

# Making Mardi Gras: the Celebration and Experience Of Mardi Gras in New Orleans



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“Making Mardi Gras: the Celebration and Experience Of Mardi Gras in New Orleans”

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## Dedication

*“There are a lot of places I like, but I like New Orleans better”- Bob Dylan*

We would like to thank all of our wonderful informants, without whom this research would not have been possible. Thank you for opening up your lives to two women from the Netherlands and embracing us and our research. Throughout this project, we have grown to love and appreciate the unique nature of the city of New Orleans, as we now realize that it is the extraordinary people that make this place special. We have experienced and learned more in a short period of time than we could have ever imagined at the start, all of which was made possible by the kind, generous and resilient people of New Orleans. Thank You.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Roos Keja, our advisor, who has been by our side throughout this entire process. Thank you for giving us advice and guidance, and for being there to listen to our crazy stories.

# Chapter One: *Introduction*

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

*“Laissez Les Bons Temps Rouler”*

This French saying, meaning “Let the Good Times Roll” is at the heart of the celebration of carnival in New Orleans in southern United States. Better known as Mardi Gras, this festival attracts many people to the city each year to experience this extravagant holiday. Mardi Gras was originally a French, Christian, celebration, which crossed over to the United States when France claimed the Louisiana territory and founded the city of New Orleans in 1699. The name of the festival is derived from French and translates to “Fat Tuesday”. As such, Mardi Gras denotes the last day of the carnival season. Carnival season always starts on January 6<sup>th</sup>, as this day is celebrated as Epiphany, also known as Three Kings day, in the Catholic tradition. The end of carnival season is annually subject to change, as it is dependent on when the dates of Easter fall that year. Fat Tuesday will always take place 41 days before Easter, as to allow for 40 days of lent starting on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter Sunday. While only the last day of the carnival season is formally named Mardi Gras, the term is often used to describe the carnival season as a whole, or to describe the last two weeks of the season, in which most of the festivities take place. The festivities include parades and carnival balls.

The first of these parades was thrown by a group of New Orleanians who had come together to form the Comus organization in 1857 (Hardy 1998, 14). Comus coined the word "Krewe", as a label to describe their newly founded organization, and established several Mardi Gras traditions. Amongst those are: forming a secret Carnival society, choosing a mythological namesake, presenting a themed parade with floats and costumed maskers, and staging a tableau ball (Hardy 1998, 15). In the decades that followed, more Krewes were founded and Mardi Gras became more and more popular. The popularity of Mardi Gras has grown so much that nowadays the celebration is closely linked in the media to images of drunken visitors letting loose in the city's famed French Quarter district. As such, Mardi Gras may be regarded as a reproduction of traditions for the sake of visitors. However, Mardi Gras is much more than merely a reproduction for the sake of tourists. Mardi Gras appears to still be of great importance to the local citizens, as they celebrate throughout the entire carnival season. These local residents celebrate in manners that visitors often do not have access to, such as the Carnival balls or private parties. Visitors instead flock to the French Quarter neighborhood to party on

the famous Bourbon street. Throughout the celebration of Mardi Gras, there are ways of celebrating that the local citizens largely perform and there are ways in which mostly visitors to the city celebrate. At the same time, these groups are brought together through the highly visible and freely accessible events of Mardi Gras, such as parades. Within this research project, we aim to examine how spaces for celebration are created and negotiated, as well as discover the manner in which meaning is attached to these celebrations. We intend to show that there is no one particular way in which Mardi Gras is celebrated and that the manner in which Mardi Gras is celebrated on an individual level is contingent upon several different factors.

### ***Research Questions***

In order to realize our research aim discussed above, we have derived the following research question: : *“How is the celebration of Mardi Gras experienced and practiced by both the local population and visitors in New Orleans”*. We have elected to use the term “visitor” over “tourist” because we feel that visitor more accurately describes the group of people that visit Mardi Gras each year. Within this group, people come to Mardi Gras for many different reasons, such as visiting family, which is why we feel the term “tourist” is too limited to merely those people on holiday. Although we have elected to use the term visitors, we still mention the term tourist whenever the context mandates it, such is the case with theoretical terms and quotes from our informants.

The key theoretical concepts we employ are social practice, spectacle and space. Social practice theory (Shove et al. 2012) reflects upon on the formation of the social world, through a dialogue between social structure and human agency. The concept of practice has been defined as “a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996, 89) Practices should be understood as dynamic entities that are performed across a specific timeline by individual carriers. As such, practices are influenced by, and an influence on their practitioners. We use spectacle to illustrate the commoditization of Mardi Gras. The concept refers to the staged visual production and imagery events and other cultural practices (Gotham 2005, 227). We use the term space to refer to the fluid non-physical environment that is constructed by cultural specifics and cultural change. We suggest that space should always be understood as shared, as multiple experiences can share cultural and historical particularities and therefore

move within the same cultural space (Casey 1996, 14). The shared space can be divided into front stage and backstage (Goffman 1956). The front stage refers to the accessible and public space, and the backstage to the private and exclusive space.

We examine our main research question through several sub questions. The first of these is: *How do socio-economic aspects influence the manner in which Mardi Gras is celebrated by the local inhabitants of New Orleans?* With this question we aim to examine the way in which socio-economic factors such as ethnicity, gender and economic status affect the way in which people experience and celebrate Mardi Gras and who has access to which parts of the festivities. Our second question is: *In which ways is meaning attributed to the celebration of Mardi Gras by local inhabitants?* This question focuses on meanings that are attached to celebrating Mardi Gras by local citizens of New Orleans. The third question is: *How is a place negotiated by local residents and visitors in the space of Mardi Gras?* With this question we will discuss how geographical, social and cognitive spaces can be distinguished within Mardi Gras, and how local inhabitants and visitors negotiate a place within those different types of spaces. Lastly, we discuss the question: *How is Mardi Gras practiced by local residents and visitors throughout the non-carnival season?* With this question we will examine the manner in which Mardi Gras is embedded in the social fabric of New Orleans and how Mardi Gras attracts visitors even outside of the carnival season.

## ***Relevance***

With this research project, we aim to contribute to existing theories regarding carnival and festivals, by applying to the unique case of New Orleans, and more specifically, Mardi Gras. This specific celebration is a useful ground for analysis as it is well-known around the world while still contained to a relatively small geographical space. While carnival is famously celebrated in many parts of the world, Mardi Gras is unique because it takes place in a country in which Catholicism is not tremendously prevalent. This unique case will therefore be a useful contribution to existing studies of carnival and festival. Additionally, we aspire to contribute to the efforts to rid Mardi Gras of its image as a sex-driven, raucous holiday characterized by drunk visitors partying at the bars on Bourbon Street. With this study, we aim to inspire an understanding of Mardi Gras as a highly significant social and cultural event, whose traditions and meanings are rooted far deeper than the shallow party it is often depicted as in the media.



Therefore, on a social level, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the celebration of Mardi Gras.

### ***Methodology***

In our research, we have made use of several qualitative research methods. The usage of different methods of data collection allows us to ensure data quality through triangulation. The most important one of the methods is participant observation. We obtained our data through hanging out, informal conversations and semi-formal interviews. As we will discuss in length in the coming chapters, the celebration of certain aspects of Mardi Gras is only accessible to a select group of people. As some events, such as Carnival balls, can only be attended through personal invitation, it was of importance to meet informants that could potentially provide us with access to these festivities. Participant observation allowed us to come into contact with these people and gain access to such events. However, as a result, many of our informants resided in the same socio-economic circles, resulting in less diverse data. We remedied this data gap through attending the parades as spectators. Through informal conversations with locals citizens and visitors alike, we were able to gather data from a more diverse group of people. Additionally, actively participating in the celebration of Mardi Gras garnered the respect of many of our key informants. They have told us that their willingness to aid us in our research stems largely from our willingness to participate and our open mindedness towards their traditions and culture. Therefore, participant observation is the method that has yielded the best suited data for our research purposes. As our research took place in the center of the city, the French Quarter and Uptown New Orleans, our findings are limited to those areas. In order to ensure the best possible data quality using participant observation, we made use of reflexivity. By continuously questioning our relationship with, and position in the field, we aim to gather stronger data that will lead to a more comprehensive analysis. Aided by key informants, we were able to gain access to many places that even many local inhabitants of the city are not able to gain access to. As a result, we occasionally felt inhibited in sharing our various exploits with informants without such access. We did not want to come across as boastful or make it seem like we were showing off when they asked us about what we had experienced during Mardi Gras. More than once, an informant would comment “You have done more in three months than I have in my entire life.”. These sentiments were troublesome

for us as we did not want to place ourselves above our informants and caused us to strongly consider the ethical consequences of participant observation. We decided to tell our informants about our activities whenever they inquired about them as we felt that it was of importance to build a relationship based upon honesty with our informants. We did resolve to not offer the information outright, without the informant asking about our experiences first.

### *Overview*

In the following chapters, we will firstly introduce a theoretical framework in which we elaborate further upon our key concepts. We discuss existing academic literature on the topics of social practice, spectacle and commoditization. Consequently, existing theories on festival and carnival are discussed. Finally, we will discuss space and place. In chapter three, we continue with a discussion about the city of New Orleans, considering both socio-economical and geographical aspects, such as the impact of hurricane Katrina. Followed with a discussion of Mardi Gras history and celebration. Following the context are the empirical chapters, of which there are four. Chapter four will focus on connectivity and community, often cited by local inhabitants as aspects of meaning in Mardi Gras celebrations. Chapter five examines access and exclusivity, examining who has access to certain kinds of celebrations. Chapter six reviews the manner in which a place is constructed for and by visitors within Mardi Gras . Chapter seven discusses the importance and celebration of Mardi Gras outside of the carnival season. We then continue with a conclusion and discussion of our findings. A summary of our findings can be found in Appendix one.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical framework

### *Social Practice Theory*

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

Social practice theory is a theory about how the social world is formed, through a dialogue between social structure and human agency. The theory uses the concept of practice to describe how humans shape the world in which they live. The concept of practice has been defined as “a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996, 89). This definition entails an understanding of practice as a dynamic entity that is performed across a specific timeline. In this sense, the concept of practice relates strongly to the concept of Habitus, as devised by Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s concept of Habitus explores the paradigm of human agency on one side and social structure on the other side, Habitus and practice coincide through the idea that habitus is always grounded in practice and is employed towards practical functions (Bourdieu 1990, 52).

According to Shove et al. (2012), practices are comprised of elements, three different parts whose linkage allows a practice to exist and that are essential to maintain it. The first element is “materials”. This element encompasses objects, equipment, and human bodies. The inclusion of the human body accounts for both the relation of the human body to material objects as well as the body as an instrument itself. (Røpke 2009, 2492)

The second element of practice is what Shove et al. (2012) have labelled competence. Competence is based upon the concept of practical consciousness, which describes the intentionally cultivated skills and understanding of appropriate performance displayed when a practice is being performed (Giddens 1984, 75). Competence is used to cluster together all forms of understanding, practical knowledge and skill one must possess in order to appropriately perform a practice.

The third element is that of meaning. This term is used to encompass the social and symbolic significance of partaking in a certain practice at a specific time (Shove et al. 2012, 10). Practices exist both as entities and performances at the same time. Firstly, practices exist as entities through the three elements discussed above. The conjunction of elements, in a certain recognizable fashion, allows for a practice to become an entity that can be spoken about (Shove et al 2012, 12). Concurrently, practices exist as performances. Through performing a certain

practice, the practice is “actualized and sustained” (Schatzki 1996, 99). Performance is thus required for the reproduction of a practice, while routinized performance is essential for a practice to be sustained over longer periods of time, as well as over larger spaces. Practices are performed by so called “carriers” of a practice (Reckwitz 2002, 250). These carriers are most often individuals. These individuals do not only carry patterns of physical performance, but also practical knowledge and mental skills, in addition to conventional understandings and emotional knowledge (Warde 2005, 142). As the reproduction, and thus persistence, of practices is dependent individuals, it follows that the contour of a specific practice are shaped by “changing populations of more and less faithful carriers or practitioners” (Shove et al 2012, 64).

As established, practices are dependent on their performance by individual carriers. Within performance, carriers act in a certain way that is enabled by the social structures of rules and meanings associated with the certain practice. At the same time, the individual practitioner is reproducing these social structures and in turn strengthening them. These two processes simultaneously influence each other, representing a duality within practice (Warde 2005, 150). Change in practices occurs when new elements are added, when old elements are discarded, or when links between elements are transformed. As these new elements of the practice are reproduced more and more over time and space, they become part of the social structure of the practice itself, which is in turn reproduced again by its practitioners.

As these practitioners become more committed to the practices they perform, the practice may become such a prominent feature in their life that they essentially become that what they perform (Warde 2005, 148). One prominent manner in which practitioners are recruited to practices, and encouraged to keep them up, is through so-called communities of practice. Wenger (1999) defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Three components are indispensable in the formation of a community of practice: domain, the community and the practice (Wenger 1999, 48). The domain refers to the specific practice around which the community is created. To be part of the community, one has to be committed to the practice. The community refers to the importance that practitioners not only have the same domain, but also interact and perhaps take part in shared activities. This does not mean that members of such communities do not perform as individuals anymore, but more so that members actively engage with one another in order to facilitate collective learning. The

last, and arguably most crucial element of communities of practice, is that there is an actual practice. Returning to the definition of practice as defined above, this entails a spatial and temporal interconnectedness of doings and sayings. Through this practice, and the mutual engagement of members in its performance, the community of practice becomes a social entity (Wenger 1999, 55). The social aspect of communities of practice creates stronger ties between practitioner and practice, which ensures its continuation through reproduction.

Specific local practices have the ability to become more widespread through a wide range of media and, by doing so attract attention from many people around the world. Consequently, people are inclined to visit these places and witness, or even take part in, those specific practices. It is here that the roles of tourism, and as an extension, commoditization come into play. These themes shall be discussed in the following paragraph.

### ***Commoditization, Authenticity and Spectacle***

*Yvonne van wanrooij*

As mentioned above, specific local practices have the ability to spark the interest of people who are not inherently familiar with these practices. As a result, people may be attracted to visit such places and experience the unfamiliar. This particular motivation for tourism fits into several forms of tourism that scholars have crafted over the years. One such form is ethnic tourism (Smith 2012, 4). In this form of tourism, the main attraction is “the cultural exoticism of the local population and its artifacts” (Van den Berghe, Keyes 1984, 344). This type of tourism often includes visits to native villages, and is motivated by curiosity or elite peer approval (Smith 2012, 4). The second form is cultural tourism. This type of tourism is mainly concerned with the lifestyle and cultural practices of local inhabitants. Sites such as museums, festivals, archeological excavations, and heritage sites become tourist destinations for the cultural tourist (Stebbins 1996, 949). Both of these classifications incorporate the tourist motivation of learning about, and experiencing, specific local practices. A key component to the attraction that such local practices and customs hold for visitors, is the idea that everything visitors see and experience is inherently authentic to its respective locality. The concept of authenticity is used to describe the desire of tourists to experience the local “culture” of their destination as something inherently different from what they are familiar with (MacCannel 1999, 4). Visitors desire to see things and buy souvenirs they regard as particular for their

respective destination, authenticity is thus used more so as a criterion of the quality of the tourist experience and the apparent ‘realness’ of their destination (Cohen 1988, 375)

The concept of objective authenticity (Wang 1999, 351) is used to concentrate on the importance of original objects from indigenous materials that may provide a genuine experience for the visitor who is able to recognize the authenticating signs (Wang 1999, 351). This indicates the prevalence of “real” tourist experiences. However, constructive authenticity is conceptualized to explain authenticity as projection of the tourists’ own beliefs, stereotyped images, expectations, and preferences on to their respective destination (Wang 1999, 351). Authenticity may in this sense be regarded as a socially constructed typology of a certain locality, founded in stereotypical imagery, and fashioned by both tourists and the tourist industry (Macleod 2006, 172).

Visitors’ quests for authenticity include the consumption of local events and the purchase of local objects and goods. These objects, goods, and performances, that might have been destined for local consumption once, become geared toward the visitor economy and are consequently commoditized (Macleod 2006, 177). Commoditization is the process by which objects and activities become evaluated primarily in terms of monetary value (Cohen 1988, 370), which may cause these cultural objects and performance to change in meaning.

Authenticity and commoditization work together in the sense that they both assist the process of creating images in visitors’ minds. The objects and activities that are regarded as authentic often become commoditized, which serves to reinforce their status as authentic. These staged cultural practices and goods then help to create a new imagery of the authentic (Macleod 2006, 177). This imagery is furthered through the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1995, 132). This term describes the way tourists perceive the place they visit. The tourist gaze is focused on the local experience, therefore often not noticing, or plainly ignoring, that what the tourist views as authentic is in fact a commoditized experience.

*Hannah Volman*

The work of Debord (2005) introduces the term spectacle, and provides two different interpretations. On the one hand, spectacle refers to particular public events, often high profile, and in urban spaces. On the other hand, the concept is used to represent the staged visual production and imagery of such events and other cultural practices (Gotham 2005, 226). For Debord, the concept of spectacle was necessary because it describes the process of

objectification of social relationships, in order to create certain images to be consumed by visitors. These images are the pictures that visitors have in their minds when they think about the destination they are travelling to. They often regard these images as authentic, and the consumption of these may therefore be regarded as the visitors' manner of pursuing authenticity. A spectacle is thus used to refer to an image-saturated society.

In society, advertising, entertainment, television, and mass media define the spectacle (Gotham 2005, 227). The images, and therefore the spectacle, are multi-dimensional, meaning that the public displays that become spectacles are meant to convey a sense of authenticity of local social relationships and local culture, as well as being a capitalistic tool that involves flows of commodities and cultural forms (Gotham 2005, 227). According to Gotham (2005), these events are rationally produced and managed by bureaucratic organizations for instrumental purposes, especially visitors oriented revitalization (Gotham 2005, 227). A spectacle can be seen as the image that is created to portray a certain event. The fact that this is the only way the event appears, leaves no room to contest this image and is therefore passively accepted and consumed by an audience (Debord 2005, 3). Thus, the spectacle is the visual display of a remarkable or lavish event, notion, idea or otherwise culturally specific practice, created and directed at visitors.

We aim to understand the spectacle in relation to authenticity and commoditization as we feel spectacle embodies both authenticity and commoditization. Before, we distinguished two types of visitors, visitors oriented at ethnic tourism and visitors oriented at cultural tourism (Smith 2012, 4). Although their reason for visiting a place might be different, both types of visitors are seeking authenticity. This authenticity is in many cases achieved by commoditization. The spectacle can then be seen as a reproduction of the image of commoditized authenticity; the spectacle is the visual (re)production of culturally specific events, notions, or practices. From the perspective that a spectacle is also a capitalist tool, it is plausible to assume that commoditization of the authentic cultural event, notion, or practice has taken place in order to attract more visitors. The visual reproduction of existing culturally specific events, notions, or practices can thus be understood as a spectacle, as it is a staged visual reproduction that reinforces a certain image to be consumed.

To illustrate the concept of spectacle further, we will use the example of festivals. We argue that festivals may be regarded as spectacles, as they are both high profile events and are mediated by the imagery associated with them. Certain aspects of performance at festivals,

such as the style of dress, may be exacerbated through the widespread availability of images of such outfits online. Visitors may come to regard that specific clothing style as essential to the practice, and as such will either come to the festival dressed in that fashion, or purchase items there. As a result, new sets of images will be created that reinforce the constructed authenticity (Wang 1999, 351) of that style of clothing, while also commoditizing that aspect of the practice. Festivals can be understood as a spectacle because authentic local celebrations are commoditized to become high profile spectacles aimed at consumption by visitors (Gotham 2005, 225). Festivals are then organized and promoted as spectacles with a means to persuade visitors to, among others, spend money (Gotham 2005, 233). Festivals can therefore be seen as a spectacle made lucrative. We argue that a festival can also be understood as a spectacle because of its accessibility. Because festivals are most often public events, a broad audience is given the opportunity to consume the festivities. Festivals are the visual reproduction of societal and cultural particularities made interesting to both members and non-members of a particular society by its flamboyance.

### ***Space, Place, Backstage and Frontstage***

*Hannah Volman*

In this last part of our theoretical framework we will work towards understanding the concept of space and ultimately also place. After discussing notions on space, we will provide a short overview of how theories on space have changed over the years, resulting in how we understand space today. We will continue to discuss how the front region and the back region (Goffman 1956) are incorporated in space and place.

Throughout the years the conceptualization of space has been subject to a lot of change. Before the 1980's, space was not specifically named in the theoretical debate. However, thinking on notions of space took place through its implicit understanding as being a part of nature or the environment. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century a more deterministic approach was adapted by scholars in order to link cultural variation to its physical environment (Kokot 2007, 13). In this sense, physical environment was seen as the determining factor in cultural difference (Kokot 2007, 13). At the start of the twentieth century a more differentiated approach towards physical environment, and therefore space, was developed. Scholars argued that physical environment was able to facilitate economic strategies and social organization



(Kokot 2007, 13). Around the 1950's, a systematic framework was developed on the relationship between physical environment and cultural change and development. According to scholars then, changes in culture and society were a result of the adaptation of social systems to the natural environment, yet no specific theories on how space was a part of this natural environment were developed (Kokot 2007, 13).

The meaning of space in its most literal sense seems obvious as it refers to a geographical region, area or landscape (Hubbard and Kitchin 2010, 4). French sociologist Henri Lefebvre was one of the first to state that space is not merely a static field where actions take place and human relationships are formed. He argued that these relationships, actions, and other culturally specific ideas and notions are what produces space (Lefebvre 1991, in West 2005, 633). The non-geographical space is therefore created by those who share cultural notions, relationships, actions, and other culturally specific ideas. Thus, historical and cultural particularities have the ability to create a non-geographical space. Space is in this sense a neutral medium that is shaped by those who move within the space (Casey 1996, 14), and should therefore be understood as fluid. Space is a combination of physical, mental, and social space, each form interacting with the other forms of space (Lefebvre 1991, in West 2005, 633). We will approach these different forms of space as cognitive, geographical and social. As such, space should not be regarded as fixed or static, as it is continuously being shaped by cultural and social specifics of those who move within that space.

In contemporary society, cultural traits or topics are no longer associated with static, socio-spatial areas like we have mentioned before. Rather, space is seen as produced by cultural and historical particularities and is therefore fluid as it is continuously adapting to changes in cultural notions. Over time, scholars have changed their approaches to space, from space being the reason for cultural change, to cultural specifics and cultural change being the influencing factor in the consideration of space.

In this work we want to approach space in a similar fashion as most contemporary scholars. However, we want to add another notion to this understanding. In our approach space should always be understood as shared, as multiple experiences can share cultural and historical particularities and therefore move within the same cultural space. In our approach to space we suggest that the shared cultural space is made up of two areas, the front region and the back region, as introduced by Erving Goffman (1956). According to his theory of performative sociology, people are stage actors who are part of a number of "situation specific

performances” (Ross 2007, 314). These performances take place in what Goffman called the back region and the front region. Regions are in this case synonymous for the situation specific performances and can, in our opinion, also be understood as synonymous for space. We refer to these regions as stages as we feel frontstage and backstage are more fitting terms in regards to festivals and other similar celebrations. The front stage can be understood as formal and public. The related behavior (or performance) is dictated by a set of rules that is directly related and specific to the region (Ross 2007, 314). The backstage can be understood as its counterpart, where the impressions created in the front region may be contradicted and hidden (Ross 2007, 316). Thus, the front stage should be understood as public and open, whereas the backstage is the hidden and closed stage, where access is limited. Both stages are related, yet are different in how accessible they are.

The use of the front and backstage allows us to better understand how one space can be home to multiple experiences. Within a space places can be established. Places can be understood as socially constructed by those who reside in those places (Rodman 1992, in Low 2009, 22). This is similar to space, however, the construction of place is far more personal as it is specific to individuals. Approaching festivals as a space can create a better understanding of the various places within that space. Place can be understood as determined by the experience of belonging. Having access to the backstage (Goffman 1956), which in the case of festival, means for example, being on the organizing side of the festival, therefore determines the place one has within the space that the festival is; it provides an experience that is different than the experience of someone who solely has access to the front stage.

## Chapter Three: Context

### *The City of New Orleans*

*Hannah Volman*

“The things that make life worth living – eating, drinking and merrymaking – are the air New Orleans breathes. From a gastronomic heritage that is as delicious as it is iconic, to the best live music in the country, this city challenges residents and visitors to wrest the beautiful and sublime out of every sultry day.” (Karlin and Bartlett 2018, 4). This is how New Orleans is introduced by the *Lonely Planet pocket guide*. We use this as a starting point to further introduce the city of New Orleans. We examine the socio-economic makeup of New Orleans, as well as the three main pillars that attract visitors to the city: food, history and music. In this part we will try to look beyond what is available at first sight and attempt to dissect how notions of ethnicity, class, resilience and tourism are intertwined in the city of New Orleans. First we will discuss, rather shortly, the complicated relationship between New Orleans and ethnicity, as this subject deserves more attention than this work can provide. We also examine class, as well as hurricane Katrina and tourism in order to give a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic fabric of New Orleans.

The historic trajectory of New Orleans is quite unique in the United States due to its varied European origins (O’Neill 2014, 12). New Orleans portrays itself as a place where various ethnicities and religions have peacefully coexisted for decades (Fussell 2007, 21). Historically, New Orleans has had an interesting relationship to ethnicity as the city was used as a slave trading port with many of the landmarks in the city reminding people of this history. The historic image that is constructed is one of a city largely untroubled by slavery and instead celebrates “black culture”. This has culminated in the adoption of the ‘white supremacist memory’ of slavery and nostalgia towards the old conservative and racist South through touring plantations and lodgings in former slave quarters (Thomas 2014). Although it is true that historically New Orleans was one of the least segregated cities in the US, nowadays, it is home to a substantial black population, most of whom live in different, less affluent areas, making the city one of the most segregated areas in the United States (Fussell 2007, 851). African American citizens often live in poor suburbs like the Ninth Ward, while white citizens reside

in more affluent neighborhoods such as the French Quarter and Uptown New Orleans (Fussell et al. 2010, 20). For example in 2005, before hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, over one third of the mainly African American population in the Ninth Ward lived below the poverty line. Disturbing numbers and facts on ethnicity and class in New Orleans came to light when hurricane Katrina struck the city August 29<sup>th</sup> 2005.

Hurricane Katrina was one of the biggest and most dangerous storms to hit the United States, causing almost the entire population of the greater New Orleans district to evacuate (Fussell et al. 2010, 20). Most damage was done by the breaching of levees causing big floods and eventually submerging about 80% of the city (Dolfman et al. 2007, 3). As if this was not enough, it was the slow response by the government that worsened the situation (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 748). With the whole world watching, the conversation moved from viewing Katrina as a natural disaster to a man-made disaster as deep-rooted poverty was exposed and its entanglement with ethnicity. In media more attention was paid to the human disasters during the rescue operation than to the flooding itself (Breunlin and Regis 2006, 748). Up until today, the effects of Hurricane Katrina can still be seen and most importantly felt in New Orleans even though its citizens have been called some of the most resilient (Campanella 2006, 143).

The city of New Orleans has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in the US over the past decades<sup>1</sup> The perception of the city as exotic, hedonistic, and mysterious has attracted millions of visitors to the Crescent City since the 1940's (Souther 2013, 1). The construction of "the Big Easy" as an entertainment haven that caters to a variety of vices, whilst being rooted in distinctive local culture, is the main touristic image that the city thrives upon (Stanonis, 2006). Both before and after Katrina, New Orleans has been largely economically dependent on visitors.

New Orleans has a unique position as it has a distinctive culture and is very different from any other city in the United States. In the case of New Orleans specifically, there are three pillars of tourism which have the possibility of being commoditized, the Holy Trinity, as it is often referred to (Tucker 2009, 6). Through a focus on food, history and music, the city is imagined as a unique place, inviting visitors to come and experience the "authentic" New Orleans. The New Orleans cuisine, often referred to as Creole, is truly that, a mixture of cuisines from different cultures that melted together to create a new cuisine that transcended

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/19/new-orleans-visit-new-york-times-happy>, accessed: 03-12-2018.

all of its different origins (Tucker 2009, 6). The “Crescent City” is the historic home of a particular variation of Jazz known as New Orleans style. New Orleans, and in particular its most touristic part, the French Quarter, which pays homage to the cities’ French roots, is filled with music. Jazz clubs and bars seem to be present at every corner. Streets, squares, and parks are filled with musicians at any time of day (O’Neill 2014, 13).

History, ethnicity, class, Hurricane Katrina, and tourism are all aspects that make up the identity of New Orleans. Despite its rocky history of amongst others, slavery and natural disasters, New Orleans has remained resilient and continues to use its particularity in order to profile itself as interesting to outsiders. The socio-economic context of New Orleans is contributing to its character as a resilient and interesting place to visit.

### ***Mardi Gras***

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

The first record of the celebration of Mardi Gras dates back to 1699<sup>2</sup>. When the city was taken over by the Spanish, the celebration of Mardi Gras appeared to stop. Early in the nineteenth century the celebration of Mardi Gras returned to New Orleans, after the city was released from Spanish occupation. Mardi Gras became a celebration which consisted of masks, secret societies (known as Krewes), and themed parades. The first official parades were held in 1857, and with the exception of the Civil War (1861-1865) are still being held every year (Gotham 2002, 1743). The first parade was thrown by a group of New Orleanians who had come together to form the Comus organization. Comus coined the word "Krewe", as a label to describe their newly founded organization, and established several Mardi Gras traditions. Amongst those are: forming a secret carnival society, choosing a mythological namesake, presenting a themed parade with floats and costumed maskers, and staging a tableau ball (Hardy 1998, 3). In the year 1872, the krewe of Rex was founded. Rex, also known as the king of carnival, is the oldest still parading Krewe of New Orleans. The krewe of Rex has established Mardi Gras' first organized daytime parade, as well as selected the colors for carnival: green, gold and purple (Hardy 1998, 4). In these early days, Krewes were very secretive organizations and access was exclusive. Members of the Krewe, and parade riders, had to be male. In addition, one had to be

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/history/> accessed: 25-05-2019

economically well off, as the Krewes represented the very top of New Orleans society. Many of these standards still hold true today. The Krewe of Rex, amongst others, still only allows men to ride on the parades. In response, female-only Krewes were created, starting with the Krewe of Iris in 1917<sup>3</sup>. As more and more Krewes were formed and the practice of Mardi Gras grew bigger, the number of people who travelled to New Orleans to witness and celebrate carnival grew.

*Hannah Volman*

The celebration of Mardi Gras in New Orleans has grown to be the biggest annual event in the city. During the carnival season, the entire city is all about Mardi Gras. The three colors, green, purple, gold can be found in nearly every kind of decoration and almost daily parades roll through the streets of Uptown New Orleans. Nowadays, the celebration of Mardi Gras consists of watching parades, attending events and partying. Currently there are over 60 Krewes active<sup>4</sup>, many of whom organize parades, balls and other activities. Mardi Gras Krewes can be seen as communities of practice. Because members of Krewes share a passion for the same thing, in this case Mardi Gras, a community forms surrounding the celebration of Mardi Gras as a practice. Krewes are inherently communities because members differentiate themselves from other Krewes. Mardi Gras specific practices such as the consumption of “king cake” characterize Mardi Gras. King cake is a cinnamon, coffee cake, in which traditionally a small plastic baby is hidden. Whoever finds the baby has to either bring the next king cake or host the next party<sup>5</sup>. King cake is one of the most famous pastries from New Orleans and is specific to the celebration of Mardi Gras. However, because of its popularity, throughout the entire year king cakes can be bought in New Orleans. Often the plastic baby is left out because many consume the cake without playing into the traditional aspect of it.

Parades, which are organized by the Krewes, and roll through various parts of New Orleans have become an integral part of the celebration of Mardi Gras. During the weeks before, and on Mardi Gras day, parades occur almost daily. The parades are characterized by practices such as the throwing and catching of beads, masks, and music. These parades have been spectacted over time. The reproduction of parades during other events and the scale on

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gonola.com](http://www.gonola.com) accessed: 11-5-2019

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mardigrasguide.com/>, accessed: 14-06-2019

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.neworleans.com/events/holidays-seasonal/mardi-gras/history-and-traditions/king-cakes/>, accessed: 14-06-2019

which the parades have come to be organized, have created an image of Mardi Gras based on these parades.

Carnivals are a complex, public and ritualistic event that touch upon a variation of subjects such as kinship, religion, politics and cultural practice (Frost 2016, 570). Carnival, should be understood as an event that is held because of a special occasion or the celebration of significant events (Arcodia and Withford 2007, 2). It is an “organized set of acts performed to commemorate an event, person, deity, or common identity” (Addo 2009, 218). Carnivals are often considered to be risqué because hierarchical and social rules are traditionally reversed (Jankowiak and White 1999, 335). Therefore, carnivals and festivals have become to be known as the flamboyant, cultural and social expressions and practices of what is considered conventional behavior (Frost 2016, 572).

## Chapter Four: Connectivity and Community

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

“The rumble of the tractor comes to life as the sounds of the first marching bands start to fade away around the corner. With a sudden lurch, the float is pulled forwards, and the riders hold on to the sides to avoid falling over. They barely have any room to stand, as the floor of the float is covered in bags filled with beads, cups, stuffed animals, doubloons, light up swords, tiara’s, bouncy balls, and whatever else one might think to throw.

As the float rounds the corner, the wide street is suddenly filled with people. They are lined up on the sidewalks, as well as the wide green stroke in the middle of street. The moment they spot the float, hands go up in the air and the shouting starts. Through the sea of shouts and yells, a single request sometimes filters through: “Throw me some beads!” or “Doubloons please!” In response, a pair of purple and gold beads sail through the air towards the crowd. For a single moment, the throng of people quiets in concentration as they raise their hands to catch the coveted goods. A fist closes around them as the shouts and waves pick up again. In front of the float, the masses of people stretch out as far as the eye can see along this wide, straight road. Their shouts, mingled with the sounds of the distant marching band, echo through the street and bring with them the promise of the good-natured chaos that is sure to follow in the next several miles”.

In this chapter, utilizing the example of parades, we examine the way in which meaning is attributed to Mardi Gras. First, we will discuss parade-watching and the related sense of community. Secondly, we take a look at the practice of catching and throwing and feelings of connectivity. Lastly, we examine how Mardi Gras parades derive meaning from their function within New Orleans society.

Throughout the Mardi Gras season, parades are held in New Orleans. The number of parades really ramps up in the two weekends before Mardi Gras day, often with multiple parades following right after each other, or even parading simultaneously. At any given one of these parades, the scene described above may be observed. This is because most parades





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follow the same structure. Parades are made up of wagons, called floats, on either side of which riders are positioned. These floats are decorated to coincide with the theme of that parade.

In between the floats

are dance troops, flambeaux and marching bands, which will be examined more closely later. Parades are an important part of Mardi Gras, as they are both freely accessible and highly visible, as such parade watching is an integral part of the celebration of Mardi Gras.

### *Along the parade route*

Along the parade routes, you are not likely to find people standing and watching the parade passively. Parades are a celebration in which the spectators are encouraged to engage. This includes the interactive performance of catching and throwing, which will be discussed later. Along the route, fold-up chairs, carts, gazebos, coolers, grills or many other types of household items can be found. A plethora of ladders may also be seen along the routes. These ladders come with a small seat on top and are designed for children to sit upon, allowing them to both see better and catch more throws. These miniature living rooms are set up along the route hours before the parade begins, sometimes even the day before. A couple of hours before the parade begins, the streets are already lined with people celebrating, eating, drinking, dancing or playing music. “We watch at the same place every year and my family and friends know this, so they can come by if they want to”<sup>7</sup>. Parades are used as a meeting place for friends and family to celebrate together. However, celebrating with friends and family is not the only way to experience the atmosphere or community celebration at the parades. “You can stand next to

<sup>6</sup> Crowds cheer on as a large float passes by during the parade of the Krewe of Orpheus, 04-03-2019

<sup>7</sup> 05-02-2019

strangers at the beginning and by the end know their whole life story”<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the sharing of food and drinks with your parade neighbors is a common sight along the route. These examples further illustrate the sense of connection that the celebration of Mardi Gras brings forth. As Mardi Gras parades take place in freely accessible and highly visible public spaces, they are embedded into a larger structure of community and social context (Arcodia and Withford 2007, 2). In this sense, Mardi Gras functions as a means of bridging the stark socio-economic disparities visible within the city of New Orleans. The focus on community further enhances the sentiment of “we” celebrate together and the depiction of Mardi Gras as “one big family”. However, this sentiment appears somewhat contradictory, as socio-economic circumstances play an important role in the determination of who has access to which parts of Mardi Gras, which we will discuss at length in the coming chapter. This contradiction is further illustrated by “watch parties”. Celebrations do not only take place on the streets of the parade, but also in the homes of the people who live on the route, who host so-called “watch parties”. These parties are similar to the celebration on the streets, as they both involve sharing food and drinks, dancing, and socializing with others. However, these parties take place in an enclosed space, that is not freely accessible to everyone, therefore contradicting notions of community on a larger scale while furthering feelings of community and togetherness on a lower level between attendees, often family and friends. Nevertheless, community is widely cited as an important aspect of Mardi Gras, along with the sentiment of “Mardi Gras is about celebrating and letting loose together.”.

Parade spectators, both in the streets and at watch-parties, may be regarded as communities of practice (Wenger 1999, 48). As discussed before, communities of practice are comprised of three components: domain, practice and community. The domain for this community is Mardi Gras, and the practice of parades. The community is committed to the practice and engages in collective behavior that is interactive. Through the parades, and the mutual engagement of spectators in its performance, the community of practice becomes a social entity (Wenger 1999, 55). The social aspect of communities of practice creates stronger ties between practitioner and practice, which ensures its continuation through reproduction.

The performance of this particular practice does not only take place through celebrating together but also through interaction between the parade watchers and the parade riders. The

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<sup>8</sup> 03-03-2019

interactive nature of parades provides a further sense of connectivity through the practice of catching and throwing, which will be discussed in more depth below.

### ***“Throw Me Something Mister!”***

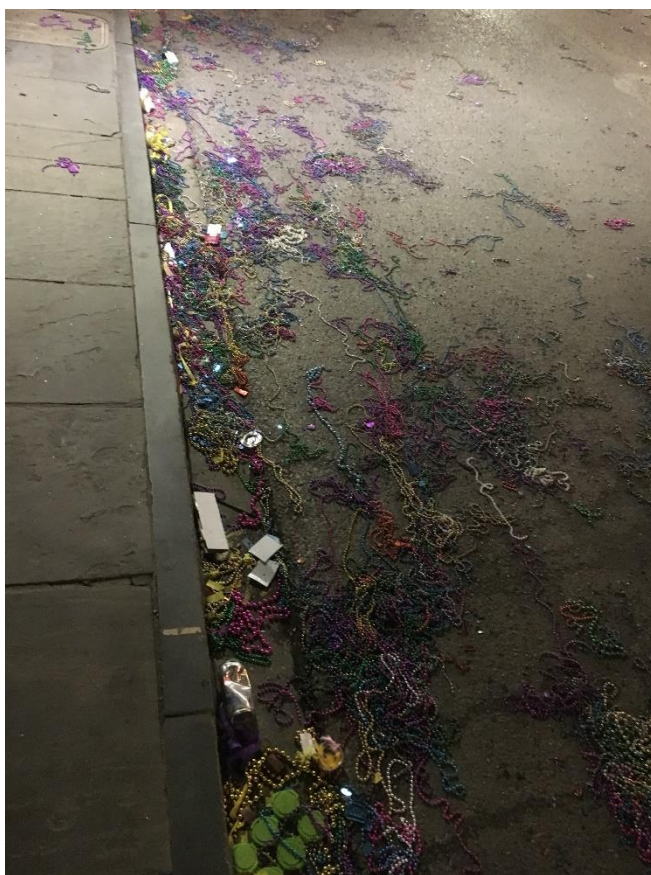
The phrase “Throw me something mister” can be overheard quite a lot during a Mardi Gras parade. The act of catching and throwing is what makes these parades interactive, ensuring that the spectator is not merely a bystander but a participant. The most iconic of these throws are the beads. Plastic beaded necklaces, in all colors imaginable, are thrown off the side of the floats in massive quantities. Besides beads, other common throws are doubloons (coins stamped with the Krewe logo), plastic cups, stuffed animals, frisbees, light up swords and crowns, small footballs and whatever else one might imagine throwing off a float. Each rider has to facilitate their own throws, an expense that often adds up to hundreds of dollars as riders buy anywhere from hundreds to thousands of these throws. What then, makes throwing so special that people are willing to spend a considerable amount of money on it? “When you throw, there is a momentary connection between yourself and that person you are throwing to, and that moment, you are celebrating together”<sup>9</sup> When a rider throws, they usually pick a person in the crowd that they want to throw to. “You want to make sure they know you are going to throw to them, so they don’t get hurt”<sup>10</sup>. This contact often happens through eye contact, or even simply pointing. Then the rider throws, and when the right person catches it, many will wave thanks in return. Even though crowds may consist of hundreds of spectators along every part of the route, these little connections make the experience of riding in a parade surprisingly intimate. The large quantity of throws is explained by the fear of running out before the end of the parade, and the desire to make hundreds of these little connections to spectators along the route.

On the other side of that coin are the people that catch the throws. They will often beg, scream or even run alongside the float in order to receive something. The larger or more exclusive the item, the more wild people will get. A good example of this are the large necklaces, with individual beads the size of a person’s head. There tend to be less of these kind of beads as they are more expensive to buy. Consequently, being able to catch one of these is

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<sup>9</sup> 13-02-2019

<sup>10</sup> 13-02-2019



deemed to be very impressive and people wear them around town as a symbol of status. Some Krewes even have specialty throws, hand decorated object of which very few are made each year. Receiving one of these throws is a big deal and “will make you king” during Mardi Gras. The most famous of these throws are the coconuts from Zulu, the high heeled shoes from Muses and the purses from Nyx. Pride is not only taken in the exclusivity of items, but also in the quantity. “Mardi Gras is about excess you know, drinking, eating, partying and also beads”<sup>11</sup>. Spectators will watch the parade with their necks straining against

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the weight of the beads around it, while still yelling and jumping for more. The pride involved in being able to catch bags full of throws is even further illustrated by the fact that many of the beads that are not caught, are not even picked up off the ground.

Most of these throws are made of plastic, fabricated in bulk in China and essentially worthless on their own. During Mardi Gras however, they become a form of social currency, a way of attaining status. Catching beads, and thus gaining status, is contingent upon connecting with the riders on the floats. Often times, people yell out common names such as “John” in hopes of someone on the float being named John and showering them with beads as a result.

In summary, connectivity is an important element in the practice of parading as it enables for the performance of parading through catching and throwing to take place. This performance is founded upon notions of pride and status associated with the amount and exclusivity of throws. In this sense, we are able to identify once more an unequal dynamic of power: the riders on the floats determine who gets the beads, and thus the status. While this

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<sup>11</sup> 06-02-2019

<sup>12</sup> Left over beads, 05-03-2019

dynamic underlies the performance of parading, social connections between people remain the aspect that cause parades to have an atmosphere of “being part of a giant family”.

### ***Mardi Gras as a Mirror***

The importance of community and connectivity in the celebration of Mardi Gras does not only become apparent within the viewing of, and interacting with parades, but also becomes visible in the role the parades themselves play. A fine example of this is the theming of the parades. Each Krewe chooses a theme for their respective parades each year. Some of these themes are quite generic, as they include science fiction or fairy tales. However, some Krewes are notorious for choosing a satirical theme, with risqué floats commenting on controversial topics. Two of these Krewes are Krewe du Vieux and Krewe d'état. Both parades featured various stabs towards president Trump. The Krewe d'état parade featured a float that depicted Trump as an overgrown man-child who cries and screams when he does not get his way. Another float commented on the kneeling of American football players during the national anthem. This float called out Nike for offering Colin Kaepernick, instigator of this movement, a lucrative contract, thereby profiling themselves as a socially conscious company, while still outsourcing their manufacturing to sweatshops in Asia. Interestingly, these topics that tend to be quite controversial, especially in the conservative American South, are tolerated, and even welcomed, during Mardi Gras. In this sense, Mardi Gras can be understood as a practice in which social rules are either abandoned or mocked, inverting established social hierarchies (Jankowiak and White 1999, 335). These inversions of social order create a sense of community and togetherness, while at the same time allowing for established social orders to still exist, creating a paradoxical relationship between exclusivity and community. These floats also often comment on local politics, with frequent references to the mayor of New Orleans. These references are often missed by people who do not live in the New Orleans area. “People will only get the messages if they really pay attention, so many tourists miss it. They [Krewes] are very proud they can do it under people’s noses without them [tourists] noticing”<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, the satirical floats are a means of exclusivity, as only the people familiar with local society and politics will recognize these “inside jokes”. This exclusivity also fosters

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<sup>13</sup> 06-02-2019

community, as local inhabitants become part of the in-group while visitors remain largely oblivious.

Another manner in which the importance of connectivity and community during Mardi Gras is illustrated, is the larger functions of carnival in New Orleans society. Arguably the best example of this would be the recovery after Hurricane Katrina. “The first Mardi Gras after Katrina was cathartic for many of us because we were looking to do something that restored some sense of normalcy. The city was hanging on so dearly to our customs and traditions. And Mardi Gras was like the first real opportunity to express ourselves, and boy did we”<sup>14</sup>. After the devastation caused by Katrina, the function of Mardi Gras expanded from community and connectivity to include a larger sense of healing and recovery. Mardi Gras became a symbol of hope, a way of showing “we ain’t dead yet”.

That year, many floats, themes and costumes depicted some aspect of Katrina and the aftermath. Through making fun of the dire situation, local inhabitants found a way to move on and be hopeful for the future. In this sense, the meaning of Mardi Gras became embedded with the survival of the city, and its communities itself.

In conclusion, meaning is attributed to Mardi Gras in many ways, most commonly through community and connectivity. Additionally, the function of Mardi Gras in New Orleans society shifts to reflect the different hardships and triumphs that the city experiences. In this sense, Mardi Gras becomes a mirror, in which society is depicted, and reversed. As such, Mardi Gras, for local inhabitants, goes very much beyond partying, drinking and dancing, although those elements are certainly crucial for many. However, the manner in which Mardi Gras is celebrated is contingent upon several socio-economic factors that determine who has access to which events and celebrations. The next chapter will examine notions of access and exclusivity as they relate to parades, Krewes, balls and Mardi Gras royalty.

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<sup>14</sup> 03-04-2019

## Chapter Five: Access and Exclusivity

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

The celebration of Mardi Gras takes many different shapes. The most notable entities of carnival are the parades, the balls and the Krewes that facilitate both. Whereas parades are highly visible to the public and happen very much on the frontstage (Goffman 1956), the carnival balls are more private and happen more so backstage. What follows is a detailed examination of the way socio-economic factors influence each of the aforementioned entities of Mardi Gras. These factors have a large hand in determining who has access to which aspects of celebrating Mardi Gras. The manner in which Mardi Gras is celebrated on an individual level is therefore related to the manner in which place is made within the space of Mardi Gras.

### ***Rollin' down St. Charles***

Mardi Gras parades are arguably the most visible aspect of Carnival in New Orleans. The parades take place on the streets, mainly along St. Charles Avenue, a long street cutting right through the heart of the city. The parades take place in public space that is freely accessible and can therefore be considered the frontstage of Mardi Gras (Goffman 1956). However, the manner in which these parades are experienced by spectators differs depending on several factors. Firstly, the factor of neighborhood comes into play. Throughout the different neighborhoods of the city, different parades are held. For many residents, attending a certain parade over another is a matter of pride. “Many people refuse to go into other neighborhoods during Mardi Gras, there is a feeling of cultural competitiveness”<sup>15</sup>. This competitiveness remains, even though many of the parades have changed routes over the years and are now all parading down St. Charles Avenue. Secondly, even though attending the parades is free, money still plays a large role in how parades are experienced. Along the routes, large VIP-stands are constructed, offering the best views above the crowds, food and drinks, and private bathrooms. Obtaining tickets for these stands means that people do not have to arrive hours before the parade in order to secure a good spot. These tickets are often sold for hundreds of dollars per parade, ensuring that access to these stands is based upon financial ability. Lastly, high above

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<sup>15</sup> 04-02-2019

the crowds and the stands, the people on the balconies take in the parades. The balconies of people living along the parade route will oftentimes be packed with spectators. Some of those inhabitants will sell tickets to their balconies that range in price from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Underneath the balconies, crowds of people will gather, shouting for Mardi Gras beads, while the people on the balconies rain the plastic beaded necklaces down on them.

Not only are there different levels of access when it comes to watching the parades, but also in participating in the parades. The “riders”, the people who are on the floats, are only one part of who participates in the parades. In front of the parade are the Flambeaux, people that carry gas torches, this is the way parades have historically been lit at night<sup>16</sup>. In addition, there are many marching bands and dance troops. These have in common that these groups “walkers” are largely made up of African Americans, while the “riders” are almost always white. As mentioned before, New Orleans knows a quite rigid segregation of neighborhoods which translates further into large economic disparities between white and black residents of the city. Riding in parades is very expensive, while dance troops, marching bands and flambeaux get paid to walk in the parade. The parade, with white people on the wagons that are spending money, and African American people walking below them, earning money, appears to mirror ethnic relations and disparities in the city of New Orleans. In addition, it places those that are affluent enough to afford a place in the parade above the rest of the people celebrating Mardi Gras. The crowds below them will quite literally beg for beads, thereby mirroring power relations within the city of New Orleans.

Access to Mardi Gras parades is thus dependent on different places within the space of Mardi Gras. This can be geographical place like neighborhood, or ethnically informed economic inequality that dictates how people experience parades.

### ***Join the Krewe***

Rex, Muses, Endymion, Zulu, ALLA, Bacchus and Nyx, these are just a few of the Mardi Gras Krewe in New Orleans. In order to ride in the parades, one has to become a member of the Krewe first. Membership dues range in price from hundreds of dollars, to well over a thousand dollars. Carnival Krewe are non-profit organizations and as such have to fund their activities through membership dues and donations. Riding in these parades is made even more expensive

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<sup>16</sup> <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/02/16/the-flambeaux/> accessed: 22-05-2019



by the fact that each rider is responsible for the purchase of their own throws. These are the gifts that get thrown into the crowds during parades, such as beads, coins and stuffed animals. Riders may spend anywhere between a couple hundred to so much as a thousand dollars on those items. This financial barrier largely dictates who is able to ride in a parade and ensures that riders are predominantly more affluent members of society. However, financial affluence is not the only determining factor in who is granted access to the Krewes.

Many of the Krewes are historically comprised of white members and, up until roughly twenty years ago, only men would be allowed to join and ride in the parades, which will be discussed in more detail shortly. Many of the older Krewes such as the Krewe of Rex and the Knights of Sparta still implement the male-only practice today. As a response to these Krewes, all-female organizations such as Muses, Nyx and Iris have arisen over the years, and are now amongst some of the most popular parades. In response to the fact that most Krewes were comprised of white men, new Krewes were formed by the large African-American population of the city, the most notable of which is the Krewe of Zulu. Parading down the streets in grass skirts, their faces painted black and white in order to emulate blackface, they hand out hand painted coconuts. These specific elements are deliberately included as a mockery of caricatures of black identity as created by white people. The segregation of Krewes officially ended in 1992, as the city passed anti-discrimination ordinances<sup>17</sup> Refusing to desegregate, some Krewes, like Comus, the original Mardi Gras Krewe, decided to stop parading. Other Krewes officially became open to all ethnicities and nationalities while their ability to select members upon gender was retained as a compromise between Krewes and the city council. While some Krewes thus became more open to the public, other become more secretive. Elite and exclusive clubs are a part of Mardi Gras that the public is generally not aware of. These clubs might have a parade under a certain name, and a ball under another. Membership is highly confidential, and subject to a rigorous application process. Joining such a club is contingent upon invitation only, a condition through which anti-bias mandates are easily circumvented. As such, these Krewes perpetuate social, ethnic and economic disparities within the city. The focus on secrecy and exclusivity showcases the idea that “Mardi Gras is about closed societal loops”. Arguably the most striking visible performance of these “closed societal loops” is the practice of carnival Balls.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/10/us/council-eases-anti-bias-law-on-mardi-gras.html>, accessed 22-05-2019

### ***Behind Closed Doors: Carnival Balls***

Carnival Balls are arguably the most important practice of Mardi Gras that is not inherently visible in its performance. Most Krewes hold a formal gala, either some days before their parade, or directly after. These balls primarily hold the function of introducing the royal court for a particular Krewe. Every year, each Krewe chooses two people as the respective king and queen, a process that will be examined in more depth later on. Historically speaking, Mardi Gras balls have served the function of introducing young ladies into society (Hardy 1998, 8). Several young women, usually in their late teens/early twenties, are selected as “debutants”. They are publicly introduced at the ball, and parade around the ballroom in beautiful white gowns. This debutante system remains in effect at many balls, mostly those that are considered the most exclusive and important ones, such as the ball for the Krewe of Rex. While members of such Krewes are exclusively male, women do play a significant role at the balls. Most significantly women that have a personal connection to a Krewe member, like their spouses, or in the case of debutantes, their daughters or granddaughters.

It is not necessarily so that everyone who is part of the Krewe or rides in the parade is in attendance at these formal events. Instead, attendance is contingent upon personal invitations, sent out by the leaders of the Krewe. In order to attend one of these balls, one must have connections within a certain Krewe to gain access. Subsequently, the closed societal loops upon which Krewes are founded are sustained through the selective and exclusive manner in which they determine who gets access to the ball. In the case of the Rex ball, the disparities between the exclusive circle of predominantly white and affluent men and women and the other inhabitants of the city are exacerbated even more through the fact that this ball is broadcast on live television. Many people sit and watch as a couple hundred of the city’s most wealthy and influential people parade around a lavishly decorated ballroom in their extravagant ball gowns and tuxedos, complete with the white gloves, which are mandatory for everyone. The exclusive feeling of the ball is strengthened by the fact that it is made visible for everyone, especially because many of the spectators might not be able to ever gain access to these practices themselves. However, there are some balls to which tickets are sold to the general public. These tend to be the larger balls, for the so called “Super-Krewes”. Super-Krewes are Krewes that retain at least a thousand active members. In New Orleans, these are Endymion, Bacchus and Orpheus. The balls for these Krewes are quite different from more traditional balls such as Rex, mainly in the

sense that they take place in the convention center or the Superdome, a large Football stadium in downtown New Orleans, respectively. These balls are referred to as Extravaganza's and usually play host to over ten thousand people, compared to the few hundred at other balls. Boasting celebrity performers and wagons that actually enter the building and shower guests with beads and other throws, these extravaganzas have become quite popular. However, admission comes with a steep price tag, as a single ticket costs might cost as much as 250 dollars.. In addition, all guests have to bring their own food and drink to the party, which makes the whole a pretty expensive affair, especially when combined with the requirement of formal wear. As a result, only affluent citizens and visitors are able to attend these festivities and as such, reinforce notions of the practice of carnival balls as exclusive. While attendance to such events is exclusive, there are several positions within the performance of these balls that are even more exclusive. These are the positions on the Royal Court, which will be discussed further in the next paragraph.

### *The Kings and Queens of Carnival*

“In brilliantly glittering outfits, complete with equally dazzling crowns, the King and Queen of Rex stride into the ballroom as the audience stands as one and applauds politely, the sound muffled by their white gloves. The King and Queen make their way around the ballroom, saluting the audience with waves of their scepters along the way. Two small children, dressed in golden prince outfits walk shortly behind them, adjusting the long trains of the King and Queens fur-lined golden cloaks, the golden plumage on their helmets bobbling as they bend down and pick up the trains to allow the royal couple to ascend upon their golden throne. Once seated, they are in for about three hours of presiding over the ball, as the formal program is just getting started.”

Mardi Gras royalty is perhaps the most elusive manner in which one can partake in the performance of Mardi Gras. Every Mardi Gras Krewe has a royal court that is selected to reign over that year's festivities. The tradition of royalty started with the Krewe of Rex and as such, the king and queen of Rex are widely regarded as The King and Queen of carnival. Within any royal court, there are several positions, these may vary from Krewe to Krewe but are overall quite similar. Firstly, there are the King and Queen, next are Dukes and Maids, and lastly the

Princes and Princesses, which are always younger children, mostly under ten. These positions are in most instances filled through selection. The King is customarily a well-respected community figure, someone that has done extensive work for the community or within the Krewe itself. Within the closed societal loops of Mardi Gras Krewes, the elected kings are predominantly older, upper-class white men. The queen, however, is usually a woman in her twenties. She is mostly chosen based upon family legacy. If a woman comes from a long line of royalty, or her family is highly involved within the Krewe, she is deemed a good candidate for the role of Queen. In order to be selected, she would also have to have an impressive track record of good grades, an excellent career and extensive volunteer work. In certain Krewes, such as rex, the Queen is also a debutante. These requirements all but ensure that people who are born outside of the small circle of upper-class white citizens of New Orleans rarely have any chance to become Mardi Gras royalty. “Kinging” or “Queening”, as fulfilling the positions is regularly called, also comes at a hefty price tag. The royalty is responsible for their own costumes and crowns, as well as for the organization for coronation parties. They also have to pay for table gifts, special throws for the parade, and many more items and events, further ensuring that only very affluent people are able to “King” and “Queen”. As mentioned before, the royal court is presented during the ball, the performance on which is referred to as the tableau. The tableau is executed with military precision while the proceedings may take hours to complete.

Through the examination of these aspects of Mardi Gras, it has become clear that an individual’s place within the space of Mardi Gras is contingent on several socio-economic factors, mostly ethnicity, gender and economic status. The celebration of Mardi Gras must therefore never be seen as a separate space, but rather as a space imbedded into the very fabric of the city. As we have been told: “Mardi Gras is the public view of things happening all year”<sup>18</sup>. This statement holds different meanings, the first one being that Mardi Gras is the public expression of things happening within the Krewes behind closed doors all year and secondly, it refers to socio-economic relations and tensions in New Orleans itself. As we have examined, krewes perpetuate these closed societal loops, ensuring that it is virtually unachievable for anyone outside that small circle to break through. We have learned that “balls and parades are used as a continuation and representation of tradition and history”<sup>19</sup>. Through

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<sup>18</sup> 06-02-2019

<sup>19</sup> 13-2-2019

the strict re-creation of Mardi Gras traditions each year, notions about who has access to certain aspects are also continued and reproduced. As such, Mardi Gras retains its association with exclusivity and wealth. However, at the same time, Mardi Gras is widely celebrated throughout the city and everyone is encouraged to join. Each year, thousands upon thousands of visitors from all over the world come to celebrate carnival. Therefore, there must be other aspects of Mardi Gras which draws people outside of those societal loops in. The next chapters will explore the subject of these visitors further and examine the way in which their presence influences the way in which Mardi Gras is experienced and celebrated.

## Chapter Six: The space that is Mardi Gras

*Hannah Volman*

As we have learned throughout the previous chapters, Mardi Gras is a celebration that relies heavily on access and exclusivity, as well as connectivity. In this chapter we will focus on how Mardi Gras, seen as a space, is occupied by both local residents and visitors, though in different ways. We distinguish between the geographical space, where Mardi Gras is confined by borders such as those of the city New Orleans, or even the French Quarter neighborhood, which is the heart of the city. The social space, in which the borders of Mardi Gras are defined by a set of expected behaviors and practices deemed appropriate, and finally the mental or cognitive space of Mardi Gras, which revolves around the various ways of experiencing the celebration of Mardi Gras and what these mean to different people.

### ***Visitors on Bourbon and Locals on Royal***

“It is March 5<sup>th</sup> 2019, the sun is shining and although it is cold for this time of the year on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter people are dressed scarcely, showing a lot of skin. Young adults are dressed in purple, green, and gold. People are smiling, dancing, drinking, and partying in the street. It is so crowded you can hardly walk, it is even difficult to hear one another speak because of the loud music blasted from bars and clubs, and the shouting mass trying to communicate despite the music. This however, does not seem to bother any of the party-goers on Bourbon Street. Walking a bit further, around the corner, towards the parallel Royal Street we once again find a great number of people enjoying themselves on the street, smiling, dancing, drinking, and partying. Today is Mardi Gras and according to many people these two streets is where you need to be during this day.”

Both Bourbon Street and Royal Street seem to have a similar way of celebrating. However, on a closer look various differences can be found. In the French Quarter, the most famous neighborhood in New Orleans, many Mardi Gras related activities take place. For example, during the weeks leading up to Mardi Gras day, various parades marching through the city may be found. During Mardi Gras day activities are centered in the French Quarter, where in a large

number of bars, cafes, and other places Mardi Gras is celebrated. In this sense, Mardi Gras is geographically positioned. As a geographical space, Mardi Gras can be understood as those spaces where Mardi Gras is taking place, such as the before mentioned example, the French Quarter. The French Quarter can be understood as the epicenter of Mardi Gras celebrations, however, throughout the entire city the festivities are celebrated.



We argue that the space that is Mardi Gras is shared, as a multitude of entities move within this space. We focus on two groups, local residents and visitors. Both are able to participate in the Mardi Gras celebrations, yet do this in a very different fashion. Different types of access are available when it comes to specific celebrations, as we have discussed before. Many local residents spend their day attending parties hosted in private, residential areas, whilst visitors remain in tourist areas, such as Bourbon Street. We understand the geographical locations of these private parties to be part of the geographical backstage (Goffman 1956), as they are

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inaccessible to outsiders like visitors. Bourbon street is then an example of the geographical frontstage (Goffman 1956). It is interesting that almost all local residents mentioned staying clear of Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras day because of the vast amount of visitors, with some even opting to leave the city because of this. Many local residents we spoke to mentioned preferring to celebrate Mardi Gras Royal Street. “I go on Royal Street each year, I wouldn’t dare to go on Bourbon, too many visitors, I don’t like it anymore.”<sup>21</sup> We can thus detect a geographical divide in where local residents celebrate Mardi Gras and where visitors celebrate

<sup>20</sup> View of Royal Street Mardi Gras day, 2019. 05-03-2019.

<sup>21</sup> 02-03-2019.

Mardi Gras. However, this divide is not related to the front- and backstage divide as both Bourbon Street and Royal Street are accessible to everyone.

Both the French Quarter and the city center can thus be understood as the geographical space of Mardi Gras even before Mardi Gras day. Throughout these weeks, the celebration is located on the sidewalks of the city center where spectators are welcomed to watch parades. We argue that this can be interpreted as the geographical frontstage (Goffman 1956). The less accessible geographical spaces during these weeks, for example, suburban areas such as Algiers and the Metairie, are not as accessible to outsiders such as visitors due to limited public transport and little effort to make this part of the city accessible to everyone.

Another divide, for example, is the fact that mainly local residents are allowed to participate in parades. We do want to note that places on floats are purchasable by visitors, however, the prices of float riding are steep and often include a year long membership to the Krewe, therefore this does not happen often. This is an example of limited access to the particular places within the geographical space of Mardi Gras. Differential access thus results in a divide of a frontstage, the sidewalk where visitors are watching the parades, and a backstage, where limited amounts of people, mainly local residents, are allowed in parades. The divide in front and backstage however, does not mean that there is no interaction between local residents and visitors; both groups can move within frontstage.

To summarize, geographically speaking, Mardi Gras is located in the front- and backstage, each constructed by different levels of access to different people. Geographically, Mardi Gras is therefore spatialized into areas where mainly local residents celebrate carnival and areas where mainly visitors celebrate Mardi Gras, although this is not mutually exclusive.

### ***Mardi Gras: Fun in the French Quarter***

“Both Bourbon Street and Royal Street are packed with people enjoying Mardi Gras day. From cafes, clubs, and bars, music is blasted onto the crowded streets. Some pedestrians stop in front of a bar to dance. The young adults on Bourbon street are dressed in glitter, body paint, and the colors of Mardi Gras. The brightly colored drinks in their hands spill over the edge as they move their bodies to the rhythm of the music. A woman, dressed in shorts that leave little to the imagination, a ton of golden glitters on her face and legs, and black jacket that is too thin for the unusual cold weather, rips open the jacket to expose her bare chest. She faces the



balcony above her which is occupied by a lot of young white men. They are each holding enormous green and gold beads. They are looking at her, and some pretend to throw her the beads. The woman is holding out one hand, wanting to catch the beads. Her other hand is grasping a plastic cup filled with a green colored drink. She continues to jump up and down with her jacked unzipped until one of the men throws a necklace. It falls to the ground, the woman covers herself again, picks up the necklace, and makes her way to the next balcony. Around the corner on Royal Street many people on balconies are throwing beads. An older looking woman in an elaborate mermaid outfit stops to catch one of the necklaces. The beads soar through the sky before falling on the ground next to her. She looks up at the balcony with her hands up and once more beads are flying through the air. This time the woman catches the beads before yelling a “thank you!” at the people on the balcony.”

During the carnival season, both local residents and visitors participate in the practice of throwing and catching beads. However, there are differences in how this practice is approached. For example, throwing and catching beads does not always go according to plan, resulting in many beads hitting the streets. Once beads hit the ground all local residents are in an unspoken agreement that these beads are then worthless, as we have mentioned before. Visitors however, who are not aware of this “unspoken rule”, are far more likely pick up beads from the ground. “You see people picking beads from the ground, you know that they’re not from here, we would never grab them from the ground.”<sup>22</sup> We argue that these differences in behavior, between local residents and visitors, define Mardi Gras as a social space. Behavioral differences are responsible for people establishing different places within that social space.

One could say that the tradition of throwing and catching beads has been spectacted; the image has often been reproduced and has become an image of recognition for many (Gotham 2005). Mainly on Bourbon Street beads have become something to be earned by visitors, invoking new kinds of behavior. Although public nudity is prohibited in the United States, in the French Quarter, public authorities look the other way since it has become a practice among (female) visitors to expose their breasts to ask people on a balcony to throw them beads. Many local residents mentioned that this is something that is solely done by visitors. What is interesting in this is that even though local residents stated that they would never participate in such practices they were not opposed to these things happening, as long as

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<sup>22</sup> 13-02-2019

it was limited to Bourbon Street. “As long as I don’t have to see it, hahaha!”<sup>23</sup>. This example shows how the tradition of catching beads is not only reproduced but also altered by visitors. thus further shows that geographical and social space may interact. Different behavior of different groups of people is allowed in different geographical spaces.

The social space of Mardi Gras is thus the space constructed by culturally and historically specific behavior. Because of, for example, differences in knowledge on how to behave within the social space, a backstage is created. However, as behavior is learned and can therefore be performed by anyone, the social space is mainly a frontstage kind of space.

### *Just Add Glitter*

“It is late in the afternoon and most people have left Royal Street. An older woman is walking hand in hand with a young child. They stand still once they have reached a patch of sunlight. Both face the sun for a few seconds before continuing their walk down the street. While standing in the sun the woman says “I really love that we have this tradition, I am already excited about next year.” On Bourbon Street Mardi Gras celebrations continue. Although it is late in the afternoon the street is packed with young adults dancing, laughing, singing and talking. Many people are holding their beverages in hand, often sipping on their plastic cups. In the middle of the street an African American man is holding a big cut out board of a beer glass. In red letters the sign that reads, “Huge Beers”, with an arrow pointing towards a nearby bar with the same sight hanging above the entrance. Two young men stop to look at the sign held by the African American man. They are carrying plastic cups filled with beer. The men look at each other and without saying anything they walk into the bar. Moments later they walk out, now each holding two plastic cups.”

Local residents have, over the years of celebrating Mardi Gras, established certain traditions. For example, the parades they watch, the parties they attend, or the manner in which they are dressed, are all part of the local Mardi Gras tradition. These traditions are often focused on family and friends. Meanwhile, visitors have created their own kind of traditions as the traditions of local residents are inaccessible to them. For visitors, the meaning of celebrating Mardi Gras as a visitor is quite different. They are often not aware of local traditions and are

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<sup>23</sup> 16-02-2019

particularly interested in the celebrational aspect of Mardi Gras that is associated with heavy drinking, partying, and risqué activities such as exposing breasts as a means to collect as many beads as possible, which can be considered a practice established and predominantly performed by visitors.

The difference in understanding and meaning of celebrating Mardi Gras also becomes apparent through the differences in costuming between local residents and visitors. In New Orleans it is tradition to dress up during Mardi Gras. Walking between the most elaborate and well thought out costumes is a treat to everyone's eyes, the colors and glitters paint a spectacular picture that is one of a kind to New Orleans. Annually, the Bourbon Street awards are held (not actually on Bourbon Street), crowning the most dazzling outfit. The tradition of costuming also has a political notion as local residents often incorporate political satire in their outfits. This year, many American football referees could be found on Royal Street, criticizing the undeserved loss of the New Orleans Saints during an important match. Costuming is a very important tradition in the celebration of Mardi Gras, with many local residents spending days, weeks or even months creating the perfect design. Visitors however, seem to have a different approach toward the tradition of costuming. Many are unaware of the political satire element in costuming, and have in most cases not spend a lot of time creating a distinctive look. Because of the lack of knowledge, or lack of cultural competency, of what it means to dress up during Mardi Gras, visitors often opt for an outfit in the colors of Mardi Gras, or just adding glitter to a more “normal” looking outfit.

Lack of understanding in the celebration of Mardi Gras is also distinguishable during parades. The elements of political satire that some parades show are often missed by visitors. Visitors who are unaware of local issues will not fully grasp the messages visualized on the floats. Local residents who are familiar with the



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<sup>24</sup> Costuming on Mardi Gras day, 05-03-2019

meaning of the float themes therefore have a different understanding of what Mardi Gras is.

We argue that traditions mostly take place in the backstage (Goffman 1956) of the so called cognitive space. The traditions take place in the backstage because they are often inaccessible to outsiders such as visitors. For visitors it is relatively impossible to understand the celebration of Mardi Gras in a similar fashion as local residents. Therefore, they have created their own traditions, such as the exposing of breasts. The cognitive space is focused on meaning and understanding. The cognitive space of Mardi Gras entails questions such as what the spectacle Mardi Gras means to different people. Within the cognitive space we can once again differentiate different experiences, creating variations in placemaking in that space.

### *Conclusion*

By illustrating Mardi Gras day on both Royal Street and Bourbon Street we have attempted to show the variations in the occupation of Mardi Gras as a space by both local residents and visitors. Although at first glance Mardi Gras may seem to be experienced the same by everyone in New Orleans, this is not the case. Visitors are welcomed as participants however, this is limited to the space that they inhabit, maintaining a relationship of spectacle and spectator. Differences within the geographical, social and cognitive space can be dissected and have created the Mardi Gras we know today.

## Chapter Seven: Mardi Gras after Mardi Gras

*Hannah Volman*

When Mardi Gras comes to an end, 41 days before Easter, it is likely to assume that anything Mardi Gras related will not be heard or seen until the next carnival season. Parades stop happening daily, many of the gold, green and purple decorations throughout the city are taken down, and visitors exit the city. New Orleans is no longer dominated by the many Mardi Gras related events. However, although Mardi Gras can no longer be found throughout every inch of the city, it is still present, be it in the minds of local residents, in the many other Mardi Gras resembling events that are held each year in New Orleans, or through reproduction in a marketing strategy. Since many of our informants indicated that they were still involved with Mardi Gras related events, it is valuable to question how Mardi Gras is practiced throughout the non-carnival season. In this chapter we analyze how Mardi Gras is practiced and experienced by both the local residents and visitors throughout the rest of the year. We distinguish three ways in which Mardi Gras remains present in New Orleans outside the carnival season. First, we focus on how practices related to Mardi Gras are turned inward by local residents. Secondly, we focus on public events in New Orleans that can be related to Mardi Gras. Finally we focus on how Mardi Gras is used as a marketing strategy throughout the year.

### ***Moving on From Mardi Gras***

“Next year I want to be a referee again!” A young boy yanks at an older man’s black and white striped sleeve while they are walking on Royal Street. It is March 5<sup>th</sup> and unlike many others, both the young boy and the man are wearing winter coats. The stripes on the man’s sleeve represent an American football referee. The back of the coat is decorated with the word “*Cheater!*” in gold letters. The man smiles and says to the young boy, “you can’t really be the same thing twice now can you? We want to wear something different every year.” The boy looks annoyed and turns away from the man. “You can choose something else you want to be next year” is the man’s response, It does not seem to impress the young boy as he remains facing the other way, “We will start looking for a new outfit...” the man is interrupted by the

boy shouting “Tomorrow!”. The man laughs and states that it is great idea. “We will start immediately, then we’ll have enough time to find something good for next year.”

To many in New Orleans, Mardi Gras is one of the most important times of the year. This is because it creates a sense of community, it is an opportunity to let loose, and it allows for individuals to criticize any current political or social issues, as we have mentioned in the previous chapters. For local residents who are involved with one of the many Mardi Gras Krewes, it is a particularly busy and important time of the year because of the many events hosted. For others, it is important because of long standing traditions surrounding the celebration. The amount of parties, activities, and overall celebrations that are being organized during the Mardi Gras season can be quite overwhelming. It would therefore be imaginable that the people in New Orleans would need a break from celebrating once Mardi Gras is over. However, this is not the case, although Mardi Gras is no longer immediately visible in the city it does not disappear entirely. We suggest that many practices, related to Mardi Gras, in which local residents partake, are turned inward. The practices that occurred in the front stage during carnival season are moved to the backstage (Goffman 1956). The creation of a new costume for Mardi Gras the following year, is an example, as is the planning of private events. We refer to these activities as the individual backstage. Local individuals start the process of planning their Mardi Gras outfit for the year to come right after Mardi Gras, and can spend the entire year being involved with this process. “I start thinking about what I want to wear right away. It’s kind of a process, it keeps me busy all year actually.”<sup>25</sup>. Costuming can take up a lot of time, for example because local residents want to incorporate contemporary social or political themes into their costumes. Conceptualizing these outfits, and the process of creating the costume therefore starts right after Mardi Gras, and continues throughout the non-carnival season.

There is also a backstage (Goffman 1956) that is established on a communal level, this is the space in which Mardi Gras related activities are organized by Mardi Gras Krewes. Each Krewe has a board whose members organize all Mardi Gras Krewe related activities. Right after Mardi Gras is over, board members of the Mardi Gras Krewes will start the process of organizing events and parades for the year to come. “We are supposed to have our first meeting on what is happening next year next week, we probably reflect on this year’s parade, to see

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<sup>25</sup> 03-04-2019

what we can improve and stuff. Then we'll also start to think about what is going to happen next year.”<sup>26</sup> The board members start thinking about the next parade as well as continue planning for other activities for the members of their Krewe, “We also have a lot of other really cool things planned, royalty events, balls, that kind of stuff.”<sup>27</sup>. These activities are events where Krewe members come together throughout the year. Partaking in these activities contributes to the sustainment of a community of practice through engagement with other members of the community and thus to the reproduction of the practice (Wenger 1999, 48). As these practices are not available to many outsiders and visitors, we understand them to be part of the back stage.

Outside the carnival season Mardi Gras remains performed amongst local residents, both individually and communally, as a social practice (Shove et al. 2012). However, since the practices are not available to all local residents, we understand these practices to have moved to the backstage.

### *Celebrations throughout the year*

““Walking through the Lower Garden District in New Orleans is hardly possible today. Despite the fact that the sun is hidden behind a deck of clouds, the air is still very warm and thick with humidity. The sheer amount of people that are on the street makes the clammy feeling even worse. People are dressed in green colors, with some people wearing t-shirts with the Irish green, white, orange flag on it. Today, accessories are anything green or with a shamrock, a four-leaf clover, on it. A familiar looking parade is rolling through the streets of this neighborhood and just like during Mardi Gras, the audience is jumping up and down, waving their hands frantically in the air attempting to catch whatever is being thrown off the floats. “Oh my god, what is this?!” a woman exclaims when she catches a dirty cabbage from one of the float riders. She seems very surprised to not have caught the traditional plastic beads, but a vegetable. Other around her are laughing at her surprised reaction, “Happy Saint Patrick’s day!” and “Keep it! It means good luck!” are coming from other audience members. Cabbages, carrots, potatoes and other vegetables are flying through the air, aimed at the vast crowds screaming and jumping to get the attention of the riders throwing the produce.””

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<sup>26</sup> 10-04-2019

<sup>27</sup> 10-04-2019

When travelling to New Orleans outside the carnival season, visitors may still be confronted with parades rolling through the city. These parades are likely to resemble the parades during the Mardi Gras season. Throughout the year, New Orleans is home to a variety of other events that are celebrated in a similar manner to Mardi Gras. In this part we will focus on these events and dissect how they are related to Mardi Gras. Outside the Mardi Gras season New Orleans is known as one of the best places in the United States to party. “New Orleans will always find a reason to party”, is a line often quoted by local residents, and is frequently printed on t-shirts and other merchandise, reminding everyone that in New Orleans, there is never a dull moment.

Hosting your own walking parade is not difficult in New Orleans, “All you need is a band and a little bit of money for a police escort.”<sup>28</sup>. All that is left to do then, is to bring your handkerchief or umbrella to wave in the air and start walking, as per New Orleans tradition.



Therefore, many people include a parade when hosting a wedding, a funeral, or another occasion. In some cases, members of the parade will even throw or give away beads to onlookers. These parades, more scaled down in comparison to Mardi Gras, happen quite often, about two to three times each week in the French Quarter. Other, bigger, parades can also be found in New Orleans, such as the St. Patrick's Day parade, in honor of St Patrick and the Irish community in New Orleans.

<sup>29</sup>St. Patrick's Day is celebrated

annually on March seventeenth and is characterized by various parades during the weekend and other private celebrations throughout the city. During the parades the same floats that were used only a few weeks before, during Mardi Gras are repurposed, the only alteration being that they are given a different name. During these parades, the tradition of throwing and catching

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<sup>28</sup> 05-03-2019

<sup>29</sup> St. Patrick's day parade, 14-03-2019



beads is kept alive, however, the tradition is slightly altered. Instead of throwing plastic beaded necklaces, stuffed animals and other small presents, produce such as potatoes, carrots, and cabbages are being thrown, with cabbages being the most sought after throw. Around the same time, New Orleans also celebrates St Joseph's Day in honor of St. Joseph and the Italian community in the city. These celebrations are similar to Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day, as they are also accompanied by parades and other private celebrations. The parade, which rolls through the French Quarter exists of floats occupied with debutants dressed in white gowns, the term used for the young women being introduced into society, as we have discussed in chapter five. Between the floats, men and boys walk, giving out throws (often in the colors of the Italian flag), to onlookers, in return for a kiss on the cheek. Other famous events that are celebrated with big parades moving through the city of New Orleans are Halloween and Christmas. Both even have their own Krewes to organize these parades.

Throughout the year, various celebrations are thus being spectacted in a way that is similar to that of Mardi Gras (Gotham 2005). The visual reproduction of famous images related to Mardi Gras, such as those of parades, constitute a sense of familiarity that draws attention to these other celebrations, as well as dictating behavioral rules such as throwing and catching objects. Mardi Gras therefore remains present through other celebrations in New Orleans, even outside the carnival season.

### ***Marketing Mardi Gras***

“As soon as the sun sets, the bar on Bourbon Street is filling up quickly. There are hardly any tables, so everyone is standing around a small stage. In the middle of the old venue with high ceilings and wooden walls, some young adults are dancing on the dancefloor to the pop music that is blasted through the speakers on either side of the room. They are dressed scarcely, topping their outfit off with some of the famous plastic beads. It is a Wednesday night towards the end of March, but that does not seem to matter on Bourbon Street. When the music stops playing the dancing stops, and everyone turns to the narrow stage. A drag queen comes out of a curtained area to the front of the stage. She is holding a microphone and wearing impossibly high heels and a glittery green top with cleavage that almost reaches her belly button. Through the microphone she says in a low male voice, “Welcome ladies! Is everyone ready to party like it's Mardi Gras?!””

As we have established, tourism is one of the most lucrative parts of the New Orleans economy. From an economical point of view, it is therefore important that, outside the carnival season, visitors remain interested in the city. The rest of the year, Mardi Gras remains present in the more visitor oriented areas such as Bourbon Street, and the French Quarter more generally. Because of the lucrative nature of Mardi Gras, it is “kept alive” throughout the year. In this sense, Mardi Gras can be seen as a crucial element in a marketing strategy. Within the marketing strategy, Mardi Gras is being commoditized (Cohen 1988, 370) in order to attract more visitors outside the carnival season. For example, in the visitor oriented areas, such as Bourbon Street, touristic shops sell plastic beads to visitors, the entire year. On Bourbon Street, the practice of throwing and catching beads is not limited to Mardi Gras. Throughout the entire year, you can find visitors on balcony areas of cafés, bars, and clubs, throwing beads at the people walking on the streets. Visitors have taken the Mardi Gras practice of throwing and catching beads, and made it their own. Visitors who lack access to most aspects of celebrating Mardi Gras outside the season, have thus created their own practice, reproducing the spectacted images of Mardi Gras.

Another way in which Mardi Gras remains practiced in visitors oriented areas is through the active promotion of Mardi Gras during the non-carnival season. When attending events such as parties or tours that are held throughout the quarter, presenters or guides will often mention Mardi Gras. Because Mardi Gras is one of the most famous “attractions” in the city, it is continuously employed for retaining the attention of visitors. Through the continuous reproduction of Mardi Gras, an appeal is made on the spectacle (Gotham 2005, 225) that people expect when visiting New Orleans.

A last example of how Mardi Gras can be understood as a marketing strategy is the <sup>30</sup>



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<sup>30</sup> Artists at work in Mardi Gras World, 06-04-2019

manner in which multiple tourist attractions throughout the city refer to or are related to Mardi Gras. Throughout the entire year, people are welcome to visit Mardi Gras World. Mardi Gras World is the warehouse where floats are stored throughout the year and artists work to prepare the floats for the following Mardi Gras. Visitors are able to learn about the history of Mardi Gras, as well as get a glimpse of what these parades look like. With a free shuttle picking visitors up from the French Quarter to bring them to the warehouse (which is located a bit outside the city center), it is easily accessible to all visitors. Through organized access to the backstage (Goffman 1956), Mardi Gras remains an accessible event, even outside the carnival season.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, throughout the non-carnival season, Mardi Gras remains an important aspect of the social fabric of New Orleans, in various ways. Local residents individually prepare for the next year, as well as continue to be involved with Mardi Gras Krewes, attending Mardi Gras related activities outside of the carnival season. Mardi Gras practices such as parading, and throwing and catching beads, are continued in other events like the St. Patrick's Day and St. Joseph's Day parades, the Christmas parade, and the Halloween parade. Throughout the year the spectacle that is Mardi Gras is being kept alive, as part of a marketing strategy, even when local practices have moved almost completely to the backstage.

## Chapter Eight: Conclusions

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

In this concluding chapter, we will first provide a short overview of our findings as they have been established in our previous chapters. Subsequently, we provide a comparison between our respective empirical chapters, examining both the differences and similarities between our findings. We then utilize our findings in order to relate them to our theoretical framework as well as to come to a main conclusion and answer our research question: *“How is the celebration of Mardi Gras experienced and practiced by both the local population and visitors in New Orleans”*.

### ***Answering Research Questions***

In the fourth chapter, which was the first empirical chapter, we provided a detailed examination of the way socio-economic factors influence different entities of Mardi Gras: parades, balls, krewes and royalty. These factors have a large hand in determining who has access to these different entities. Through the examination of these aspects of Mardi Gras, it becomes clear that an individual's place within the space of Mardi Gras is contingent on several socio-economic factors, most notably ethnicity, gender and economic status. The celebration of Mardi Gras must therefore never be seen as a separate space, but rather as a space imbedded into the very fabric of the city. “Mardi Gras is the public view of things happening all year”, meaning that Mardi Gras is both the public expression of things happening within the Krewes behind closed doors all year and a reference to socio-economic relations and tensions in New Orleans itself. As we have examined, krewes perpetuate closed societal loops, ensuring that it is virtually unachievable for anyone outside their small circle to break through. We have learned that “balls and parades are used as a continuation and representation of tradition and history”. Through the strict recreation of Mardi Gras traditions each year, notions about who has access to certain aspects are also continued and reproduced. As such, Mardi Gras retains its association with exclusivity and wealth.

The fifth chapter utilized the example of parades in order to examine the way in which meaning is attributed to the celebration of Mardi Gras. Firstly, we discussed parade-watching and the related sense of community. Spectators at these parades interact with each other, and

mutually engage in the celebration of parades through such acts as dancing, drinking, partying and catching. Through these interactions, a sense of community is created. We paid special attention to the acts of catching and throwing, as these represent the aspect of connectivity. Connectivity is an important element in the practice of parading as it enables for the performance of parading through catching and throwing to take place. This performance is founded upon notions of pride and status associated with the amount and exclusivity of throws. While notions of status are important to the practice of catching and throwing, social connections are responsible for the feeling of “togetherness” created by the parades. Lastly, we examined how the function of Mardi Gras in New Orleans society shifts to reflect the different hardships and triumphs that the city experiences. Mardi Gras becomes a mirror, in which society is depicted, and reversed. As such, the meaning Mardi Gras for local inhabitants goes very much beyond partying, drinking and dancing, as connectivity and community appear to be the most important aspects, although partying is certainly crucial element for many.

*Hannah Volman*

In the last two empirical chapters the focus was shifted towards the position of visitors in how Mardi Gras is celebrated in New Orleans. By looking at local residents separately and in connection to visitors we have been able to establish in what ways the celebration of Mardi Gras can be considered a local celebration and in what ways this is influenced by visitors. The third research question, which is answered in chapter six, examined how Mardi Gras can be understood in terms of various levels of space and what place visitors have in these spaces. We argued that firstly, Mardi Gras can be understood as a geographical space, as celebrations are taking place in particular geographical sites, with the French Quarter as the epicenter. Royal Street is more frequently visited by local residents who often state they would not dare to go on Bourbon Street due to the vast amount of visitors. We argued that Mardi Gras may secondly be understood as a social space. Mardi Gras is a social space in which different ways of participating are available to different people. For example, some female visitors are willing to expose their breasts to catch beads, whilst it is very unlikely that local residents would act in such a way. As well as distinguishable differences in how local residents and visitors dress during Mardi Gras day. Lastly, we argued that Mardi Gras is a cognitive space. The cognitive space revolves around the different interpretations and experiences of Mardi Gras that can be found amongst local residents and visitors. For example, during parades messages of political

satire are less likely to be grasped by visitors because of them not being informed on local issues.

The seventh and last chapter focused on how Mardi Gras is present in the city of New Orleans during the non-carnival season. We argued that Mardi Gras remains practiced throughout the non-carnival season. Firstly, we showed that for local residents, activities relating to Mardi Gras turn inward after the carnival season is over as they begin the process of preparing for the next year. This can involve participation in a Krewe, or starting with the construction of a new costume. When part of a Krewe, members will also be invited to participate in various events that are organized by the Krewes as communities of practice. Secondly, throughout the year, several big events in New Orleans keep referring to Mardi Gras. New Orleans is host to several other parades on holidays, such as St. Patrick's Day, St. Joseph's Day, Halloween and Christmas. Often, the floats created for Mardi Gras, are repurposed for these parades. The practice of catching and throwing beads is also performed during these parades. Thirdly, Mardi Gras is "kept alive" throughout the non-carnival season as Mardi Gras is one of the most economically lucrative draws to the city. Throughout the entire year, plastic beads can be bought in the French Quarter, which are then thrown off the balconies. During events in these visitors oriented areas, slogans like "Let's party like it's Mardi Gras" can often be heard. Other visitor oriented activities and sights like Mardi Gras World, remain open all year to allow visitors a taste of Mardi Gras.

### ***Empirical Comparison***

*Hannah Volman*

The first two empirical chapters have been written focusing on Mardi Gras in a local context. Specifically, in these chapters, we have tried to dissect what celebrating Mardi Gras means to local residents and how the various communities in New Orleans celebrate carnival. The last two chapters have been written, also focusing on the presence of visitors and the way they celebrate Mardi Gras. The following is an overview of some central themes found throughout all empirical chapters. Although all chapters were written with different research questions in mind, we still found some common themes throughout the work. We will take these into account when formulating an answer to our main question.

First we will focus on the theme of access. Who has access to what has been a central theme throughout the empirical chapters. Access is a determining factor in how Mardi Gras is celebrated as we have seen in chapter five. We have found that access is granted to local residents and visitors in layers. Visitors have access solely to the public space and are excluded from any private events regarding Mardi Gras. Geographically speaking, Mardi Gras parades are public events, however socially speaking, local residents and visitors occupy different places. Physically, access is granted to bars, clubs, and their adjoining balconies and other public areas. The access that is granted to visitors relies completely on cultural competency, or cognitive access, which is their knowledge of local traditions, as we have seen in chapter six. Because visitors are not aware of the multitude of Mardi Gras traditions they will never be granted access. We do find it important to note however, that most visitors are not consciously experiencing the limitation in access that are put upon them. To local residents the level of access in the celebrations of Mardi Gras is based on socio-economic factors such as class, ethnicity, and gender. Mardi Gras Krewes are often only accessible to affluent, white men. Marginalized communities in New Orleans therefore experience a level of access that is more similar to the extent of the access visitors get. Although visitors and locals partially celebrate Mardi Gras together, local residents have access to different practices than visitors. The various forms of access are what creates the different places individuals and communities occupy within the space that is Mardi Gras. In this we can distinguish a frontstage, the public area where access is granted to virtually everyone, and a backstage, where access is limited to a specific community (Goffman 1956).

Another central theme throughout this work is meaning as it is related to different communities. Meaning is an important concept as it defines how Mardi Gras is experienced and practiced. We argue that celebrating Mardi Gras has a different meaning to different groups of people. For local residents celebrating Mardi Gras can be participating in a community of practice (Wenger 1999). For visitors celebrating Mardi Gras is being a part of a temporary community of practice. However, participating in the various Mardi Gras related activities creates connectivity, both amongst those who have the similar senses of what it means to celebrate Mardi Gras and people for whom Mardi Gras has a different meaning. For local residents the meaning of celebrating Mardi Gras is focused on tradition, and is often done in the context of the family, which includes several generations. For visitors, the meaning of

celebrating Mardi Gras is usually focused on partying, which is often done with friends and peers.

### ***Final Conclusions***

*Yvonne van Wanrooij*

Throughout this thesis, we have established that the manner in which Mardi Gras is celebrated is highly diverse as a result of the different places that may be occupied in the space of Mardi Gras. These places are socially constructed and are based upon to notions of belonging (McCleod 2006). As such, visitors to Mardi Gras are conceived to be in a different social place than the local residents of New Orleans as the celebration of Mardi Gras is often referred to, and regarded as, “their” festival and part of “their” heritage and traditions. In this sense, visitors to the festivities are considered to have a different level of belonging and are as such positioned in a different space within Mardi Gras celebrations. However, an individual’s place within the space of carnival is not only determined by a sense of belonging related to geography, or where they live. Instead, the aspects of access and meaning play a large role in the construction and navigation of these spaces.

In the case of Mardi Gras, belonging is closely tied to access. Access is the first pillar upon which notions of places within Mardi Gras is founded. As we have examined, this access is based upon different socio-economic factors. These aspects, such as gender, ethnicity and economic status determine in large part who gets access to which festivities and celebrations of Mardi Gras. The front stage (Goffman 1956) of Mardi Gras is the part that is highly visible and freely accessible. As a result, both visitors and local citizens alike are able to engage in, and interact with, these celebrations. The backstage of Mardi Gras are those events that are less visible and more restrictive in the selection of its practitioners. Among these are the carnival balls and the Krewe themselves as well as other private celebrations. This backstage region is marked by a focus on exclusivity, and recreation of the history and traditions of such events allows for the perpetuation of closed societal loops. For visitors, this backstage region is even more inaccessible for visitors, as they often lack knowledge of the existence of the entire backstage region. As such, they lack the crucial element of cultural competence that is needed to perform a practice (Shove et al. 2012, 11). Access is therefore dependent on socio-economic factors as well as the possession of certain cultural knowledge. The second pillar that



informs the way places are constructed within the celebration of Mardi Gras is meaning. As celebrations of Mardi Gras take on different forms, they also take on different meanings. For visitors, meaning is cultivated through the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1995, 132). This term is used to reflect the manner in which tourists perceive the place they visit. During Mardi Gras, this gaze is often more so reflective of the vivid visual imagery produced as a result of Mardi Gras rather than the actual celebration itself. Visitors to Mardi Gras consume, and as a result reproduce, images that they have come in contact with through various media, a process that is termed “spectacle” (Debord 2005). Meanings of community and connectivity are challenged as more visitors come to the city and reproduce notions of Mardi Gras as merely a raucous party and an excuse for excessive behavior. However, these large numbers of visitors may also aid in the continued performance of traditions and celebrations, ensuring that local heritage, and meanings of community and connectivity, are sustained. Meaning may also be found in the function that Mardi Gras serves in the local community, as illustrated by the example of hurricane Katrina. Lastly, Mardi Gras is meant as a celebration in which social norms and rules are either abandoned or mocked, resulting in an inversion of social order (Jankowiak and White 1999, 335).

Different places and celebrations all come together within the shared space of Mardi Gras. This space is defined along geographical and temporal nexus and is as such reminiscent of the definition of social practices as provided earlier. In this sense, Mardi Gras itself can be considered the nucleus of a cluster of practices, all of which are performed by practitioners in different places. The space of Mardi Gras should therefore be considered as fluid, as it is defined by the cumulation of the different practices it encases. As mentioned before, Mardi Gras is a shared space and as such, the emphasis should be placed upon the “shared” part of that term. This term encapsulates the essence of Mardi Gras as an inherently social phenomenon. At the heart of this is interaction, as all celebrations are both defined by the existence interactions and its absence. Many parts of Mardi Gras are both highly visible and freely accessible and are therefore always in a social context (Whitford 2007). Engagement in a particular practice consequently entails interaction with others in the same place, as well as other places. The absence of interaction, caused by lack of access, is equally important as it eludes to the exclusiveness of certain aspects of Mardi Gras. As mentioned before, Mardi Gras serves as an apparent reversal of social norms and hierarchies, it therefore seems paradoxical

that existing social orders are perpetuated through the closed community on the backstage of Mardi Gras, all the while these exact social orders are mocked and protested.

In conclusion, we have argued that Mardi Gras is a shared space, built upon several places, which all interact and intersect. The boundaries of these places are defined by access and meaning, along with temporal and spatial specifics. As a result, the celebration of Mardi Gras is an accumulation of uniquely individual experiences that are negotiated within the social context that Mardi Gras is embedded in.

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## Appendix One: Summary

In this research project, we aim to examine how the celebration of Mardi Gras is created and negotiated, as well as dissect how meaning is attached to these celebrations. We argue that there is not one particular way in which Mardi Gras is celebrated. The way in which Mardi Gras is celebrated is contingent upon multiple socio economic factors making a uniquely individual experience. We examine this issue through the use of our main research question: “How is the celebration of Mardi Gras practiced and experienced by both local residents and visitors in New Orleans?”. The key theoretical concepts we employ are social practice, spectacle and space. Social practice theory reflects upon on the formation of the social world, through a dialogue between social structure and human agency. The concept of practice has been defined as “a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings”. Practices should be understood as dynamic entities that are performed across a specific timeline by individual carriers. As such, practices are influenced by, and an influence on their practitioners. We use spectacle to illustrate the commoditization of Mardi Gras. The concept refers to the staged visual production and imagery events and other cultural practices.

We use the term space to refer to the fluid non-physical environment that is constructed by cultural specifics and cultural change. We suggest that space should always be understood as shared, as multiple experiences can share cultural and historical particularities and therefore move within the same cultural space. The shared space can be divided into front stage and backstage. The front stage refers to the accessible and public space, and the backstage to the private and exclusive space. In the fourth chapter, we examine the way socio-economic factors influence different entities of Mardi Gras: parades, balls, krewes and royalty. Krewes perpetuate closed societal loops, ensuring that it is virtually unachievable for anyone outside their small circle to break through. Through the recreation of Mardi Gras traditions, notions about who has access to certain aspects are also continued and reproduced. As such, Mardi Gras retains its association with exclusivity and wealth. The fifth chapter examines the way in which meaning is attributed to the celebration of Mardi Gras. Connectivity and community are important elements in the practice of parading as it enables for the performance of parading through catching and throwing to take place as well as ascribes meaning to these processes. In addition, the function of Mardi Gras in New Orleans society shifts to reflect the different hardships and triumphs that the city experiences. Mardi Gras becomes a mirror, in which

society is depicted, and reversed. In chapter six we focus on the various forms of space that can be dissected in the celebration of Mardi Gras. We argue that Mardi Gras should be understood as a geographical space, as a social space, and as a cognitive space. Mardi Gras as a space is shared by both local residents and visitors, whose access to the front and backstage determines their Mardi Gras experience. Chapter seven focuses on the presence of Mardi Gras in New Orleans outside the carnival season. Mardi Gras related practices for local residents, such as the involvement with Krewes, are turned inward to the backstage outside of the Mardi Gras season, but do not disappear completely. Other events reproduce Mardi Gras related practices, such as throwing and catching objects. And lastly, Mardi Gras remains present in New Orleans through its utilization in a marketing strategy.

Throughout this thesis, the themes of access and meaning have been established as essential to the celebration of Mardi Gras. We argue that the meaning of celebrating Mardi Gras is different to local residents and visitors. For local residents, celebrating Mardi Gras is often focused on community and connectivity. For visitors, Mardi Gras is often regarded as an opportunity to party and let loose. Access is an important aspect to Mardi Gras as it is decisive in how Mardi Gras can be celebrated. Different levels of access are appointed to local residents and visitors creating a difference in the experience of Mardi Gras.

In conclusion, we have argued that Mardi Gras is a shared space, built upon several places, which all interact and intersect. The boundaries of these places are defined by access and meaning, along with temporal and spatial specifics. As a result, the celebration of Mardi Gras is an accumulation of uniquely individual experiences that are negotiated within the social context that Mardi Gras is embedded in.