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## KINSHIP, INTELLIGENCE, AND MEMORY AS IMPROVISATION

Culture and performance in New Orleans

*Joseph Roach*

On 14 September 1874, an armed force under the direction of an organization called the Crescent City White League carried out a bloody *coup d'état* against Louisiana Governor William Pitt Kellogg and his racially integrated administration. The authors of the blueprint for the event, the "Platform of the Crescent City White League," included Fred Nash Ogden, the former Confederate officer who would lead over 8,000 paramilitary volunteers against the state government's Metropolitan Police and Negro Militia. The "Platform" proclaimed in advance the victory of what its authors called "that just and legitimate superiority in the administration of our State affairs to which we are entitled by superior responsibility, superior numbers and superior intelligence." Although Governor Kellogg survived to be reinstated by Federal troops several days later, Reconstruction in Louisiana was soon effectively aborted, and the era of Southern Redemption begun.

Phrased in the past tense, this account disguises a continuous reenactment of a deep cultural performance that many New Orleanians call the present. Over the past several years, as the city has contended with the legalities of integrating the "Old Line" Mardi Gras organizations, which date from the nineteenth century, another, closely related issue has festered in city council chambers, on editorial pages, and in the streets: the disposition of the "Liberty Monument," an obelisk erected to honor the perpetrators of the terrorist *coup* of 1874. On this stage of contested but collective memory, intensified by the political rise of former Klansman David Duke, the city of New Orleans has made a national spectacle of its cultural politics, going over some of the same ground it covered 100 years ago when *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Louisiana public accommodations lawsuit that challenged Jim Crow, provided the United States Supreme Court with the occasion to establish "separate but equal" as the law of the land.

In writing this essay about a particularly volatile form of local knowledge – the rites and secular rituals of a performance-saturated interculture – I have two, more general goals.

First, without in any way diminishing the importance of any one of the more familiar categories of difference and exclusion that cultural studies surveys, I want to apply current trends in the emerging field of performance studies to suggest how categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality may be produced by (and remain imbedded in) complex networks of other measures of human difference. Based on my research into the local conditions of cultural performance in New Orleans, I have chosen kinship, intelligence, and memory to represent these other measures. They are no more or less constructed, no more or less essential, no more or less naturalized than other rubrics within human taxonomies, but they have remained far less prominent in discussions of alterity. Like other culturally encoded categories of difference, tradition insists on the rootedness of kinship, intelligence, and memory in "Nature," even – or perhaps especially – when the facts of their constructedness within cultural and social norms may be explicitly demonstrated. The secret history of Mardi Gras in New Orleans documents this process of naturalization by exposing putatively timeless annual rituals as contingent improvisations.

Second, I preface my account of this historical instance of culture as performance with a version of the development of performance studies as an interdisciplinary (or postdisciplinary) methodology. Not entirely by coincidence, this history also involves New Orleans. As a framework for my account, I am adopting Richard Schechner's definition of performance, set forth most comprehensively in *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985), as "restored behavior" or "twice-behaved behavior" – (re)presentations that can be rehearsed, repeated, and, above all, recreated (35-116). The concept of restored behavior emerges from the cusp of the arts and human sciences as the process wherein cultures understand themselves reflexively and whereby they explain themselves to others. Theater, as a high-culture form, remains important in this formulation as a genre with a rich theoretical lexicon, in light of which the cultural significance of other performance modes may be interpreted (Beeman, Balme). The concept of the restoration of behavior extends performance to include what Brooks McNamara terms "invisible theater" and Michel de Certeau calls the "practice of everyday life." Looked at in this light, literature itself (and not just dramatic literature) may be understood as the historic archive of restored behavior, the repository and the medium of transmission of performative tropes like Mary Poovey's proper lady, say, or Karen Halttunen's confidence man.

I want further to limit my definition of performance, however, by adopting John J. MacAloon's restriction, proposed in the preface to *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (1984). MacAloon argues that performance is a particular class or subset of restored behavior "in which one or more persons assume responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it." This qualifier adds not only an element of self-consciousness (or "reflexivity") as an intensifying

precondition for the raising of restored behavior to the level of cultural performance, but it also introduces an element of risk and risk-taking. "Performances are anything but routine," MacAloon continues: "By acknowledging responsibility to one another and to the traditions condensed and objectified in the 'scripts,' agents and audiences acknowledge a risk that things might not go well. To agree to perform is to agree to take a chance" (9). Performance thus entails a compact between actors and audience (even when their roles are rapidly handed back and forth, as in carnival), a compact that promises the production of certain mutually anticipated effects, but the stipulations of the compact are often subject to negotiation, adjustment, and even transformation. The range of human interactions defined within these limits delineates the field of performance studies, to which institutional history I now turn.

## I

Theoretically speaking, performance studies, like jazz, can claim its status as an American invention. The formation of the field in the 1960s – including its predilection for the comparative juxtaposition of matrixed and non-matrixed performances, its interest in street theater and non-scripted events, its valorization of popular entertainment and oral performance, and its methodological engagement with ethnographic, folkloric, and anthropological approaches – owes more than it has perhaps fully acknowledged to the Afro-Caribbean retentions and adaptations of New Orleans. My version of the disciplinary history of performance studies begins with the early years of *The Tulane Drama Review (TDR)*, which, under Richard Schechner's editorship, "served as a sort of clearinghouse of the new ideas, seeking out and encouraging new theoreticians and practitioners in America and spreading news of work in Europe and elsewhere" (Carlson 254). Among those new ideas was an expanded notion of what constituted a performance event, including non-scripted Happenings and ritual practices from many cultural traditions.

Quite apart from *TDR*, however, theater and drama had maintained from its disciplinary inception a receptiveness to cultural anthropology, largely stemming from the influence of Sir James Frazer on the Cambridge Ritualists – Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, and F. M. Cornford – who stressed the origin of drama in rites of death and renewal. Although these Hellenists worked with the texts of Attic tragedy and comedy, they imagined between the lines a world of forgotten gestures, intonations, practices, and meanings that "evolved" from the primordial rituals of vegetation worship, regicide, and sympathetic magic. They carried into the study of pre-history their version of the old anthropological distinction between civilized and savage on the basis of literacy. Because many of Frazer's key examples in *The Golden Bough* come from Africa, inscribed by the Cambridge Ritualists as

“primitive” analogues to the origins of Greek theater, an interesting ligature developed in anticipation of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987), whereby the ritual fragments of African oral traditions re-oriented the received meaning of the most hallowed texts of the Eurocentric canon.

The Ritualist emphasis on the stasis and sacrificial conservatism of rites and rituals continued to inform the reigning teleology of theater history, which traced the evolutionary progress of drama in the West from “the sympathetic magic of ‘primitive peoples’ before the beginning of history to the Pisgah sights of European modernism at its end” (Reinelt and Roach 293). Most histories of the theater prefaced their accounts of the origins of the ancient theater with photographs of “tribal” rituals from around the world. These tribes presumably occupied a place in cultural evolution equivalent to that of the pre-history of Greece, or more precisely, they existed outside of time altogether as political nullities in a disconnected realm, untroubled by progress or even by history itself. Theater thus derived from anthropology one of the latter field’s most troubling (and troubled) issues, what Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* calls the “denial of coevalness” between the anthropologist and his or her human “object” of study (31). Such chronopolitics of difference denied the cultural performances of traditional societies participation in history, while at the same time they accepted the products of the anthropologists’ or historians’ own tradition as the aesthetic consummation of a most satisfactory evolution. In theater studies, this ethnocentric mind-set segregated the study of canonical forms, such as Greek or Elizabethan drama, for instance, from many of the world’s most prolific performance genres.

In New Orleans, however, the elitist bias and Eurocentrism of these influences encountered a uniquely countervailing alternative in the popular culture of carnival, especially in the simultaneous interpenetration of European and African-American festive traditions. The topical presentness of these forms in the streets of an American city disrupted the denial of coevalness. The ethnographic “field” was not on another continent but in the next block, a block likely to be peopled by the creolized descendants of most European, African, and American extractions, but still divided by segregationist violence in law and custom. Given its role as a polyglot entrepôt on the circum-Caribbean rim, the historic collision of cultures in New Orleans has customarily been marked by public performances. The eye-popping juxtaposition of these events has the surrealistic effect of defamiliarizing the forms of one culture (making the familiar strange) in the very process whereby it increases understanding of others (making the strange familiar). In *The Future of Ritual* (1993), Richard Schechner looks back on those “seething public processions,” such as the famous African-American “Zulu” parade, which, when he last saw it in the 1960s, translated the turbulence of the Civil Rights era into “black and gold painted coconuts [hurled] like

cannonballs at white spectators” (74–5). The real show is clearly in the streets, and the participants annually enact therein a local version of intercultural co-production, which insists that their histories and identities, though distinctive in their own ways, do in fact overlap in many others.

Memory and history do not always or even often agree (Le Goff), for differing conventions and technologies of retention shape the contents as well as the form of remembrance. In a passage that has great resonance for the performance culture of New Orleans, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992) describes the contested terrain of literacy at the modern juncture of African and European languages, and he concludes: “On the other side [orality], there are many devices for supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief without writing” (132). Performance studies attempts to find not only a way of writing about these “devices” but also a way of researching them by participating in them. Performance offers itself as an alternative or a supplement to textual mediation. A shared belief in the possibility of such participation links a variety of otherwise autonomous practitioners, though they may differ widely over methodological particulars (Hymes, Bauman and Briggs, Conquergood).

To this configuration of the field of performance studies, the work of Victor Turner remains generative. Turner’s formative experience in the field was with the Ndembu people of Africa, among whom he developed his idea of “social dramas,” the stagings and resolutions of conflicts within a society, which afford “a limited area of transparency in the otherwise opaque surface of regular, uneventful social life” (*Schism and Continuity* 93). As performances of and by the community, they are “at once the distillation and typification of its corporate identity” (*Celebration* 16). Perhaps most important of all, Turner’s development of the Van Gennepian concept of liminality, the “threshold” stage of “becoming” in rites of passage, theorized an entire area for performance research. In an oft-cited and oft-critiqued experiment at New York University, Richard Schechner and Turner adapted Ndembu initiation rituals for use in a co-led workshop on liminal experience (*From Ritual to Theatre* 89–101). I do not accept the dismissive characterization of such intercultural experiments as “naive and unexamined ethnocentricity” (Bharucha 14), but neither do I view them as unproblematic. Nor did Schechner and Turner. In such a transfer of ritual practices from their source, and in the particular cultural appropriation of African “corporate identity” that such an experiment performs, the anthropologist-directors re-enacted the secret history of the field that they were engaged in inventing: performance studies as the restoration of borrowed African behaviors in the radically re-defined contexts of the postmodern global interculture. They attempted the cross-cultural transfer of memory without writing, and in the proposed reflexivity of their embodiment, the Ndembu appeared only to disappear in the project of improvising somebody new.

That is one reason why the question of improvisation remains one of the pressing issues on the interdisciplinary agenda of performance studies today. The idea of improvisation adds the element of reflexive self-invention to the matrix of repetition described by the concept of restored behavior. It troubles the inherent conservatism attributed to ritual by Turner's concept of the "social drama." The importance of improvisation in ritual is elaborated by Margaret Thompson Drewal in her important book on West African performance, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (1992, with video supplement). Drawing upon Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody as repetition with a critical distance (and difference) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s analysis of Jelly Roll Morton's riff on Scott Joplin ("Maple Leaf Rag [A Transformation]"), Drewal examines the importance of transformational improvisation in Yoruba ritual praxis "as repetition with revision" (2-6, her emphasis). Improvisation introduces a space for play within memory itself and, as Drewal's title suggests, for agency within the performative compact of traditions and conventions of restored behavior.

Outside of Afrocentric traditions of "signifying" – which foreground the signifier to dramatize both the presence and the adaptability of remembered affiliations (Gates; cf. Berliner 257) – the most intriguing point about the ubiquity of improvisation in performance, especially Eurocentric performance, is that its memory is so often erased by its very success. The present stabilizes the past by representing itself as the inevitable consummation of deliberate steps, but to do this it must smooth over the unbidden eruptions necessary to its own creation. Not only are African forms forgotten, but also effaced are the traces of the process whereby improvisation celebrates (not negates) memory. This retroactive solemnification of the marriage between ritual and amnesia is elegantly summarized in Franz Kafka's miniature parable: "Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes part of the ceremony" (qtd. Stas 40). Improvisation and its erasure figure prominently in the struggle between the intertwined performance traditions of New Orleans, as I hope to demonstrate. In so doing, I offer the disclosure of suppressed improvisations as a method of cultural critique.

## II

The carnival krewes originated among English-speaking New Orleanians in the mid-nineteenth century in order to establish a more socially regulated alternative to promiscuous masking of Creole Mardi Gras (Young). Formed along with exclusive men's clubs, such ostensibly festive organizations as the Mistick Krewe of Comus and the subsequent krewes of Momus, Proteus, and Rex have set the social tone for New Orleans since the post-Reconstruction era (Kinser, Mitchell, O'Brien). Their rites of passage offer a rich array of ethnographic and historical materials that highlight

performance as the principal mode whereby elite cultures produce themselves by contrast with the excluded.

One informative document is a privately printed, first-person account by William J. Behan, wholesale grocer and sugar factor, later mayor of the city of New Orleans, of his 1871 initiation into the original and most exclusive krewe, the Mistick Krewe of Comus, whose membership was and is secret, and its co-extensive social arm, the Pickwick Club. Behan recalls:

At that time, when a duly elected member was presented to the Pickwick Club, he was met by the Sergeant-at-Arms, booted and spurred, and equipped with the largest and fiercest-looking saber which could be found. The position of Sergeant-at-Arms was filled by the most robust member of the Krewe, and one whom nature had endowed with the most sonorous basso-profundo voice to be heard on the operatic stage. He was an awe-inspiring figure, and the spirit of the new-comer quailed within him, as he was led blindfolded, into the darkened and mysterious chamber where the ceremony of initiation was to take place. The room was draped with sable curtains, and ornamented (if such a word can apply) with owls, death's heads, cross-bones and similar blood-curdling devices. Behind the curtains, the merry Krewe of Comus was concealed, but never was this reassuring fact suspected until having administered the oath to the aspirant, the President asked in a loud and solemn voice: "Are you willing that this stranger be admitted," and then a mighty and unanimous roar burst forth from behind the curtains: "We are," and the curtains were drawn back, disclosing the merrymakers. Now, the room was flooded with light, solemnity yielded to hilarity, and the evening waxed merrier and merrier, for the "Big Mug" had been discovered, filled with the wine of the gods, for Comus and his Krewe. (2)

It is perhaps challenging to keep in mind that the performers in this social drama are not boys, in possession of a tree house, but grown men – social, commercial, and civic leaders of a city that was then reconstituting itself as an Anglo-American version of a Latin-Caribbean capital. By Behan's account, the Comus initiation follows the classic pattern of rites of passage – separation, liminality, and reincorporation – and his hearty effort to take the whole affair lightly conceals neither the serious purposes of homosocial affiliation that the rite reaffirms, nor the oligarchical entitlements afforded by membership in the community that it secretly and selectively enlarges.

The Pickwick Club and the Krewe of Comus exerted social discipline over the families of the New Orleans elite by a system of rigorous black-balling in which fathers controlled the marriageability of one another's daughters – and hence the uppercrust's densely endogamous kinship networks – by minutely regulating both club membership and the annual invitations to the coming-out balls of the Mardi Gras social season (Ryan). In the useful *Hand-Book of Carnival*, furnished by J. Curtis Waldo in 1873, the secret rites of social selection of the Mistick Krewe of Comus are explained in relationship to its public parades at Mardi Gras:

Not only have the gorgeous and fantastic processions been the occasion of an out-door demonstration on the part of almost the entire population, but the tableaux and ball which terminate the evening's festivities have ever been a subject of the deepest anxiety with a certain class of our population. The beautiful and costly cards of invitation and the mysterious manner of their distribution, combine with the social position of those selected, to invest this part of the entertainment with a still deeper interest. It has grown to be a recognized evidence of caste to be the recipient of one of these mysterious biddings, and here is sole clue we have to the character of the organization.

(6-7)

Waldo's choice of the word *ever* to describe a practice that had been instituted fourteen years earlier (and had been interrupted by the Civil War) shows how by 1873 the intruding leopards had established themselves in the memory of some as eternal consumers at the ritual chalices of Mardi Gras.

William J. Behan's initiation to the Krewe of Comus and the Club of Pickwick in 1871 and Waldo's sycophantic *Hand-Book* of 1873 offer revelatory insights into the self-creation (out of little more than their supposed intelligence, really) of a dominant social elite. As fictive kin, they invented themselves through restored behavior – repetition with revision – the improvisatory quality of which has since receded from the living memory of their descendants, but not from their family memoirs. In the mid-nineteenth century, their records disclose, they underwent a kind of collective puberty, a self-dramatizing and even violent quest for identity and position. Victor Turner's elaboration of Van Gennep's classic study of tribal rites of passage led him to the crucial concept of liminality, a "betwixt and betweenness," the vulnerable state that precedes (yet is indispensable to) full acceptance by the group. The word *liminal* well describes many of the Anglo-American New Orleanians of mid-century, as they invented their own traditions of social selection amidst the failing memories of the creolized interculture they appropriated and then replaced (Hirsch and Logsdon).

William J. Behan, the vulnerable "new-comer" whose spirit "quailed" before the awe-inspiring paraphernalia of the threshold between inclusion and exclusion, stands in symbolically for many others. I have found the names and addresses of twenty-seven of the original Comus members of 1857, their homes and offices, and all are representative of an ill-defined assortment of American opportunists, a number from Mobile, Alabama, drawn to New Orleans between the Louisiana Purchase and the Civil War, to seek their fortunes. A memorandum from the daughter of the first president of the Pickwick Club records the addresses as well as the professions of the founders – steamboat agents, accountants, lawyers, produce wholesalers, and a "cotton pickery" – in all eighteen merchants, four professionals, three bankers, and two unknowns (Werlein Memorandum, Churchill Family Papers). Most have distinctly English-sounding names (there is an Addison, a Pope, and a Newton

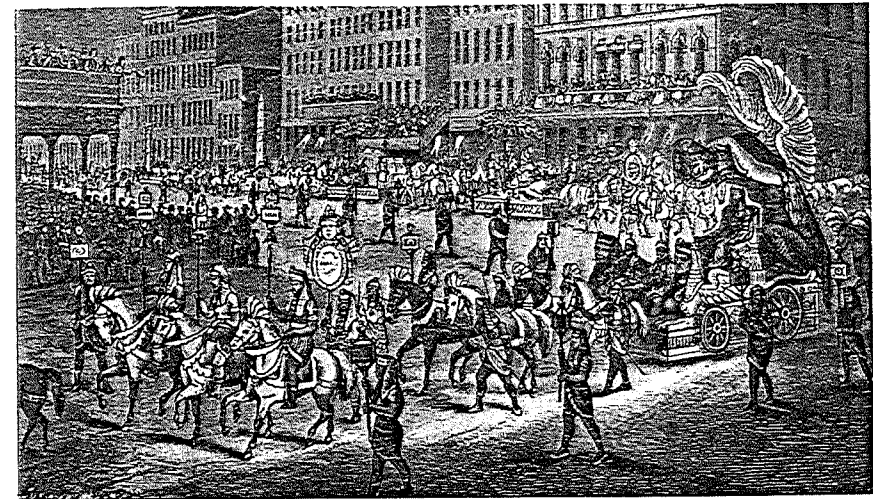


Figure 12.1 The Mistick Krewe of Comus, "The Classic Pantheon," *London Illustrated News*, May 8, 1858 (The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum/Research Center. 1959.172.12)

among the founders), but others, like Behan, who joined after the Civil War, are Irish or Scottish.

In antebellum New Orleans, such American fortune-hunters, once contemptuously sneered at as "Kaintucks" and "Riverboatmen," countered the old lineage and established caste system of the francophone Creoles by advertising frequently and shrilly their intrinsic merit based on intelligence. They contrasted Yankee ingenuity – in manufacturing and marketing goods, in draining swamps and digging canals, in building houses and laying down trolley lines – with what they took to be Creole decadence, sloth, and stupidity. The self-inventing, improvisatory rhetoric of the period still resonates in a privately printed history of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, compiled to celebrate its centenary year: "The people of New Orleans are under three influences – the French, the Spanish, and the Anglo-Saxon. The Spanish influence is especially shown in the early architecture of the city, the French influence by the manner and customs of the people, the Anglo-Saxon by aggressiveness in developing the commercial and business growth of the city" (Herndon 6). The strong signifier of superior aggression and superior industry sets apart the category pompously labeled Anglo-Saxon, concealing its rag-tag origins, the teeming refuse of several distant shores.

The collective rite of passage for this ill-defined group – and the demonstration of its supposed intelligence – was an improvisation on a borrowed theme. In the 1850s, the Anglo-Americans reinvented "Mardi Gras": Comus

began the tradition (unbroken except by war and police-strikes until 1992) of elaborate float parades and tableau balls, which resembled royal entries and masques of Renaissance princes, to supplant the willy-nilly bacchanal of Latin carnival (Figure 12.1). Early on, this was a very fluid kind of association of fictive kin – mostly young men, mostly wholesalers, who met regularly “Uptown” at John Pope’s drug store on the corner of Jackson and Prytania streets – as yet neither a class nor a caste, but rather an imagined kinship network founded upon mutual appreciation for one another’s industry, invention, and powers of organization. The founding president’s daughter sets the scene:

New Orleans in 1857 was but a comparatively small place spread over a very considerable area and divided into a number of small districts, each of the latter being either under separate administrations or were recently become a part of the City. It was not an unusual thing then, as it is now in small cities, for the better element of young business and professional men to gather of an evening at the leading drug store and to sit or stand around, smoke a cigar and pass a few words with one another before returning to their work or going elsewhere. . . . At that time this neighborhood was the centre of the then new residential district; there resided the well-to-do American (as opposed to the French) residents of the City. . . . [At John Pope’s drug store] the early affairs of the Mystic Krewe of Comus were doubtless frequently discussed; and it was here that the inception of the Pickwick Club was made.

(Werlein Memorandum 2–3)

Reinventing Creole carnival prior to and immediately following the Civil War was an improvisation, a repetition with revision, a space for play, in which the homosocial kin, hanging out together at the local drug store, decided to transform their world by building a club house and conspicuously over-spending on party hats and *papier-mâché*.

One strong proof for this assertion resides, I believe, in the privileged role of English literature in the krewes’ early attempts to accumulate cultural capital to assert anglophone pre-eminence. The name “Comus” derives from the stately masque of the same name by John Milton. The first procession of the Mistick Krewe of Comus in 1857 impersonated “The Demon Actors in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.” Another early Comus parade took up Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, and, according to J. Curtis Waldo, in his later *History of the Carnival in New Orleans* (1882), “illustrated in appropriate groupings the principal episode of that delicate and fanciful creation, which, in the centuries that have elapsed since its birth, has lost no beauty or splendor by comparison” (12). Without completely ruling out the possibility that Spenser’s epic romance spoke urgently to the hearts of New Orleans dry-goods merchants, the more likely explanation is that they were claiming kin, performing their intelligence with learned citations. The “Pickwick Club,” of course, quoted Charles Dickens, suggesting its generous openness to the good-hearted members of a motley krewé. The by-laws of the club explain

that it was formed by Comus members “to give continuity to comradeship born under the mask” and to “conceal the secrets of their other identity” (*The Pickwick Club* 3).

That “other identity,” like the ritual staging of Behan’s initiation, mixes menace with mirth. Underneath the veneer of boyish self-invention seethed a deep capacity for violence, soon to be tested: “Most of the membership exchanged billiard cue for the musket and offered their lives for the Southern Cause” (*The Pickwick Club* 4). They returned in bitter defeat to find the city of New Orleans occupied by Federal troops, with blacks and creoles of color soon thereafter seeking important public offices and the reconstructionist Republicans able to remain at least nominally in charge. The response of the club and krewé membership to this state of affairs was a campaign of armed terrorism, culminating in the *coup* of 1874. My research has confirmed in detail what many native New Orleanians generally know as a commonplace: that the officer corps of the White League (and a not insignificant number of its rank and file) formed an interlocking directorship with the secret membership of the exclusive Mardi Gras krewes and men’s clubs, especially Comus-Pickwick. Like the Ku Klux Klan elsewhere in the South, the carnival krewes took advantage of their “comradeship under the mask” to assert the entitlements of their group, most obviously against blacks, but eventually against others with whom they made temporary alliances of convenience: the Crescent City White League had a separate regiment into which Italians were segregated, for instance, and another for the Irish. Unlike the Klan, the krewes have ever since maintained a strict standard of exclusion by caste. By confirming the roster of White Leaguers in Augusto Miceli’s *The Pickwick Club of New Orleans*, privately printed in 1964, with *The Roll of Honor: Roster of the Citizen soldiery Who Saved Louisiana*, compiled in 1877 by carnival historian J. Curtis Waldo, I have confirmed a list of over 120 names of Comus-Pickwickians who took up arms to fight “The Battle of Liberty Place” in 1874.

First on Waldo’s *Roll of Honor* is Major General Fred Nash Ogden, the hemp merchant and member of the Pickwick Club (Miceli Appendix “J”). Ogden was a Confederate veteran, cited for valor at Vicksburg, and the co-author of the “Platform of the Crescent City White League,” which denounced the “stupid Africanization” of Reconstruction, whereby “the negro has proved himself as destitute of common gratitude as of common sense.” Next on the list of heroes is Brigadier General William J. Behan, the wholesale grocer, also a wounded veteran of Gettysburg, whose brother was killed at Antietam on his eighteenth birthday, and whose Van Gennepian rite of passage into Comus and the Pickwick Club has already been cited. Most ominously, however, in terms of the history of American race relations in the twentieth century, was the armed service of a young lawyer in Company E of the Second Regiment, “Louisiana’s Own” (*Roll of Honor* 24): Edward Douglas White, later Justice and ultimately Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of

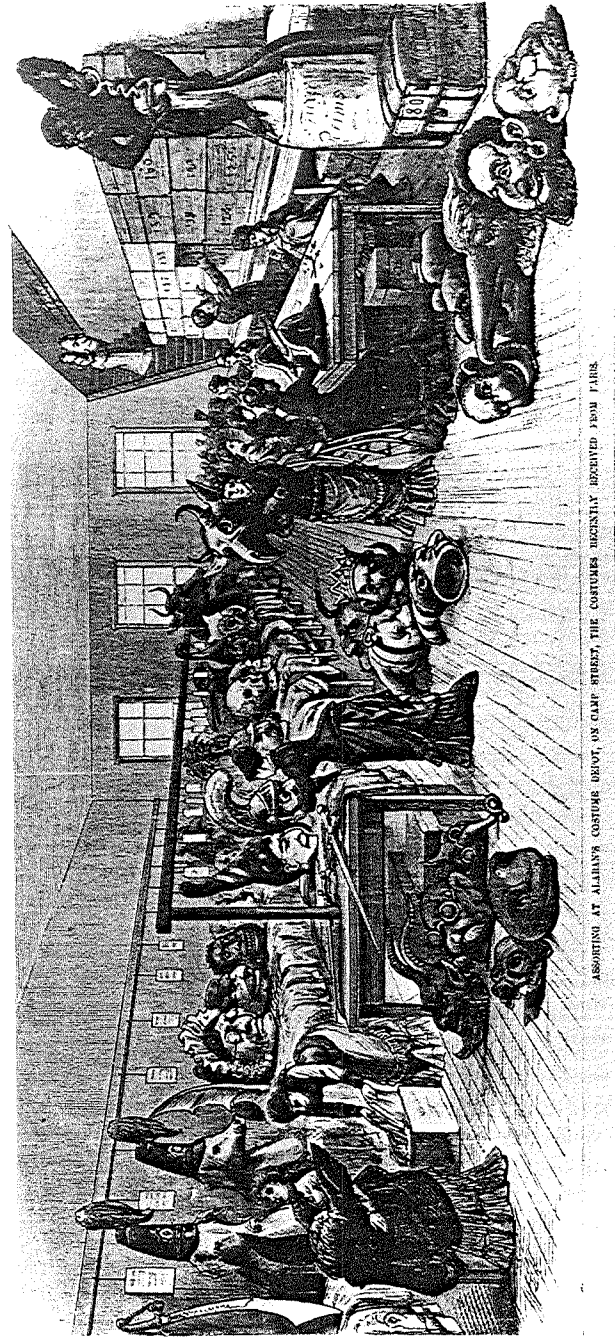


Figure 12.2 Comus parade. "Assorting at Alaban's Costume Depot, on Camp Street, the costumes recently received from Paris," Frank Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper*, March 16, 1878 (The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum/Research Center. 1980.381i)

the United States, who joined the majority opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Justice White was also a member of the Pickwick Club and performed the Mistick Krewe (Miceli Appendix "J").

To historians of cultural performance, the most fascinating phenomenon to emerge from this juncture of *coup* and carnival is the way in which Comus rehearsed the former by improvising the latter. At Mardi Gras in 1873, eighteen months prior to the "The Battle of Liberty Place," the theme for the Krewe of Comus parade and ball was "The Missing Links to Darwin's *Origin of Species*." It presented animal-like caricatures of hated public figures from Reconstruction, such as Ulysses S. Grant as a verminous potato bug or the "Radical" J. R. Pitkin as "The Cunning Fox [carrying a carpetbag] which joins the Coon" (Figure 12.2). This taxonomy, arranged by phyla in a parodic version of "survival of the fittest," culminated in the mock crowning of the "The Gorilla," a caricature of the Negro Lt. Governor of Louisiana, strumming a banjo with hairy paws, as the "Missing Link of Darwin's Eden" (Figure 12.3). In the tradition of carnivalesque inversion, the lowest changed places with the highest, but this "topsy-turvydom" mocked the regime that supposedly had created its own Lords of Misrule by placing black people in positions of power over whites in the first place. The White League's "Platform" denounced Reconstruction as "the most absurd inversion of the relations of race," and its members volunteered to set the State of Louisiana right-side up again by turning it up-side down.

The sense of doubleness provoked by this inversion, however, played itself out in the form of a weird kind of identification through disguise. White carnival during Reconstruction took on the mask of blackness to protest what it saw as the injustice of its postwar abjection and exclusion from power. The Krewe of Momus, for instance, representing a mounted battalion of Moors in blackface, performed such a drama of protest in their street parade for Mardi Gras of 1873: "Trooping down the streets of an American City, between rows of stately modern edifices, came the dusky battalions of the race who could not be conquered, and who fought with blind savagery for things they only prized because the hated Christians desired it. Their swarthy faces and barbaric splendour of their trappings recalled the vanished centuries" (Waldo, *Hand-Book* 60). In the collective memory of both blacks and whites under slavery, the historic license of carnival had provided a locus in which rebellions in the name of Liberty could at least be imagined, if not implemented. In Martin Delany's abolitionist novel, *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859), the threat of a slave revolt flickers amidst the "games, shows, exhibitions, theatrical performances, festivals, masquerade balls, and numerous entertainments and gatherings" on the eve of Mardi Gras in New Orleans: "It was on this account that the Negroes had been allowed such unlimited privileges this evening. Nor were they remiss to the utmost extent of its advantages" (98-9). Delany evokes the memory of the best-organized slave revolt in North American history, the Louisiana rising of 1811, when, during



Figure 12.3 Comus ball. Charles Darwin, the “Sapient Ass” (left) and the “Missing Link” (right), *Scribner's Monthly*, November 1873 (The Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University)

carnival season, a force of over 500 freedom fighters marched on New Orleans under Haitian officers with flags unfurled and drums beating (Hofstadter and Wallace 190). The restoration of behavior that such an adventure inspires reappears through the doublings and inversions of white carnival: the face of the “fittest” behind the black mask of the gorilla representing Darwin’s “Missing Link” certainly belonged to a member of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, perhaps to Brigadier General Behan himself, who was known to have taken a masked role in the parade (Miceli Appendix “H”).

There is no question that the insanity of American racial politics dominated this event, but there also flourished at its heart an invented and symbolic kinship, performed in the rites of fraternal initiation of New Orleanian krewes, performed again in the streets as Mardi Gras parades, rehearsed as acts of homosocial bonding in carnival disguise, and then restored as behavior in storming the gates of the statehouse. In their own words, they forged their bond on the strength of their “superior intelligence.” In their own imagery, they took the risks implicit in the compact of performance, the rite of passage, the admission behind the curtains into social power. In their own lethal festival, they enacted the rites of kinship through violence. Back from

Gettysburg and Vicksburg, but still playing war, these boy-men and their sons and younger brothers occupied New Orleans, reinvented it, and re-enacted it annually. In the expansion of restored behavior to the level of reflexive cultural performance, in the mystifying production of social identity and difference, one initiation ceremony may inquire for thousands, “Are you willing that this stranger be admitted?” – to which an invisible chorus may or may not then answer, “We are.”

### III

On 15 June 1993, the Advisory Committee on Human Relations, which reports to the New Orleans City Council, held a hearing on the disposition of the “Liberty Place Monument.” Erected at the height of Jim Crow and Southern Redemption in the 1890s, the monument lionized the White League and elevated to martyrdom the handful who lost their lives in its cause. In connection with street improvements in 1989, the monument had been removed and placed in storage, where it remained until a lawsuit by “historic preservationists” forced the city reluctantly to re-erect it (Eggler B-1). Contemplating its removal for the second time on the grounds that it represented a “nuisance” and that it honored those who had shot dead a number of city and state policemen, the New Orleans City Council asked its Advisory Committee on Human Relations to render an opinion on memories evoked by the monument and their impact on the city’s “great cosmopolitan population consisting of large numbers of people of every race, color, creed, religion, age, physical condition, national origin and ancestry” (“Scope of the HRC Hearings”). As carnival itself was the subject of a heated integration controversy, the monument became the scene of a number of demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, and confrontations.

As a study in the performance of memory, the hearing of 15 June, which was chaired by Rabbi Edward P. Cohn, provided moments of breath-taking improvisation that coagulated, before the eyes of the onlookers, into law and history. Speaking in support of the preservationist Friends of the Liberty Monument was David Duke, former Klansman and Nazi enthusiast, who celebrated Adolph Hitler’s birthday as recently as 1988 and whose run for the U.S. Senate and then the Louisiana Governorship attracted a majority of the white votes cast in both elections. Duke’s testimony touched only indirectly on the White League and not at all on the carnival krewes, whose members, in any case, have despised white-trash opportunists since the days of John Pope’s drug store. Speaking of what he called “the true meaning of the monument,” Duke cited the battles of Lexington and Concord as the real precedents invoked by the Battle of Liberty Place and its cenotaph: there the patriotic “Minutemen” fought and died for their freedom against the occupying forces of “tyranny.” Removing the Liberty Monument would be tantamount to desecrating statues of Washington and Jefferson, he continued,



which would be defacing public property symbolizing “Liberty” itself, an act with dire consequences. To remove the Monument would be to rewrite history, argued Duke, who denies the Holocaust: “Then we don’t have a civilization any more. We have a jungle.”

The slippage that conjured the “Founding Fathers” out of the self-congratulatory erection honoring silk-stockinged rioters starkly illustrates the convenience of Eurocentric memory, which serves to erase the troubling evidence of intervening improvisations by direct appeal to origins. To Duke this distinction suggested a choice between the alternatives of “civilization” and “jungle.” Carried away by his defense of American civilization against a rising tide of barbarism, he likened the opponents of the monument to “book-burning Nazis.” Rabbi Cohn interrupted the testimony at this point to ask with perfect chairmanly decorum, as if clarifying an obscure phrase for the record, “Nazis, Mr. Duke? Pardon me, but did I hear you say ‘Nazis?’” Duke nodded affirmatively but with apparent confusion; then he continued his eulogy, paraphrasing, without attribution and perhaps accidentally, the “mystic chords of memory” passage from Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address.

A silent witness to the 15 June hearing was city council member-at-large Dorothy Mae Taylor, who was instrumental in framing and passing the 1991 civil rights ordinance that prompted Comus, Momus, and Proteus to end their Mardi Gras parades, even though the intent of council’s legislation was to end segregation, not celebration. Her silence was eloquent. Taylor’s leadership, which was visited by more denunciations and ridicule than support, even from some of the other council members who had voted for the ordinance (Vennman, “Boundary Face-Off” 89–104), was forged in the crucible in New Orleans racial politics in the 1960s (Hirsch and Logsdon 262–319). Taylor’s record in this regard seemed to fall prey to collective amnesia. The 1991 ordinance developed logically from the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, and indeed from the historic argument of fair and equal access to public accommodations. Even before the final and softened version of the ordinance had been made law, however, the krewes of Comus, Momus, and Proteus cancelled their 1992 parades, and many New Orleanians blamed Taylor for trashing carnival tradition. The Mardi Gras festivities of the three krewes continue now only in private as debutante balls behind closed doors (and here and there in the form of some guerrilla-style street parading, lampooning city council members and others).

The society pages of the local paper report on the symbolism and iconography of these festivities, however. In the 1993–4 season, the Harlequins, a youth Mardi Gras affiliate of the Old-Line krewes, staged a most pointed pageant. On the surface, the film *Jurassic Park* seemed to provide a theme for the preliminary training-debut of the Harlequin Queen and the Maids of her Court. Underneath the surface, an explicit restoration of behavior evoked the local creation myths of race and caste:

As the tableau began, several Jurassic species, including the Comusaurus, the Proteadactyl and Momusraptor, were seen meandering through the primeval forests. They were being watched by “modern man,” who was confident that his science, his culture, his civilization, were superior to that of these ancient beasts. Man’s confidence led him to believe that times were changing, that ancient species should die off and be replaced, and that the dinosaurs must go. Darwin’s ghost looked down upon the scene with a wry grin, and the end of the reign of the dinosaurs was proclaimed. But then something went awry. The dinosaurs refused to accept their fate and rose up in rebellion, proclaiming that they too had rights. Modern man was unable to dominate them and in the end, the dinosaurs were left to themselves.

(“Primeval partying” E-3)

On the liminal occasion of a rite of passage that serves to mark acceptance of its initiates into society and announce their availability for exchange within its patriarchal kinship network, the soon-to-be marriageable daughters of the krewes performed a most precise embodiment of selective cultural memory. The Darwinian anxiety about being replaced by another “species” directly quotes the Mistick Krewe of Comus 1873 parade and grand tableau: “The Missing Links to Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.” The “rebellion” of the dinosaurs, justified by a proclamation of their “rights,” makes a clear reference to the coup of 1874 and its enactment of “the survival of the fittest” at the expense of the racially mixed Kellogg government.

There are no trivial rituals. In the service of memory, or in its betrayal, performances have powerful, if often unpredictable consequences. Knowing nothing of the Mistick Krewe of Comus Mardi Gras parade and ball of 1873, historians of constitutional law stress the importance of the almost magical sway of “Social Darwinism” over the Supreme Court of the United States at the turn of the century (Highshaw 64–5), particularly in the opinions rendered by Justice Edward Douglas White, Pickwickian, formerly Private White, Company E, Crescent City White League. Many other influences, no doubt, shaped the Justice White’s reasoning in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, but probably none more exhilarating to one who regarded himself as speaking for the “fittest” than the overthrow of Reconstruction in Louisiana by Carnival in New Orleans.

Of the persistence of memory about “The Battle of Liberty Place” among the descendants of the White Leaguers, historian Lawrence N. Powell has written: “For decades to come, their sons and grandsons – even granddaughters – felt compelled to measure themselves against the legend born that humid September afternoon” (Powell B-7). From the intense dialogue between the illusion of rote repetition, which erases the memory of improvisation, and repetition with revision, which foregrounds it, performance studies gets a critical edge. The future of ritual, however, remains uncertain and deeply contested. As of this writing, the Liberty Monument still stands

in New Orleans, a shrine not only to the Pyrrhic re-enactment of "comradeship born under the mask," but also to the implacable erasure of improvisation that occurs when memory turns to stone.

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## FORMS OF APPEARANCE OF VALUE

Homer Plessy and the politics of privacy

Amy Robinson

In an academic milieu where identity and identity politics remain at the forefront of a battle over legitimate critical and/or political acts, the subject of passing has received increasing attention. But too often this attention claims the performative logic of passing as a troubling solution to the problem of identity. In this formulation, the pass reiterates the process of identity formation itself; the passer's performance chronicles the becoming of a self that cannot, by definition, lay claim to a fiction of natural essence. Violating the sturdy boundaries of ontology, the passer throws the logic of social hierarchies into disarray. While I am sympathetic to this reading, it's important to note that the logic of performativity cannot "solve" the problem of institutional subversion or recuperation. Rather, the field of performance studies brings with it the wisdom of contingent identities that, almost by virtue of this contingency, recommend the taking up of positions on necessarily unstable ground.

I would suggest, therefore, that the seemingly endless critical debates about performance that Eve Sedgwick has characterized as concluding with the refrain, "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic,"<sup>1</sup> are frankly less interesting and more self-indulgent than the contentious politics of identity that continue to inform daily practice. In contrast to those who would claim the pass as a liberating rejection of natural essence — an appealing analytic structure of indeterminacy — this essay poses the proximate relation between passing and appropriation as a necessary starting-point of investigation, rather than as a culminating riposte. As a strategy of entrance into a field of representation, the social practice of passing is thoroughly invested in the logic of the system it attempts to subvert. As such, the subject of passing has much to teach us about the possibilities and problematics of resistance in a performative culture. While it is far from my purpose to recommend passing as a political strategy, the continued relevance of the subject of passing lies precisely in its thoroughgoing complicity with those institutions that we daily negotiate in an ongoing attempt to imagine a political context in which structural change is not merely