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“Resilient City”? The Double Face of the 2006 Mardi Gras Celebrations in New Orleans

AURÉLIE GODET

Abstracts

English Français

Six months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, the residents of New Orleans decided to follow the tradition and organize a scaled-down Mardi Gras despite the perception that the city was still inundated with water. This article first analyses the 2006 carnival parades as the expression of a desire for “normality” as well as an attempt to memorialize Katrina. It then moves on to a discussion of the extent to which such a narrative of resilience was in fact devised and promoted by city officials and public editors in order to address various concerns, such as the decline of the tourism industry, divisions over the way reconstruction should happen, or the unflattering portrayal of the Crescent City in national and international venues. Finally, it examines how the combination of conservatism and transgression that characterized Mardi Gras discourse in 2006 echoes past debates on the propriety of carnival, making post-Katrina celebrations less an exception to the rule than an illustration of the double face of New Orleans Mardi Gras and of the city itself.

Six mois après le passage de l'ouragan Katrina et au terme d'une intense controverse, le conseil municipal de la Nouvelle-Orléans a finalement décidé de respecter la tradition en autorisant le défilé des principales organisations festives de la ville. Cet article analyse dans un premier temps le carnaval de l'année 2006 comme l'expression simultanée d'un désir de « normalité » et d'une mise en mémoire de la catastrophe. Il rappelle ensuite la façon dont le discours de résilience formulé par les participants entre janvier et mars 2006 a été construit et promu par les autorités et les éditorialistes locaux afin de répondre à trois besoins : celui d'enrayer le déclin de l'industrie du tourisme, de limiter les désaccords

autour du projet de reconstruction de la ville et de contrer le portrait peu flatteur de la ville brossé par les médias nationaux et internationaux. Enfin, cet article établit un parallèle entre le discours tout à la fois satirique et conservateur du carnaval en 2006 et les débats qui ont scandé l'histoire du carnaval depuis le dix-neuvième siècle. Il apparaît alors que ce qui paraissait être une exception reflète en réalité le double visage de Mardi Gras et, plus largement, de la Nouvelle-Orléans.

Index terms

Mots-clés : La Nouvelle-Orléans, Katrina, résilience, carnaval, mémoire, satire, ritualisation

Keywords : New Orleans, Katrina, resilience, Mardi Gras, memory, satire, ritualization

Full text

- 1 The Carnival season in New Orleans consists of a series of costumed float parades, street gatherings, and elaborate balls that start on January 6 (the feast of the Epiphany) and culminate on Mardi Gras day, the day before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. It has often been portrayed as a gauge of the city's recovery efforts following disasters, including wars or epidemics (Abrahams; Mitchell).
- 2 In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a debate over the propriety of holding Mardi Gras celebrations in 2006 set the local media ablaze. Government and tourism industry officials argued that Mardi Gras would “boost the local economy and signify to the nation that New Orleans was once again open for business” (Williams 1). Other local public figures disagreed, concerned with how the rest of the nation would view New Orleans's swift revival of Carnival or thinking Carnival inappropriate for a city that had just lost 1,464 of its residents. “How pathetic and out of touch we will appear to those who tune in to witness this desperate and exhausting charade,” warned NOLA rabbi Edward Paul Cohn (Cohn D7). Ernest Johnson, the then-president of Louisiana's branch of the NAACP, added that having Carnival would send the “wrong message” (Burdeau). In the end, despite the perception that New Orleans was still inundated with water, the decision was made to follow the tradition and organize a scaled-down Mardi Gras.
- 3 This article first analyses the 2006 celebrations as the expression of a desire for “normality” as well as an attempt to memorialize Katrina. It then moves on to a discussion of the extent to which such a “narrative of resilience” (Vale and Campanella) was in fact devised and promoted by city officials and public editors in order to address various concerns, such as the decline of the tourism industry, divisions over the way reconstruction should happen, or the unflattering portrayal of NOLA in national and international venues. Finally, it examines how the combination of conservatism and transgression that characterized Mardi Gras discourse in 2006 echoed past debates over the propriety of carnival, making post-Katrina celebrations less an exception to the rule than an illustration of the double face of New Orleans Mardi Gras, and of the city itself.
- 4 Our avowed hope is that, by combining a variety of critical perspectives drawn from sociology, media studies, performance studies, urban studies, and history (with a particular focus on such concepts as “resilience,” “satire,” and “ritualization”), the present text will help improve our understanding of New Orleans as a city as well as of how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power operating through social phenomena.

1. Mardi Gras 2006 as the Apex of the “New Normal”

- 5 In one of *Treme*'s earliest episodes, one of the characters created by TV writers David Simon and Eric Overmyer – a Tulane English professor named Creighton Bernette – muses that the 2006 Mardi Gras celebrations were understated, yet cheerful, “the same, yet not the same” (Season 01 Episode 08). This naturally calls to mind the term which *Times-Picayune* journalist Chris Rose coined to describe the awkward space old signs of normalcy occupied in disaster-stricken New Orleans: the “New Normal” (Rose 17).¹

1.1. Fun as Usual?

- 6 By all appearances, the 2006 carnival season, which also marked the 150th anniversary of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, was as lively as ever. In typical fashion, it was punctuated by parades, banquets and balls, and other social activities organized by “krewes.” The oldest of them, the Mystik Krewe of Comus – founded in 1856 by six Anglo-American New Orleans businessmen – held its traditional “bal masque” across Canal Street on February 28, 2006. The ball was followed by a formal invitation from Comus Royalty to another krewe called “Rex,” and the two courts joined later for a common celebration of Mardi Gras. As usual, parades included floats, costumed riders, flambeaux carriers, marching bands, and “throws” – either colorful beaded necklaces, doubloons (toy coins with the krewe's logo imprinted on both sides), plastic cups, or stuffed animals.
- 7 The Krewe du Vieux was the first to march post-Katrina and followed its traditional route through Marigny and the French Quarter, two weekends before Mardi Gras, on February 11. On February 18 and 19, one week before Mardi Gras, seven parades (Pontchartrain, Pygmalion, Sparta, Pegasus, Carrollton, King Arthur, Bards) took place, and then parades followed daily from Thursday night through Mardi Gras Day. On February 26, revelers on St. Charles Avenue got to acclaim two perennial favorites, the so-called “super krewes” of Bacchus and Endymion, which were parading consecutively. From elaborate lighted floats, King Bacchus XXVIII (Michael Keaton) and masked riders tossed strings of beads to outstretched hands.
- 8 On Mardi Gras Day, February 28, 2006, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the oldest (est. 1916), predominantly black Mardi Gras krewe, led the procession with the theme “Zulu, Leading the Way Back Home.” Again, riders threw beads to eager parade goers as well as Zulu's much-coveted gifts to favored onlookers: gilded coconut shells.
- 9 Outside of the official schedule, continuing a tradition that dates back to the days of slavery, when Native Americans supposedly sheltered runaway slaves (Becker; Kinser; Lipsitz), many Mardi Gras Indian tribes (i.e, groups of Black New Orleanians who dress up for carnival in elaborate, colorful costumes made from beads and feathers), took to the streets on Mardi Gras Day. Divided into uptown and downtown tribes, they donned suits carefully stitched by hand over the last six months. Darryl Montana, Big Chief of Yellow Pocahontas and son of the legendary Allison “Tootie” Montana – the Chief of Chiefs who had died just before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast –, decided not to don a costume. But Otto Dejean, chief of the Hard Head Hunters – who would later play Big Chief Albert Lambreaux's “Spyboy” in David Simon and Eric Overmyer's *Treme* – led his tribe on an emotional march through the ruined 7th Ward. Big Chief Donald Harrison,

Jr., the head of the tribe known as the Congo Nation Afro-New Orleans Cultural Group since 1999, emerged in a costume so large it barely fit through the door, and so elaborate that it took one’s breath away.²

10 Meanwhile, the usual drunks and flashers on Bourbon Street showed that tourists were still in town to trade “boobs for beads” in the French Quarter, the 78-square-block area that extends along the Mississippi River from Canal Street to Esplanade Avenue and back from the Mississippi River to Rampart Street.³

1.2. The Indelible Presence of Katrina

11 Despite the above-mentioned evidence, Mardi Gras celebrations did not ignore the reality of the devastation caused by Katrina. Many aspects of the 2006 carnival season were unusual, starting with the length of the celebrations.

12 The City of New Orleans’ municipal code prohibits corporate sponsorship of Carnival parades and advertising. There is no such thing, therefore, as an official Mardi Gras product or sponsor. Police protection and cleanup, though, are a local government responsibility. Normally, the city spends more than \$4.5 million on police overtime, fire protection, and sanitation (Gotham “Tourism from Above and Below” 314). Following Hurricane Katrina, however, New Orleans’s budget situation was so dire that the city decided to break the law and offer four companies the opportunity to become the first corporate sponsors of Mardi Gras (Mowbray). National media buying club MediaBuys.com was selected by the city to locate sponsors in a 30-day window. There was concern that without this drastic step the city government would lack funds to provide basic services for the parades. Efforts to find a \$2 million corporate sponsor to pay for police protection and cleanup failed, however. Glad Products was the only company to step forward, offering 100,000 bin liners and an unspecified six-figure donation to lessen expenses associated with the city’s production of the revel (Rivlin). Ultimately, the New Orleans City Council unanimously voted to dig into its already busted budget to foot the bill, on condition that the number of parades, routes, and participants be limited to keep the cost of police overtime down to just over a million (PBS).

13 The main consequence was that Mardi Gras season was abbreviated and included only eight days of parades rolling down St. Charles Avenue toward the French Quarter instead of the usual twelve prior to Mardi Gras day. Another consequence was that every parade had to use the same route and that the Zulus were prohibited from rolling their floats as far as they usually do on Mardi Gras Day – past the Lafitte housing projects (which no one had been allowed to move back into since the storm) and Dooky Chase restaurant all the way to their clubhouse on Broad Street, in the Treme-Lafitte neighborhood.

14 Had the City Council been able to pay for a full-scale Mardi Gras season, the celebrations would still have been more subdued. Krewe membership numbers had fallen by over 27% after Katrina, due to hurricane-related death and the Katrina diaspora (Deloughery). In the Zulu krewe alone, 10 people had died; 80% of the rest had lost their homes (Bates). A diaspora of Zulus still spread across America, especially in Southern metropolitan areas such as Houston, Baton Rouge, Dallas-Fort Worth, and Atlanta (Zaninetti). A combination of higher rents, housing shortage, and the evaporation of the tourism industry made it impossible for many musicians and krewe members to return (Sparks). In January, only a minority had come back to the affected areas to clean up, rebuild, and join in the annual tradition. Even though new members were brought in to fill in for members dispersed by Katrina, and Zulu dancers travelled from South Africa for the first time to lend their support to the krewe (Alexander), there were less hands

to work on the parades. Consequently, from 33 in 2003, 2004, and 2005, the number of parading krewe went to 27 krewe in 2006, with an average of 19.22 floats per krewe – against 22.21 usually, i.e a 26% decrease (Deloughery).

15 The number of visitors declined too. Mardi Gras usually draws an estimated 1 million tourists on a 2-week period. In 2006, that number fell to 700,000 (Barry). The Jazz Fest that followed two months later drew 350,000 people, down from 500,000 in 2004 (Deloughery). These figures naturally translated into a fall in revenue (Williams; Weiss).

Year	Attendance over the last week	Economic impact
2005 (Pre-Katrina)	1,000,000 +	\$250 million
2006	700,000	\$150 million?
2007	800,000	\$200 million
2011	1,000,000 +	\$300 million

16 Mardi Gras was not just smaller that year, it was also by all accounts more local and “whiter” (among visitors, white young urban reconstruction professionals from Houston, attracted by the favorable circumstances of reconstruction, featured prominently). The changing demographics of the Mardi Gras crowds, which in November 2007 would translate into the first white majority on the NOLA City Council in over two decades, prompted Mayor Ray Nagin to make an offhand remark on Martin Luther King Day about the necessity for NOLA to become a “chocolate city once again” (Nagin), fuelling the fire of racial debate and inspiring the Krewe d’Etat a float based on Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

1.3. An Unusual Blend of Satire and Gravity

17 Historically, carnival has provided an opportunity for self-expression, group identity, and satire – here defined as an artistic genre in which people’s vices or shortcomings are held up to ridicule, often with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations, government or society itself, into improvement. As such, it has long been a platform to send messages and draw attention to particular social, political, and economic issues (Agier; Bakhtin; Burton; Cohen; DaMatta; Eagleton; Kinser; Scott; Stallybrass & White). For 2006, a huge target presented itself to “Mardigradians”⁴: incompetence at every level of government (local, state, and federal).

18 Katrina thus inspired the sixteen-year-old Knights of Chaos (KOC) a parade entitled “Hades – A Dream of Chaos,” that echoed a 1877 Krewe of Momus parade entitled “Hades, a Dream of Momus.”⁵ Satirizing “Reconstruction II,” the floats skewered “the headless state,” “the pigs of patronage” (no-show insurance agents), “the corpse of engineers” (the US Army Corps of Engineers), the “ministers of misinformation” (media talking heads), the “Department of Homeland Insecurity,” as well as looters who stole designer clothes. The most dramatic float, “The Inferno,” showed governor Kathleen Blanco, mayor Ray

Nagin and former FEMA Deputy Director Michael Brown as “infernal cooks brewing a giant cauldron of human gumbo in the Superdome as members of Congress forced people into the boiling pot with pitchforks, and a leering George W. Bush presided over the whole scene as the horned Satan incarnate” (Swenson 54). The Krewe du Vieux, one of the newer (established 1987) and more satiric organizations, also chose a Katrina theme, “C’est LeVee,” referencing levee failures in the wake of the storm; as they paraded, they handed out fake FEMA checks. With a float named “Buy us back, Chirac,” the krewe of PAN (one of the Krewe du Vieux’s 17 sub-krewes) offered a plea for France (then presided by Jacques Chirac) to reverse the Louisiana Purchase as a way to address U.S. government concerns about the tremendous cost of rebuilding New Orleans.

19 Many costumes voiced paraders’ outrage with social injustice by drawing attention to government neglect that contributed to the weak levee system and later to the poor living conditions at many storm shelters and FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs). Some costumers in the Faubourg Marigny neighborhood dressed as giant fleur-de-lis, a traditional symbol of New Orleans, with screws stuck through them, signifying the sentiment that the city had been “screwed” by the federal government; others on Bourbon Street wore sunglasses and carried canes in order to impersonate blind levee inspectors. One woman was dressed in a Marie-Antoinette costume proclaiming “Let them eat MRE’s” (the “meals-ready-to-eat” that the military distributed to residents post-Katrina). Others dressed as “Brownies” to embody George W. Bush’s nickname for Michael Brown, the FEMA director during the Katrina crisis. They were accompanied by a woman portraying “a stiff Margarita” – a reference to Brown’s notorious email sent during the hurricane expressing his hope for just that drink (Stevenson). Other costumers dressed as UPS deliverymen wearing the slogan “What did Brown DO for you today?”⁶

20 While satire prevailed, participants occasionally struck a deeper note. Ray Nagin on horseback thus paid homage to Lieutenant General Russel L. Honoré, the army officer in charge of the military relief for areas hit by Katrina. Zulu armed service veterans displayed memorial ribbons at their club’s 2006 parade. Each ribbon represented a Zulu brother who had perished either as a direct result of havoc unleashed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina or from other causes during the six months that elapsed between the storm and Mardi Gras. The Carrollton Krewe (the fifth oldest Carnival parading organization, behind Comus, Rex, Proteus, and Zulu), based its entire parade around the theme “Blue Roof Blues,” a reference to the blue tarps still on top of damaged rooftops all over the city. While blue tarp roofs and FEMA trailers were very popular costumes among paraders, people were also dressed as levees, immobilized buses, X-codes (symbols used by search-and-rescue teams to mark searched property in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans), Home Depot workers, maggots and maggot-infested refrigerators. Some wrapped duct tape around themselves to symbolize water lines, which still mark many of the city’s flooded homes. To honor the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the all-female Krewe of Muses (founded in 2000), closed their parade with an empty float evoking the riderless horse that follows the caisson carrying the casket in a funeral procession. Called Mnemosyne after the mother of the Muses and the goddess of memory, it was dominated by a huge head prop of a beautiful woman with large tears rolling down her face and said, “We celebrate life, we mourn the past, we shall never forget.”

21 It would be false, therefore, to say that 2006 Mardi Gras celebrations ignored reality. The performative nature of NOLA culture allowed Mardi Gras to document the devastation and to keep the casualties of Katrina alive in an immediate and visceral fashion. In other words, observing carnival was one of the

ways New Orleanians memorialized Katrina and talked about/to the world.

2. The Power of “Organized Resilience”

22 Most New Orleanians interviewed during the 2006 Carnival season described it as “a survival mechanism,” “an act of resistance” against invisibility, “an empowering gesture” for their community (Price). Sociologists concurred, saying for example that, “by allowing [residents] to publicly voice their sense of injustice and share their experiences of trauma and disaster with others,” Mardi Gras celebrations allowed them to “maintain a sense of agency in a situation in which they had little power” (Barber).

23 While this is undeniably true, I think it is also necessary to realize the extent to which such a “spirit of resilience”⁷ was in fact engineered by city officials and public editors in order to placate national public opinion – which was then heavily prejudiced against New Orleans –, attract tourists back to NOLA, and ultimately reorder the city’s ruptured narrative.

2.1. Official Concerns in the Wake of Katrina

24 New Orleans’s reputation for immorality and corruption dates back to the colonial period. By the 19th century, the city began to cultivate that image outside Louisiana to encourage tourism. Katrina demonstrated the danger of such a strategy, especially at a time when religious conservatism and political conservatism were so strong nationally. In the wake of the hurricane, New Orleans faced powerful opponents, ranging from Christian broadcasters who saw the storm as God’s judgment on a sinful city to “politicians who condemned the city’s freewheeling lifestyle and history of political corruption” (Sparks). Dennis Hastert, the Republican Speaker of the House, even questioned the wisdom of strengthening the levee system of a city that lies 10 feet below sea level (Babington). Naturally, the wounded city’s officials became anxious to silence such criticisms and promote a more positive image of New Orleans in the national media.

25 Rebuilding the economy became a major concern too. Until Katrina, about 30% of the City of NOLA’s annual operating budget, 9.4% of the Louisiana workforce, and 3.8% of gross state product had been directly attributable to expenditures in travel and tourism (Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism 2004). With 80% of the city flooded, 200,000 Gulf Coast homes destroyed, and about 400,000 people displaced, how could New Orleans hope to attract visitors in 2006? (Gotham “(Re)Branding the Big Easy”)

26 The third main concern for public officials’ post-Katrina was to bridge the racial divide and preserve the temporary feeling of unity that trauma and a common enemy (the federal government, national public opinion, the national media) had created. Divisions among New Orleanians over the way reconstruction should happen, in particular, needed to be silenced. To reorder the city’s ruptured narrative, city officials needed to make sense of the disaster and maintain control over the narrative being told about rebuilding.

27 The way city elites addressed all of those concerns was to weave a narrative of resilience in public speeches, public relations material, and newspaper editorials between August 29, 2005 and the start of the 2006 Carnival season.

2.2. “Resilience” as the new motto for post-Katrina New Orleans

28 Narratives of resilience are generally described as constructed collective voices that arrange events of drastic urban change, in this case resulting from disaster, and expose a longing to render tragedy in uplifting terms. According to Lawrence J. Vale and Thomas J. Campanella, editors of an excellent collection of essays entitled *The Resilient City*, “urban resilience is an interpretive framework proposed by local and national leaders and shaped and accepted by citizens in the wake of a disaster” (Vale and Campanella 353). This definition is of particular interest to us in that it identifies resilience as one among many interpretive frameworks employed to do the work of urban reconstruction in the name of dominating social, political, and economic systems. It also emphasizes the need for people to accept and shape the plans and actions of their political leaders if that process of reconstruction is to happen.

29 By shifting focus from economic, political, and ideological institutions to the community and individual actors, Chris Rose’s *Times-Picayune* editorials from August 29, 2005 to February 29, 2006 clearly testify to this acceptance of the dominant narrative. Rose offered the stories of New Orleanians actively engaged in being New Orleanian to show his audience the essential strength of their fellow citizens:

In a strange way, life just goes on for the remaining. In the dark and fetid Winn-Dixie on Tchoupitoulas, and old woman I passed in the pet food aisle was wearing a house frock and puffy slippers and she just looked at me as she pushed her cart by and said: ‘How you doin’, baby?’... Like it’s just another afternoon making groceries (Rose 13).

30 Narrators such as Rose presented these people as representatives of the natural resilience of New Orleanians, who dealt with disaster by pushing through hardship. This reality was on display in another unlikely place, the reopening of a strip club on Bourbon Street. “Gaudiness, flesh, neon and bad recorded music have returned to one small outpost on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, and if that’s not one small step towards normalcy – at least as that term is defined in the *Big Uneasy* – then I don’t know what is” (Rose 28).

31 This narrative of resilience also informed the way New Orleans advertised itself on its official website in 2005-2006. In contrast to the “Louisiana is food” metaphors prominent in the period before Hurricane Katrina, the metaphor found on most official New Orleans travel websites following Katrina was “New Orleans is a phoenix/New Orleans is reborn” (Gotham “(Re)Branding the Big Easy”: 835–836).⁸ While post-Katrina marketing continued to appeal to New Orleans’s relaxing, celebratory, party atmosphere, it also appealed for assistance to recover. “Many of you have asked how you can help New Orleans. First, visit New Orleans,” the NewOrleansOnline website insisted for instance.⁹ The use of the American flag addressed Louisiana’s position as one among fifty states. The physical, urban destruction might be Louisiana’s to face, but as part of the USA, the state was asking the nation for help. The call to social action, the participation in tourism and pilgrimage, was portrayed as a patriotic deed. Here lay the essential ambiguity of this resilience narrative: it issued a call for help amidst an affirmation of life.

2.3. How did Mardi Gras fit the narrative of

urban resilience?

32 Mardi Gras quickly became the centerpiece of the resilience narrative devised and propagated by political elites with the help of the local media. “Fat Tuesday” celebrations were ceaselessly promoted as a great unifier for the community of New Orleanians. By memorializing Katrina instead of ignoring it, officials and columnists all argued, Mardi Gras would help mend the gap between struggling displaced citizens and the celebrating citizens already returned. A *Gambit Weekly* editorial suggested:

There will be Mardi Gras Indians struggling to maintain their culture. There will be rerouted parades, smaller krewes, curious visitors, hopeful investors, homeless parade-goers, evicted hotel dwellers, returning citizens, activist groups, awestruck relief workers and contractors, film crews of all stripes, moist-eyed historians, fundraising efforts... the list goes on and on. Surely, we can all move past the obvious and tell the fascinating stories that will come from the most anticipated Carnival season in recent memory (*Gambit Weekly* c).

33 Mardi Gras was also described as a venue for expressing the intangible “spirit” of NOLA, “a declaration of faith in ourselves, our culture, and our spirit” (*Gambit Weekly* a). As such, it was celebrated as a spiritual, sacred event, filled with meaning derived from the last six months.

34 Above all, Mardi Gras was conceived of as “a shot in the arm” for the economy. As the primary cultural event of the city, Mardi Gras was not just about uplifting the spirits of the community, it was seen as a way to bring money and “bolster [the city’s] flagging economy” (*Gambit Weekly* b). A logo that appeared in early 2006 on the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation website attempted to attract tourists (back) to Louisiana by incorporating the Mardi Gras theme and by drawing on the pre-Katrina theme of “open all year.” “New Orleans” was presented in uppercase, uneven, playful font sitting above the informally written phrase “happenin’ every day” which, itself, was presented in smaller, lowercase font. The second “N” in “New Orleans” shared its right-most stroke with the stick handle of a Mardi Gras mask, the kind a reveler might wear when participating in the festivities (Hallett 53).¹⁰ The logo paid tribute, through the inclusion of the mask, to the city’s Mardi Gras identity, and, in the process, reinforced the message that NOLA continued to function as a destination for tourists.

35 This emphasis on the economic impact of Mardi Gras was also a way to dismiss national representations of New Orleans as a “drain on federal coffers” and as a city that never contributed to the economic vitality of the country. Actually, Mardi Gras celebrations were “theatre” (from the Greek *theatron*, a place to see), an opportunity to address a national audience and show what was still right with the city. It was meant as an antidote to negative media coverage in national venues, a resistant voice to the silence of a nation that seemed to have resigned itself to what was happening in one of its greatest cities.

36 Unsurprisingly perhaps, New York was the place where NOLA’s call for recognition was heard the best. “The City That Never Sleeps,” also portrayed as “resilient” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, paid tribute to “the City that Care Forgot” by lighting up the Empire State Building in the colors of the official Mardi Gras flag: green, gold, and purple (BBC).¹¹

37 All in all, official 2006 Mardi Gras celebrations were designed as an extreme version of capitalism’s usual process of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter), helping transform the new (a natural/human disaster) into the known, thus creating an “illusion of order” (Rozario 30) that sustained dominant representations of power and undermined oppositional ones.

2.4. Did satire threaten the resilience paradigm?

- 38 The satirical, antigovernmental discourse of many Mardi Gras paraders may seem to contradict our idea that resilience was a top-down strategy devised by public editorialists and politicians. But in fact, satire never threatened the resilience narrative in the sense that Mardi Gras parades never became a forum for assigning blame in a rational, verifiable manner. Saying that levee inspectors had failed, that Brown and FEMA had failed too, that politicians were corrupt, and that bureaucrats were lazy did not prevent Louisianians from continuing to tolerate widespread corruption and inefficiency after Katrina (Kushner).¹² Mardi Gras 2006 provided a chance to mock and even to grieve, but it hardly provided a platform to discuss solutions. It actually favored a peculiar brand of fatalism; problems were to be endured, not solved.
- 39 Due to this combination of passivity and resistance in the face of destruction, blame-gaming and nose-thumbing at fate, we think it is fair to portray Mardi Gras 2006 as a socially and economically productive form of denial. This could actually be said of Mardi Gras in general.

3. Conservatism vs. defiance: the double face of New Orleans Mardi Gras

3.1. Social conservatism vs. social transgression

- 40 As noted by Randy Sparks, “carnival has always had a double face – symbolized by the masks of comedy and tragedy” (Sparks). Significant parts of the festivities are still controlled by the city’s (mostly white) establishment – the elite, secretive krewes which also serve as debutante societies, and the private clubs (such as Zulu or the Bunch Club) that are controlled by the rich and well-connected. But Mardi Gras also offers revelers release from oppression, a momentary state of “topsy-turvydom” in which the common people become powerful and the powerful people become ridiculous (Bakhtin; Girard). From this perspective, playful transgression becomes a publicly enacted dream of escape from social problems and contributes, even momentarily, to the subversion of the dominant orders. The fact is that Mardi Gras has often allowed disenfranchised groups to resist subordination. The Mardi Gras Indians emerged in the early 19th century as a way to resist racial objectification (Kinser). They drew parallels between the experiences of African-Americans and American Indians. One may also think of the open parading of prostitutes, homosexuals, and drag queens lampooning the sexual order imposed by the city elite (Vaz).

3.2. Fatalism vs. nose-thumbing

- 41 Constantly living under the Damoclean sword of floods and hurricanes, cholera and yellow fever,¹³ New Orleans realized almost from the moment of its founding

nearly 300 years ago that death was inevitable.

42 Faced with this inescapable reality, NOLA residents have reacted in two opposite ways. They have accepted death as a part of life by embracing fatalism. New Orleans’s famous/notorious love of music, food, drink, and pleasure is rooted, not in optimism, but in this very fatalism. But they have also defied death by embracing the sort of existential triumph that 19th-century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche attempted to codify in less joyous terms. The laughing defiance of Mardi Gras in New Orleans is “the ritualization of that nose-thumbing at fate” (Ringle).

43 The same finger-at-fate defiance lies, of course, at the heart of tango, flamenco, and of another American anthem of human resilience-amid-pain, the blues. What is remarkable about Mardi Gras in New Orleans is the extent to which the entire city has institutionalized this defiant laughter, so that every class, race, and condition shares it. Nothing signals that more than the climax of Mardi Gras, when Comus, the symbolic king of New Orleans’s vestigial family aristocracy, and Rex, the king of the people, ceremonially come together at the end of their krewes’ elaborate balls at New Orleans Municipal Auditorium. Carnival is not just about having fun. It is about reminding people that good times are a precious part of life, not to be traded for a fleeting illusion of power or significance.

3.3. A (Hi)story of Confrontation

44 The two dichotomies described above have made Mardi Gras a continual source of division and confrontation in New Orleans.

45 During the 1850s, the city council passed ordinances designed to rein in traditional Carnival, arguing that it was no longer in sync with modern times. During the Civil War, the holiday was observed, contrary to what many Americans think, but it was viewed as “the holiday of the disreputable” (Mitchell). In 1875 Mardi Gras became a legal holiday in Louisiana, and it continued to expand. In 1879, in the wake of yellow fever, many carnival organizations refused to celebrate, but the Krewe of Rex decided to parade, arguing that the arrival of Rex in New Orleans would “dispel the gloom” of the epidemic and attract tourists. In protest, the Republican newspaper *The New Orleans Louisianian* wrote: “We are about to get supreme contempt as a silly people, or a tender pity as madmen who know better” (Mitchell 91).

46 After the tragedy of World War I, some again suggested that the carnival spirit was gone and Mardi Gras was cancelled for two years. Prohibition also dampened festivities, but after its repeal, celebrations were back in full swing. As a part of his general campaign against New Orleans, Huey Long launched a major cleanup campaign that put the city back in the national headlines. *Vanity Fair*, for instance, proclaimed New Orleans a “Wicked City” (Long).

47 World War II again interrupted the celebration, but once peace was restored, it gained wider national attention and a celebrity following, thus confirming historian Robert Tallant’s prediction: “If there is any world left in which human beings still laugh and still, even on rare occasions, have fun, there will be a Mardi Gras” (Tallant x). In 1949, Zulu became the first krewe to choose a celebrity as its king, native musician Louis Armstrong. The practice became commonplace by the late 1960s with the emergence of larger, more open “super-krewes,” which staged more lavish parades with national celebrities on board, and Mardi Gras carnival earned its reputation as “the greatest free show on earth” (Dufour).

48 In the 1960s, the United Clubs (African-American social clubs) and the NAACP urged a boycott of Carnival in response to Louisiana’s opposition to school

desegregation. In December 1991, the New Orleans City Council passed a civil rights ordinance which sought to integrate the “Old Line” carnival organizations by race and gender, leading the all-white, all-male krewes of Comus and Momus to cease their public parades and to hold private balls instead. By the end of the 1990s, though, Mardi Gras attracted millions of tourists, national and international reporters, and brought \$1 billion into the local economy. Much of the media coverage focused on the rowdier aspects of the festival and helped fuel such behavior.

49 What this brief historical overview shows is that argument over the propriety of carnival observance is itself a carnival tradition; and that this tradition has only rarely threatened carnival itself. In fact, the question in 2006 never really was whether to hold Mardi Gras. The decision was not in the hands of the city government, newspaper editors, or the business community. Certainly the city could have withheld the permits necessary to hold a parade. That would have cancelled “organized carnival.” But, while floats may define Carnival for some people, carnival itself remains a folk festival. The last time the city of New Orleans officially cancelled Carnival because of a police strike (1979), no parades rolled and most tourists stayed home, but the people of NOLA still took to the streets in masks and costumes.

50 Contrary to popular representation, therefore, the story of fatalism and resilience that was advertised in 2006 was anything but exceptional, and was actually shaped by decades of conflict over the meaning of Mardi Gras for the city of New Orleans.

Conclusion

51 So, what do the 2006 Mardi Gras Celebrations tell us about New Orleans in the end? That one cannot hope to understand “the big Easy” by portraying it merely as a “resilient city.” Ever since the 19th century, its history has been one of resistance and change. Ever since the 19th century, it has stood apart from the rest of the U.S. while insisting on its integration to the national economy and forging links with the rest of the world.¹⁴ Ever since the 19th century, it has advertised its supposed local “joie de vivre” (epitomized through its motto “Laissez les bons temps rouler”) while also satirizing its notoriously corrupt or inefficient leaders.

52 “Resilience” primarily refers to the ability for an object to return to its original form, position, etc. after being compressed or stretched. The problem with applying that concept to New Orleans is that the city never had a clear shape to begin with. It is, essentially, a volatile city.

53 Though Mardi Gras has long been a source of civic identity for New Orleanians, the 2006 Mardi Gras celebrations also remind us that this identity is constantly being redefined by the different urban actors involved in its planning. Mardi Gras is ultimately a mirror of the city’s own struggle for continued existence.

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Notes

1 Rose covered Katrina for the *Times-Picayune* and his compilation of post-Katrina columns, *1 Dead in Attic*, is now part of the storm canon.

2 He, too, would serve as a consultant on *Treme* from 2010 till 2013.

3 See Forsyth for a history of this practice of exposing one’s breasts to get colorful strands of beads or other small gifts, which began in the late 1970s but grew more popular in the 1990s.

4 The late Donald Harrison used the word to refer to black Mardi Gras Indians (Abrahams). We dare extend it to all carnival celebrants here.

5 The Krewe of Chaos actually shares a great deal with the racist Krewe of Momus, which stopped parading in 1992, following an ordinance presented by councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor to integrate all Mardi Gras krewes by race and gender (Roach). More recent KOC parades have included immigration and healthcare reform-themed floats lampooning Democratic efforts to reform both.

6 Some of these costumes can be seen in Season 01 Episode 08 of HBO’s *Treme*, entitled “All on a Mardi Gras Day.”

7 Originally used in the field of material science, the concept of resilience has become pervasive (one might even say “fashionable”) in recent years. It is now used across academic disciplines – psychology, biology, sociology, economics, ecology, environmental science, archeology, and urban studies – to refer to the capacity of a system (a species, a company, a city, etc.) to spring back into shape, to recover quickly from difficulties, i.e. “[to] return to a pre-disaster state of stability or equilibrium” (Gotham and Campanella 299). On New Orleans’s history of resilience in the wake of both natural and man-made disasters – including floods, yellow fever epidemics, fires, water pollution, and economic depression, see especially Campanella 2006; Campanella 2008; Leong et al. For a more theoretical discussion of resilience as a concept and its applicability to a wide range of academic disciplines, see Kapucu, Hawkins and Rivera; Pelling; Pickett, Cadenasso, and McGrath; Redman; Vale and Campanella; Sheffi.

8 Gotham mentions such slogans as “Fall in Love with New Orleans All Over Again”, “Still America’s Most Romantic, Walkable, Historic City, New Orleans,” “The Rebirth of New Orleans: Ahead of Schedule,” “Jazz at the Center of Rebirth,” and “We Lift Our Instruments to Lift our City,” respectively coined by the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau (NOMCVB) and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra (NOJO).

9 www.neworleansonline.com/rebuilding/help.html. Accessed 27 January 2006.

10 Unfortunately, this 2006 logo could not be retrieved via a Google search, and we must

therefore take Hallett’s and Kaplan-Weinger’s word for it.

11 As explained here, this was the result of a last-minute lobbying campaign by a private citizen named Steve Apple: <https://steveapple123.wordpress.com/category/esb/>

12 One notable exception to that tolerance has been the conviction of former mayor Ray Nagin in February 2014 on twenty of twenty-one charges of wire fraud, bribery, and money laundering related to payoffs, free trips, and gratuities from city contractors before and after Hurricane Katrina. The first mayor of New Orleans to be criminally charged for corruption while in office, Nagin is now serving a ten-year sentence in a Texas federal prison. *Times-Picayune* journalists and watchdog groups such as the Bureau of Governmental Research, the New Orleans Anti-Corruption Coalition, and Community United for Change were instrumental in his indictment.

13 In 1878, for instance, yellow fever hit the lower Mississippi River Valley and killed over 30,000 people from New Orleans to Memphis, Tennessee, and beyond. Over 4,000 people died in New Orleans alone.

14 On this particular subject, see David Redmon’s 2005 documentary film, *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (Carnivalesque Films).

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