi Gras runners become the best Mardi Gras *capitaines*. Mardi Gras's role in validating the wild tendencies of young men reaches its full justification as these wild men grow into respected group leaders. The solid, older man who once was wild is both the controlling force and the model future for the *sauvages* he whips. Whipping the *sauvage*, the *capitaine* publicly demonstrates something of how he was beat—and how he beat himself—into shape. Whatever else it may mean in Cajun culture, today's Mardi Gras remains vital because it continues to bind the generations and to deploy in orderly ways the forces of disorder toward a shared future.¹²

TODAY

Among the countless surface changes that Cajun Mardi Gras has undergone in the past fifty years, one fundamental structural change stands out. In Basile, as in some other communities, the maskers visit one site where they do not beg for food: the local nursing home. There they ask for nothing but come to please, to entertain. The Basile nursing home is filled with women and men who once lived on the farms that the Mardi Gras invaded yearly. With this one visit, the revelers have institutionalized the memory and importance of their rural past and marked Mardi Gras as a two-way giving



Fig. 4. Vories Moreau's son, Kim, wearing the mask that Vories made in 1950, visits the old folks' home in Basile, 1996. "Here we take Mardi Gras back to where it came from"—Kim Moreau.

process. "We go to the old folks' home to give Mardi Gras back to the people who gave it to us," Mardi Gras Tony Johnson has said. As surely as today's young people capture chickens to give a gumbo to the town, the older people have given Mardi Gras to the young. Quite self-consciously, the ritual participants affirm the ties binding young and old.

Kim Moreau, Vories's son and a *grand Mardi Gras* in his own right, also says, "When we go to the old folks' home, we're taking the Mardi Gras back to where it came from." When Kim enters the home, he embodies quite literally an image of the past (fig. 4). Wearing a mask made by his father in 1950, a mask even older than he is, his Mardi Gras face stirs memories far older still. One old woman laughs even as she shudders involuntarily because, like most of her companions, she was frightened when, as a child, she first saw the Mardi Gras. Like many in the room, she is re-experiencing that early childhood moment. As she begins to shudder, Kim turns his face down and kisses her hand through the screening of the mask.

Perhaps everything else about Mardi Gras and Cajun culture has changed, but the need to mend transgenerational rifts has not. The young boys who become men in today's Mardi Gras have played so many video games and watched so many futuristic movies that the wild men in costume who descend on farm houses seem quaint rather than alien and frightening, as

they seemed to their fathers. Paradoxically, what seems most outrageous to the young riders today is the *order* of the festival: the begging, the groveling, the chicken chasing, the control of the *capitaine*—those things which seemed the most realistic extensions of community life in their parents' days. Mardi Gras can hardly provide license for a group of teenagers who stretch the moral limits of their community daily. In a period when childhood crime and extramarital pregnancy are becoming relatively widespread for the first time, there is not too much a boy can do to shock his community on Mardi Gras day.

But the bonding continues (fig. 5). In awe, kids watch their parents and grandparents dance, cross-dress, act like fools, and play roles that test their endurance and that may otherwise seem senselessly old-fashioned. Some kids drink too much and fall down as their fathers run past them to capture the chickens that the young men are supposed to win. Others grow up in the process of that one day, inspired by the stories they have heard in the past month and by those whose actions that day most clearly embody the promise of the stories. In 1994 a young reveler told me that he could not run Mardi Gras *just for himself* anymore because the younger Mardi Gras did not know what they were doing; he had to show them. In 1996 that same young man was chosen Best All-Around Mardi Gras by the *capitaines* who lauded him for



Fig. 5. Bonding is not an abstraction on Mardi Gras day in Basile. Most obvious is the reciprocal hug around the neck, exchanged more often than hellos or handshakes. Vories Moreau and Mike Broussard celebrate the return of the Mardi Gras to Basile, 1992.

the way he taught the young. By the end of the night, after dancing without stop for hours, he was telling his Mardi Gras stories about his uncle and his Mardi Gras father, Potic Rider.

That night at the *bal*, exhausted young men speak with animation knowing either that tomorrow at six A.M. they will be back working in the rice fields or that at seven they will be starting back to school. Even their exhaustion cannot mask their exhilaration. They will tell you how many chickens they caught, how much money they begged, who they fooled, who they scared. They will also tell you that their fathers did it all better. Finally, they will tell you that they—and their parents—have fed the town.

Vories Moreau, the Mardi Gras trickster who stole from his neighbors and who sometimes made his friends want to kill him, was also the trickster who realized his mother's fantasies, dispelled her nightmares, and fed her dreams. He tells a story about how his mother would fantasize that she would never be hungry again because there was a banana tree growing next to her rocking chair. After hearing her dream, Vories drove twenty miles and bought a bunch of bananas. He brought them home and then tied them by a rope from the living room ceiling so that they dangled just above his mother's rocker. That was the day Vories's mother awoke to her dream.

Theorists may tell you that the festival has its origins in magical invocations of the dead and that it served to bind together the living and the dead in supernatural ways (cf. Ginzburg 1991:186–87). When Vories talks about Mardi Gras past, he tells one very powerful story about the presence of the dead on that day, but listening to him, you learn nothing about ghosts or magic. Rather, you finally see the otherwise invisible bond that brought together the outlaw and the provider, a bond that tied him to his friends and them all to the community. I have not heard Vories tell this story often, but it says far more than I can to tell you about why he still considers Mardi Gras the most important thing that can happen in his town:

My mother died in . . . January. The Mardi Gras was in February. . . . I said, "I can't go. My heart is too big—and I just can't make it." [But] they really wanted me to run. . . . Jessie and Bad Eye and Tit-Doux and all of them.

[Mardi Gras] morning at four o'clock somebody knocks on the door, and I get up and I said, "Who is there?" Ha! And they start singing the Mardi Gras song. . . .

I opened the door, and we made coffee and they come in. . . . And they kept saying . . . , "Vories, you're going to have to run Mardi Gras, man. It's just not going to be Mardi Gras if you're not there," you know.

I said, "Well—I just can't do it, man. My heart is broken and my momma just died and I just don't feel I can do it."

[But] they kept after me, and kept after me, and so finally Bad Eye . . . said, "Where's his suit?"

And Mary [my wife] said, "It's hanging in the closet."

So Bad Eye said, "Well, go get it."

Mary went and got my suit and Bad Eye put it on me. . . . And then Jessie caught me around the neck—we were very close friends—and said, “Come on, man—you got to run.”

So I said, “Okay”—and I went with them.

It was okay at first. But when we got to my house there was a bunch of people waiting for us. And when I saw the people there, I just broke down. I couldn't sing. I just started crying, and so Bad Eye and them caught me by the arm, and they talked to me and told me, “Look. You ain't doing nothing wrong.”

I say, “I know. I don't think I'm doing anything wrong. My mama would want me to run Mardi Gras, because she knew how much I loved it. Mama would want me to run, but it just breaks my heart.” And it did. I could see my mama standing there in the doorway. But she wasn't there. (November 1992)¹³

Vories did not see a ghost on Mardi Gras day, but one could easily say that, for all intents and purposes, his mother *was* there. In the same way that she is there for him weekly when he visits her grave in the Basile cemetery, she is always there for him at Mardi Gras. Though no longer a runner, he now waits on the same porch when his son and grandson come singing and begging. Once in a while he will don his grandson's mask and the role he has not been able to play in many years. In 1996, though aged seventy and fighting the flu, he put on a suit and mask to join the Mardi Gras at their last stop, a street dance. In twenty minutes of begging in the crowd, he earned nearly twenty dollars for his town's Mardi Gras. He showed me his prized bill: “The tightest man in Basile gave me this one.” This is a new story about an old need, and this time next year someone will be telling it.

For Potic Rider, Mardi Gras itself was born from the need of beggars. But as Potic and Vories Moreau practice Mardi Gras, begging becomes an exercise in giving: memories to the old, stories to the young, food to the town. And it is Mardi Gras itself that seems to feed them all. By reenacting the scripts of verbalized memories, Potic, Vories, and Basile in effect relive their first Mardi Gras while living through the Mardi Gras of today. The burning bush that Potic invokes to name the feeling of Mardi Gras, the image of Vories's mother standing on the porch of his house: such words invest one ephemeral day of play with an astonishing sense of permanence—all consuming, yet simply unable to burn itself out.

Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, Day of Atonement, but today, Mardi Gras, brings its own at-one-ment as community divisions are ultimately, if temporarily, mended. Order and disorder, past and present, old and young melt together as kids without futures suddenly find them, tricksters feed their parents' dreams, and outlaws feed the town. We do not even have to ask—all we have to do is listen—to hear our own opposed ancient and modern notions of Mardi Gras dissolve into a stream of continuities that includes and transcends them all.

NOTES

I thank Barry Ancelet for introducing me to Cajun Country Mardi Gras and for twenty years of showing me how much he has seen in it; Pat Mire for sharing his visions of Mardi Gras; Carolyn Ware for her readings, corrections, and comraderie as a fellow fieldworker in Basile; and the anonymous JFR reviewer for urging me—with some success, I hope—to create an essay as unifying as Mardi Gras itself. Special thanks to Vories Moreau and Potic Rider for their many hours of shared eloquence and hospitality. I am also grateful to Mrs. Agnes Miller, the late Hoover Landreneau, the Putnam family, Joyce and Kim Moreau, Jim and Ella Ruth Young, Tony and Donna Johnson, Oscar Miller, the LeBlues (J. B., Cassie, Laura, and Jennie), and all the other Grands Mardi Gras of Basile, Louisiana, for their limitless generosity.

1. Although Ware's essay cites earlier festival scholarship that characterizes carnival as primarily an agon between order and disorder, her own perspective, like mine, minimizes the opposition. Ware contends that the Cajun women's Mardi Gras of Tee Mamou and Basile do not "deny the normative order. . . . Although chaos is often foregrounded, the female Mardi Gras' clowning includes a range of behaviors encompassing both disorder and order, both conformity and nonconformity to cultural expectations . . . [that] coexist within the women's performance" (1995:157).

2. I consider the following list representative of the works on Cajun Mardi Gras that have imparted substantial information about the festival, but which have limited themselves to ancient or modern interpretations, or to a combination of the two: Adair 1983; Ancelet 1982; Ancelet 1989a; Ancelet 1989b; Ancelet, Edwards, and Pitre 1991; Ancelet and Morgan 1979; Gould 1980; Gould and Spitzer 1985; Lindahl 1992; Lindahl 1996; Mire 1992; Oster 1964; Oster and Reed 1960; Post 1974; Spitzer 1986.

3. Folklorists are not unique in ignoring the emic effects of verbalized memory. Although there have been many recent and exciting attempts to add historical dimension to anthropological studies, the role of narrative in mirroring and informing actions and in adapting to and creating change has not been examined. See, for example, the many essays in Ohnuki-Tierney (1990) as well as the work of Fentress and Wickham (1992), Roseberry (1989), and Rubin (1995). For further discussion of these points, see Lindahl 1993 and 1995.

Pat Mire's film *Dance for a Chicken* (1993) is the sole previously published account of Cajun Mardi Gras that presents older participants' narratives and verbalized emotions as integral to the festival.

4. In Basile, as in most present-day Cajun Mardi Gras communities, the Mardi Gras adopts the fiction that the chickens caught that day will be added to the gumbo. The chickens captured that day will indeed eventually end up in a gumbo that will feed the people of Basile. However, all the chickens actually served on Mardi Gras day are purchased in advance with money raised by Mardi Gras beggars.

5. This construction of the form and functions of Mardi Gras was gathered not only from the older people of Basile but also from former and current Mardi Gras in the surrounding area, particularly people from Church Point, Eunice, Mamou, and Ossun. My brief description is largely modeled on a lengthier piece (Lindahl 1996).

6. Several communities' traditional Mardi Gras songs contain the phrase, "*Les Mardi Gras devient de tout partout; Mais tout à l'entour du moyeu*" ('The Mardi Gras

comes from all around; all around the hub') (Oster 1964:279). The Basile Mardi Gras sings, "*Tout le tour le tour du moyeu*" ('All around the hub') (Putnam and Ancelet 1996). Many interpreters see the "hub" as the center of the community from which the Mardi Gras leaves that morning, and which it circles in the progress of the day. Many insiders, however, interpret the "hub" simply as the hub of a wagon wheel, and they do not see the phrase as symbolic of the communal center of their circular route.

7. The observation that Mardi Gras *was* "more important than Christmas" or "bigger than Christmas" has reached proverbial status in Basile and in many communities where Mardi Gras is practiced. For some of the older and retired riders (and for a small but very important core of the younger riders) Mardi Gras remains the most important holiday of the year.

8. I have never heard a Cajun refer to these Mardi Gras sponsors as "Mardi Gras fathers," but many runners, like Vories Moreau, say that he was "like a father" to the boy he sponsored.

9. Vories's and Potic's explanations of Mardi Gras as a celebration of a sense of communal sharing that makes survival possible may seem archaic, but it is worthy of note that many relatively prosperous contemporary communities similarly evoke a time of past need to underline their sense of shared identity in current celebrations (see Abrahams 1982).

10. Vories Moreau's references to Noncle ("Uncle") Émile Leger are recountings of his antics in the Tee Mamou Mardi Gras rather than the Basile Mardi Gras. When the Basile run was discontinued in the late 1940s and 1950s, Vories ran Mardi Gras with the men from neighboring Tee Mamou (about seven miles away) in a group that included members of his wife's family.

11. If I am correct, Basile's Mardi Gras memories conform to the same processes of oral chronology noted by Fentress and Wickham (1992), Levi (1963:137), Lindahl (1985), and Wilson (1979). To outsiders, such chronologies present great and sometimes inexplicable gaps, but insiders regard their histories as relatively full and satisfying records of the community's self-defining moments.

12. The role of Caribbean carnivals and other festivals in channeling youthful energies to serve the community's sense of order is surveyed in Abrahams and Bauman (1978). Natalie Z. Davis argues similarly that in sixteenth-century France *charivaris* often served similar purposes (1971).

13. For an outsider, this story carries a powerful message of friendship. All non-Cajuns with whom I have shared it are impressed by the love and loyalty Vories's Mardi Gras brothers demonstrate in helping their grief stricken friend. Among Vories's relations and Cajun friends, however, such a message is too obvious to comment on; intense bonding and demonstrations of loyalty and affection are simply part of the Mardi Gras experience. To Vories's wife, Joyce, the story conveys an entirely different major message. She likes it because it illustrates one of the few times that her stubborn husband ever changed his mind.

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