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COSTUMES OF SUBVERSION:  
A STUDY OF MARDI GRAS AND THE CAJUN IDENTITY

by  
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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in the Department of Theatre  
Idaho State University  
Fall 2016

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of COLIN WINTZ find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Lynda LeBlanc, a doting parent, a persistent teacher, and a Cajun ambassador to the Northwest. Without her persuasive nudges towards cultural experiences and unwavering appreciation for the arts I would not have the knowledge nor the guidance to complete this thoroughly entertaining investigation.

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Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2016)

While many consider carnival a party, it actually informs its society of the relation of “high” and “low” aesthetics and facilitates a reversal of power and expression of freedom within a hegemonic structure. In this paper I shall outline the origins of Carnival and explore the social function of costumes in Mardi Gras, relying on the theoretical framework of Bakhtin, Bataille, and Foucault. I reference the “grotesque” to characterize the imagery of Carnival and create a central framework for my claim that subversive symbolism dominates Cajun Mardi celebrations. Theories by Bakhtin, Foucault, and Bataille inform this argument as all three oppose official and stratified concepts of the body. I will trace the lineage of Carnival from Medieval France to Acadia, and then focus my studies of Mardi Gras to examples of a rural town in Louisiana in order to concentrate on symbolic traits of the costumes I’ve created.

## Chapter I: Introduction

Today, the idea of carnival conjures images of grand pageantry and excessive behavior. Revelers don elaborate and colorful masks for this one day and such anonymity facilitates transgressive behavior. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian philosopher and literary critic considers a study of carnival key to understanding culture. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin explains his sentiments on carnival.

The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals, and forms of carnival type)—its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its underlying fascination is one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture. (122)

I agree with Bakhtin; carnival fascinates me. The “life force” on the muddy streets of Church Point, Louisiana on Mardi Gras morning laughs, dances, and drinks excessively underneath their carnivalesque costumes. The day replays a primordial experience, that of a community celebrating together. Bakhtin, however, contends that one should not compare modern Mardi Gras with the medieval Carnival he deems “complex and interesting.” He argues that Carnival is a powerful, creative event, but Mardi Gras represents merely a spectacle. I object to his blanket judgment that all contemporary Mardi Gras celebrations are innocuous distractions from the mundane. In rural south Louisiana, Mardi Gras celebrations demand participation from the

community; its traditions are steeped in subversive symbolism, and this spectacle blurs the division of procession and audience. The smaller, individualized representations of Mardi Gras in towns like Church Point, Louisiana provide clearer insight into the heritage and migration of Carnival, with traces of their celebration reaching back to medieval Europe. The costume worn on Mardi Gras day actually inform its society of the relation of “high” and “low” aesthetics and facilitates a reversal of power and, more importantly, an expression of freedom within a hegemonic structure. To better understand the role of Cajun Mardi Gras costumery, I shall outline the origins of Carnival and explore the social function of costumes in Mardi Gras using Bakhtin’s theoretical framework. Furthermore, my creative research incorporates carnivalesque symbolism and screen-printed illustrations into textile prints that I integrate into a body of costumes. By creating costumes that appropriate depictions of the ruling class and subverting their likeness into Mardi Gras costumes, I engage in this power struggle and highlight its sublimation. In my costume designs, I act out the hierarchical roles in a farcical manner and hopefully inspire others to participate in these role reversals.

Bakhtin considers Carnival a rich opportunity to invert temporarily the role of authority, offering the powerless a day of power. He draws heavily on the images created by the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais to describe the Carnival spirit and explain its importance in society. In Bakhtin’s seminal text *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin sees Rabelais’s gluttonous characters who possess grotesquely large bodies and speak in grotesquely ribald language a positive depiction of Carnival itself. The laughter and amusing storytelling found in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* prove restorative and generative. Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as a positive image of the body that is

universal, equalizing, and a source of great renewal (Bakhtin 10). Additionally, Bakhtin notes that Carnival opposes official feasts as it exhibits a great amount of strata and hierarchy instead of seeking to equalize all positions. During official feasts, rank dictates where guests sit and Bakhtin considers this a consecration of inequality (Bakhtin 10). Bakhtin grieves the demise of these two essential features in modern day Carnival, the communal nature and restorative laughter of the celebration.

Both components of Carnival, grotesque features on costumes and the equalization of positions at the table for a Carnival feast are omnipresent in Cajun Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras in Churchpoint embodies the collective experience. The day begins with a Courir de Mardi Gras where participants go from house to house begging for ingredients for a communal gumbo; this provides the community a socially acceptable platform for the poor to beg for food and mock the nobility through costume and comic gestures. Many masks worn at this event resemble Rabelais's characters with their long, phallic noses. I have limited my research of contemporary Carnival celebrations to the unique region of southwest Louisiana because I have experienced this traditional style of festival and feel emotional ties to it as part of my cultural heritage. As such, I will trace the lineage of Carnival from medieval France to Acadia, an isolated region in eastern Canada, and then focus my studies of Mardi Gras to examples of a rural town in Louisiana in order to concentrate on symbolic traits of the costumes I've created.

I believe that Bakhtin's views surrounding the body contribute to the inclusive and inviting participatory elements of Carnival and I consider this celebration fertile ground for the development of my costume work. My body of costume work concentrates on the influence of textiles and fashion, but more specifically, it illuminates the potential to

conceal a subversive narrative as a decorative motif in the construction of period garments. Lavish fabrics and distinct cuts of clothing present a sphere of influence and a show of material wealth, but during Carnival the lower classes subvert fashion trends to form caricatures of status. I rely on carnivalesque imagery to instill the subversive qualities of Carnival into period costumes synonymous with wealth and opulence. Similar to historical Carnival costumes, I seek to elevate the political and expressive form of costuming as a platform for the lower classes to interact with symbols of authority, to dethrone temporarily official language. I wish for the appropriation of these disparate styles to create a dialogue between “high” and “low” aesthetics.

Textile prints become a narrative vehicle to represent a story of power struggles and upheaval. On the surface of the costumes, Mardi Gras revelers are supplanted into patterns reminiscent of “Toile de Jouy” prints, a textile innovation closely linked with colonial fashion of the 18th century. The idyllic pastoral scenes typically found in “Toile de Jouy” prints are evocative of the Rococo paintings of Watteau and Fragonard, which depict serene and blissful lifestyles of aristocracy. Conversely, some of the scenes that I have incorporated into the surface of the period garments shed light on the Acadian experience. Other vignettes portray the bawdy antics of Cajun Mardi Gras revelers interacting with high society. By inserting costumed Mardi Gras revelers into these idyllic scenes, I attempt to disrupt the use of fashion as a status symbol and subvert the institutions of “high culture.” My constructed period garments do not serve the purpose of identifying social rank. Everyday people can wear them regardless of social background. High fashion of the 18<sup>th</sup> century presents an important counterpoint to the traumatic expulsion of the Acadians because of the enormous disparity between social

classes and the exceptional display of frivolity, abundance, leisure, and excessive ornamentation. I rely on the theoretical framework of Bakhtin, Bataille, and Foucault to destabilize the hierarchy of these authoritative symbols.

There is a great deal of overlap in the theories of Bakhtin, Foucault, and Bataille in reference to the body; all three theorists describe social practices that subvert political and ideological control over the body. Ideological control occurs through language; the language does not work for individuals but rather for those in power. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and George Bataille (1897-1962) both reference the grotesque in their theories of power and sexuality. Both orient the body within hierarchic societal structures. Foucault interrogates the power structures seen as “natural” by revealing and questioning the methods of discourse in order to develop a historical context of social practice (Pickett 452). Bakhtin sees the grotesque body as a site of transgression and notes that it “is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin 26). He means that resolved forms represent static forms of ideology whereas open, unresolved forms welcome change and lie closer to universal, inclusive forms of representation. This is generally what Bakhtin considers the material bodily principle and is akin to George Bataille’s theory of base materialism. Bataille echoes Foucault’s concern of empowering those low on the hierarchical structure and argues for an active base matter that disrupts the opposition of high and low and destabilizes all foundations (Noys 499). Low origins like earthly desires are put in opposition to all that is high, spiritual, ideal, or abstract. All three theorists add that the conflict between low and high disrupt the socio-political

structure. Carnival's social practices joyfully shake up the socio-political structure, if only for one day.

Finally, I reference the "grotesque" throughout this master's thesis to characterize the imagery of Carnival and create a central framework for my claim that subversive symbolism dominates Cajun Mardi celebrations; theories by Bakhtin, Foucault, and Bataille inform this argument as all three oppose official and stratified concepts of the body. In Bakhtin's terminology, the grotesque emphasizes the body through eating, evacuation, or sex and relates to the limits of the body, both socially and politically (Clark 303). This means emphasis of the mouth, the anus, and the penis, among other orifices. Paramount to the idea of the grotesque is excessiveness, exaggeration, and rebellion to authority. Bakhtin developed the term "grotesque realism" to portray an alternate reality, one different from the world he knew in Russian in the 1930s, and one of its key concepts is the material bodily principle. He sees the body as principally positive. In fact, to Bakhtin the body is universal and represents all people. What may be perceived as bawdy, Bakhtin considers earthy and positive. Exaggerated appendages on costumes represent fertility and abundance. The material bodily principle considers a population who continue to grow and be renewed. Grotesque realism critiques the dominant hierarchical order and favors a collective "ancestral body of all people" (Bakhtin 19). I find that the value found in carnivalesque and grotesque realism is likewise found in Cajun Mardi Gras celebrations and its exaggerated costumery; I also find that Bakhtin, as well as Foucault and Bataille, offer a valuable vocabulary to articulate its value as complex and interesting and important in our culture.

The expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755 is a departure point to critically analyze and contrast the fashion trends of the elite with the traumatic passage of the Acadians. Not only does this traumatic event represent a pivotal moment in the development of the Acadian identity, it also is the source of folklore in the epic poem *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The representation of folk humor, which lies at the heart of Cajun culture and long standing carnival practices, is apparent in the textile patterns of my costume work.

I will discuss the formation of the Acadian identity, which has sustained practices of Carnival for generations, even after leaving its ancestral home in medieval France. The migration of the Acadians allowed for the unique preservation of customs because of their geographic isolation, abandonment by governing bodies, and their precarious exchange of wardship between warring nations. The foreign affairs of Britain and France played a significant role in the development of the Acadian identity, yet their presence was largely overlooked until they refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the King of Britain. The historical passage of the Acadians represents a departure from the French culture and development of a unique identity after surviving as an isolated community. By reexamining the past and reinventing researched stories of the deportation of the Acadians from Nova Scotia, I am connecting a personal experience to historical events and rituals of the Acadians. I am intrigued not only by the development of the Cajun identity but the surrounding politics and events that have been instrumental in contributing to world affairs, history, power, and pre and post-colonial cultural hegemony.

## Chapter II: Approaching a Modern Theoretical Framework

Exuberant feasting and exaggerated masks that obscure revelers' faces are two key components of rural Mardi Gras in south Louisiana. Both were also illuminated 500 years earlier in the literature of François Rabelais (1493-1553), a French Renaissance writer. Mardi Gras costumers exalt the depraved and ridicule the pious actions of monasteries, as Rabelais did in *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534), a pentalogy of novels that chronicles two giants' adventures. Courts and kings delighted in his stories, but Rabelais' work was condemned by many of his peers for his use of bawdy jokes and grotesque images. His carnivalesque themes opposed established authority and transgressed the limits of his period's ideology. However, Rabelais was part of the royal court of Francis I and this is perhaps the only reason he succeeded in writing his satirical and controversial stories. He displays a love of wine and sex, praising indulgences of the bodily realm and ridiculed the monastic lifestyle (Clark 295). Rabelais presents counter ideology to the values and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in the same way that Carnival built its own world of opposition.

Bakhtin analyzed Rabelais's writings and saw in Rabelais's imagery a certain undestroyable, nonofficial nature. This text proves fundamental for Bakhtin to connect Carnival from medieval Europe to his theory of linguistics and popular culture. He utilizes the archaic tradition of Carnival to analyze Stalinist culture and the new canons imposed by socialist realism (Clark 305). He criticizes his country's official language and his culture's idealized heroic images. Bakhtin optimistically states that "no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images;

these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook” (Bakhtin 3). Bakhtin’s response to Rabelais’s literature contradicted the nationalistic fervor of his Stalinist Russia; he therefore subverted his own authoritarian culture by extensively researching a literary world that praises “low” and mocks “high,” something impossible in his serious-minded Russia. I look to this framework demonstrated in Bakhtin’s analysis of Rabelais as a way of connecting the visual imagery exhibited in the costumes of Cajun Mardi Gras to its pre-medieval roots and its heritage of subversive language.

Language implies a power structure that tends to favor a dominant or ruling class. In Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, we see some of the most truthful and accurate representations of carnivalesque culture. He writes of popular festive forms, offers images of the grotesque body, and recreates the language of the marketplace (Bakhtin 11). Rabelais was submerged in the folk culture of his time and he used his writing to subvert the hegemony of the church. Bakhtin maintains that Rabelais was among the last of the authors to merge the grotesque tradition peculiar to the marketplace with the academic literary tradition (Bakhtin 109). He explains that the tradition of popular-festive laughter that informed Rabelais’ work began to decline in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the cultural cues that informed these tales were lost to a process of generalization and rationalization representative of the Enlightenment Period. Bakhtin asserts that the obscene and the sexual had no place in the new official system of philosophy and imagery (Bakhtin 109). Although Bakhtin stresses the loss of this context in today’s culture, the effects of Rabelais’s writing are lasting. Bakhtin and others scholars have reinvestigated Rabelais’s

work to form possible connections with contemporary structures and retrieve meaning which has been lost in popular and academic culture.

Bakhtin was interested in Rabelais's literary methodology and his approaches to the general division between official "high" and "low" cultures. As Rabelais wrote literature in a language of the people, so too did Bakhtin develop a philosophy of language grounded in the common communication of speech (Clark 197). Bakhtin explains that languages are philosophies that are concrete, social philosophies. He emphasizes the importance of language that is so decidedly nuanced that its speakers can interact in both the "high" classical languages and "low" vernacular. Literary critics like Allon White, Peter Stallybrass, and Stuart Hall consider the semiological and linguistic implications of Carnival using this perspective of Bakhtin. As Bakhtin relies on Rabelais's work to inform his worldview of popular culture, these theorists have embraced Bakhtin's liberating framework to provide an alternative worldview. To me this reinforces relevance of Carnival in contemporary culture. Stallybrass echoes my sentiments when he explains, "There is now a large and increasing body of writing which sees Carnival not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but as a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic" (Stallybrass 6). Bakhtin offers the literary world an extended interpretation of Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. He articulates the merit and importance of subversion in medieval Carnival. White, Stallybrass and Hall find a "positivity" in Carnival. To them, understanding the rationale for celebrating Carnival facilitates an understanding of the culture that celebrates Carnival. I wish to add that my study of costumery in Cajun Mardi Gras facilitates an understanding of the Cajun culture. Bakhtin discusses the stratification of language and considers the body as a

metaphor for hierarchic values and this validates the important function of Medieval Carnival, but it does not express the immersive qualities of this celebration. I want to focus on theory that emphasizes the body and its many expressions in Carnival.

The traditional masks of a rural Louisiana Mardi Gras espouse many grotesque characteristics that allude to Bakhtin's destabilized notions of ideal forms. A patchwork of found materials embellish crude wire screen masks. Often the masks express ogling eyes, exposed tongues, and perverse grins. Phallic noses protrude from the masks like exaggerated fertility symbols. These extensions of the human form represent that body as a sight of becoming or transformation rather than an ideal or finished form like those represented in Greek statues. Bakhtin explains, "the grotesque ignores the smooth and impenetrable surfaces of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depth" (Bakhtin 317). The penetrable parts of the body such as the orifices or genital zones are subject to the greatest amount of censorship and control by dominant ideology. By exalting the areas of the body that read as imperfect and unresolved, one contradicts idealized forms and dominant representations of beauty. The use of grotesque imagery in popular culture is a method of transgressing the limits of official ideology. While wearing costumes and masks that reference the grotesque, participants of Mardi Gras are free to transgress in a socially acceptable format. Bakhtin would have appreciated the meaningful, medievaesque representations of costumes worn by my fellow revelers.

Like Bakhtin, George Bataille takes up conflict with the tenants of idealism and the construction of hierarchic value systems that venerate the "spiritual" and "ideal" over the "lowly" and "common." Bataille, a French intellectual and surrealist dissident, differs

moderately from Bakhtin's theory of the "grotesque" if only to push it further. While Bakhtin deconstructs the hierarchic relationships of Medieval and Renaissance culture in his analysis of Rabelais's texts, George Bataille addresses similar stratified concepts of the body in his writing while largely focusing on themes of sexuality and transgression. In his surrealist writings, he develops what he calls "base materialism." Much like Bakhtin's "grotesque realism," Bataille's base matter questions traditional perceptions of beauty and ideal forms in order to disrupt the opposition of high and low. Bataille defines base matter as everything excluded by both idealism and materialism: luxury, mourning, war, cults, and the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, and perverse sexual activity (Noys 500). These actions reflect the tendency of human production to create excess. Like Carnival, which is a celebration of excess, base materialism seeks to create its own values in order to oppose existing values (Bataille 33). By delving into imagery that is associated with the lower stratum, Bataille engages in a process of demarking limits in society and transgressing those limits through literary means. The imagery that Bataille creates is effectively as transgressive as the imagery of Rabelais and similarly distained by his fellow scholars. For his obsession with the matter of the lower stratum, André Breton, the founder of Surrealism, branded Bataille as the "excremental philosopher."

The primary site of base materialism for George Bataille is the erotic body, since it is here that the boundary-making processes are revealed and delineated. He references how the body becomes a limit marker for society and the individual (Foucault 48). Bataille references bodily fluids, erotic acts, and sexual symbolism in his writings to locate the body in a social and cultural framework where the boundaries are formed by

taboos, transgressions, and the attraction or repulsion around the sacred. His similarities to Bakhtin's theory are striking. The grotesque symposium does not have to respect hierarchical distinctions; it freely blends the profane and the sacred, the lower and the higher, the spiritual and the material (Bakhtin 285). The lower stratum of the body and the festivals that paraded these forms through costume and in language articulate "low" expressions of peasantry. The costumes and rituals of south Louisiana Mardi Gras renew a connection with base matter. Some costumes situate underwear over the Mardi Gras costume (Lindahl 69). These costumes encourage low behavior, behavior that includes crawling through the mud, urinating in public, or engaging in sexually licentious behavior. In a largely Catholic region, these actions do not represent depravity amongst parishioners but a temporary release from imposing structures. They result in a marriage and acceptance of the sacred and profane rather than the repression of seemingly incompatible themes.

Bakhtin relates the collapse of authentic Carnival culture with the rationalism of the Enlightenment era and 18<sup>th</sup> century ideals. According to Bakhtin, "Enlighteners had a lack of historical sense, an abstract and rationalist utopianism, a mechanistic conception of matter, a tendency to abstract generalization and typification on one hand, and to documentation on the other hand" (Bakhtin 116). The "mechanistic conception of matter" reduced things to essential qualities rather than seeing a multiplicity of connotations and emphasized a generalized and narrow perception of meaning. Bataille seems to parallel Bakhtin's sentiments when he notes that "base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations" (Bataille 163). Bourgeois ideology reinforces

oppositional values and suppresses carnivalesque forces by categorizing them as something “other.” One sees the social domains of the lower class as “low” and “disgusting”; whereas the elite, who are withdrawn from popular culture, possess a sanitized conception of the self (Hall 287). From a close reading of Bataille and Bakhtin, the rise of rationalism could be seen as a new method of invalidating the expression of the lower class and its production of anti-authoritarian symbols.

Bataille upholds a Rabelaisian tradition of employing subversive symbolism to counteract the control of ideological structures, including class structure. *The Solar Anus* is a short Surrealist text in which Bataille parodies reductive scientific and metaphysical discourses. In this text, mechanized ordered reality and transcendent views of solar energy incur Bataille’s intellectual violence (Bolt-Irons 356). Forces of nature reference the orifices of the body but also allude to class structure. Bataille relates the proletariat to the grotesque genital zones and ties sexuality to social transgression. He states, “Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts; sooner or later there will be a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off” (Bataille 8). Volcanoes symbolically represent the anus of the earth; the explosion is a metaphor for vomiting and defecation. Bataille often relates explosive forces to the act of transgression. He combines violent and sexually driven imagery to define social relationships, but most importantly, he demonstrates how parody subverts hierarchy. The obviously grotesque themes challenge the idealization of these higher forms and use the lower stratum of the body to transgress the limits of idealized philosophical thought.

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and social theorist, uses the work of George Bataille to elucidate transgressive nature. Foucault believes that acts of transgression help individuals to deconstruct and reestablish identity within their society. Foucault maintains that the transgression of one's own bodily form is a method of destabilizing the subject in order to regain identity. He defines transgression as the process of "crossing-over," or moving from an ordered rational state to an unordered and irrational state (Foucault 80). In this instance, transgression means sexual transgression. Carnival in the Middle Ages allowed for the process of transgression because as Foucault explains, "the tradition of mysticism and spirituality was incapable of dividing the continuous forms of desire, rapture, penetration, and ecstasy" (Foucault 29). The Enlightenment Period changed the way in which individuals were made subjects by excluding irrational thought and offering instead a marginalized view of transgressive behavior. As Bataille explains, there is a strong relationship between the joyful and terrifying moments of ecstasy formerly achieved through mysticism in pre-Enlightenment periods (Bataille 226). Foucault believes that one finds power when moving beyond society's sexual limitations. By destabilizing the power structure, one gains power, a central focus of Michel Foucault's work. Though Bataille and Foucault believe that sexuality is the primary site for transgression I contend that while sexual acts are included in carnivalesque festivals, it is not the only means of transgression. The role reversals inspired through costumes in Carnival help to destabilize the subject.

Foucault also investigates the institutional practices of the Enlightenment Period, particularly in how it results in the marginalization of madness in society and the repression of sexuality. Foucault reflects on the objectification of the insane in the way

that society has historically isolated and confined those that do not fit into a rational worldview. Those considered “abnormal” exist outside of the realm of reason and become the “other.” In the essay “Madness and Society,” Foucault discusses the silence that the language of psychiatry has imposed on the language of madness. All societies have examples of those who do not conform to commonly defined rules, those considered as “marginalized individuals” (Foucault 336). In the Middle Ages, the mad person was not defined as someone without reason. Society sometimes venerated the mad person and considered him to have a superior knowledge of the world. During the Renaissance Period, discourses on madness began to change. Reason and madness become opposing forces and lead to ostracizing the mad person from society. Carnival focuses on the inescapable need to incorporate unreason and madness into life and subvert dominant structures. Like Bakhtin, Foucault asserts that in today’s culture we lack the political-religious meaning that was associated with festivals and in place of subversive content we use alcohol or drugs to contest the social order (Foucault 340).

### Chapter III: History of Carnival and the Acadian Identity

Carnival offers society a sanctioned place for insanity, an acceptable placement for the “other,” and an opportunity to incorporate the irrational mind into the concept of the self. In ancient Greek and Roman society, festivals of excess included heavy consumption of wine to achieve an ecstatic union with the divine. Indeed, the god’s spirit guided the intoxicating and disinhibiting effects of those imbibing copious amounts of wine. The Roman festival of the Saturnalia began with a public banquet and continued partying in a carnival atmosphere that overturned Roman social norms. For example, the celebration sanctioned gambling, a forbidden sport and masters provided table service for their slaves (Miller 172). Saturnalia enabled slaves and Roman citizens alike to interact in role reversals. Society permitted these temporary liberties with the understanding that prevailing social hierarchies and the social order it necessitates would return following the festivities. Saturnalia represents one of the most popular festivals of the Greco-Roman world.

Dionysian and Bacchanalian festivals also embraced the ecstatic senses and allowed for the removal of inhibitions and social constraints. As these celebrations honored the gods of merrymaking, they also allowed participants a release from rigid social norms as it diffused inequality between master and slave and citizen and state (Vernsel 149). Perspective shifted and Greek rulers began considering the cult of Dionysus a threat to civilized society and wished to control it. Leaders feared conspiracy against the state during these festivals and feared this empowering experience would empower some to question authority following the festival.

## The Feast of Folly

The praise of folly was popular in festivals and theatre during the Middle Ages. The fool had mysterious abilities of perception. He connected the mystical and rational in spite of, perhaps because of, his idiocy. The madman or fool made people laugh because he saw what the other actors did not see and revealed the ending of the plot before them (Foucault 340). In the theater, the madman expresses the truth with his body; often, actors and spectators alike missing his messages. The Feast of Fools encouraged a festival atmosphere, a communal congregation, a synthesis of cooperation, and participation without regard to dominating structures. It occurred in cathedrals and churches during Christmas and the New Year and oldest mention of the feast places it at the end of the 11th century in Medieval France. For the feast, a lord of misrule was chosen to rule and he symbolized the world turning upside down. A younger sub deacon was selected as the “bishop” and he presided over the feast; he yielded a staff and wore a miter hat to represent his fictitious status. Today, the miter hat serves as an important element in rural Mardi Gras. In the Catholic hierarchy, the sub deacons were the lowest group and they were identified with the bodily level whereas the higher priests represented the soul and spirit. The celebration uprooted the social hierarchy and in 1445, the Theological Faculty of Paris addressed a letter to the bishops and chapters of France that condemned the practice of a feast that was sacrilege and against principals. During the Feast of Fools, priests and clerks were seen “wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office.” Clergy “dance(d) in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels.” Clergy were observed singing “wanton songs” and could be seen eating “black puddings at the

horn of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass.” Moreover, they censed “with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes” and even some played at dice (Gilhus 24). This atmosphere of excess and portrayed in the Feast of Fools echoes practice observed at a Cajun Mardi Gras.

Pageantry in both celebrations subvert normal church rituals. Around 1570, the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder portrayed the celebration of the Feast of Fools with revelers in brightly colored clothes and hoods with donkey ears sown in like court jesters. Participants had flowers in their hair and some appeared with their clothes inside out. Some clergy changed clothes with laymen; some even appeared naked. Incense provided a pleasant smell as well as masked the smell of human bodies, but censing with old shoes, smelled a stench of human bodies (Gilhus 28).

The Feast of Fools offered lower classes of clergy to escape, albeit temporarily, societal standards. Despite public support of the Feast of Fools, the church attempted to suppress the celebration and in 1526, the festival was banned in Lille, France. As a result, the Feast of Fools shifted to secular rhetorical societies (Moxey 642). In an effort to legitimize the celebration, the Carnival season absorbed much of the practices from the Feast of Fools.

Communities throughout Europe gathered to help dispose of rich food and drink in preparation for the Lenten season, thus marking the beginnings of the tradition of excess considered Carnival. In Latin the phrase used was “carnem levare” which means the putting away or removal of flesh as food. “Carna vale” in Italian translates into “flesh, farewell” (Rudwin 405). Mardi Gras means Fat Tuesday in French, noting that rich foods were to be consumed on the day before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. This

celebration of excessive feasting reinforced the unity of the community and its feelings against outsiders and deviants, and fostered the idea that they were in the land of plenty, “land of cockaigne” (Biek 266). Carnival was a time to wear masks and costumes, perform farces, dance, and mock the authorities. Revelers held contests and played games, paraded through town in masks or on allegorical floats, and, above all, ate and drank to excess. Bawdy sexual themes were likely to emerge, along with mockery of husband dominated by wives and the put-down of priests or rulers who behaved arrogantly.

### Cajun Mardi Gras

To visit southwest Louisiana towns like Mamou, Church Point, Eunice, and Basile in the weeks before Lent, one would observe excess and vestiges of debauchery that carefully balance the limits of social structure and chaotic anarchy. Mardi Gras morning introduces “le Courir de Mardi Gras” or the Mardi Gras run where the “runners” travel throughout the community on horseback or are carried atop a flatbed truck with ice coolers full of alcohol. The festivities culminate in a communal meal provisioned by ingredients extorted and artfully misappropriated by the costumed participants. In this regional celebration, the streets fill with faces obscured by crude window screen masks covered in a collage of found objects, grotesque features, and appliquéd fabric remnants. Pointy hats tailed with long streamers strut above the crowd bobbing and weaving as the participants prostrate themselves on the ground begging for money and food ingredients, or disruptively run through the crowd with stolen goods. All elements of their costume

mean to hide their identities as they engage in playful, mischievous, and often indecent acts. Though it may seem to be a mindless and masked drunken frenzy, Barry Ancelet, a Cajun historian, suggests that “Mardi Gras provides a quite serious context for symbolic expressive behavior” (Ancelet 2). Their Mardi Gras costumes draw from the daily life and hierarchical structures of the Medieval Ages but their adaptations serve as a record of the diaspora and relocation of a people.

The recognizable themes of the Mardi Gras costumes of rural Louisiana utilize the archaic symbols of Medieval Carnival which mock the nobility, the clergy, and the scholars (Ancelet 3). The fringe laden and vibrantly colored patchwork costumes typical of rural Mardi Gras celebration create the likeness of precious materials and reference the parti-colored outfits of jesters and court fools of the Medieval Era. The reoccurring motif of the pointed hat known as a “capuchon” is a symbolic jest at the hats worn by Medieval noble women (Ancelet 3). The bishop’s miter and four-cornered hat of scholars are also common tropes of the celebration. Rather than describing the hegemonic structure that pervades contemporary life, the costumes are simply vestiges of the past. For this reason, I agree with Bakhtin’s assertion that modern interpretations of Carnival do not play the same sociological function and lack the same potency of earlier celebrations to negate official doctrine. These symbolic references to archaic traditions serve other equally important purposes, to establish cultural identity which is marginalized by dominant ideology.

Cajuns have progressively assimilated into American society, but practices to reaffirm and preserve community ties are still apparent in rural examples of Mardi Gras. During the Medieval Era, the winter months brought strain on poor rural areas of France

and so the practice of a ceremonial begging known as *la fête de la quémande* became a common practice of the pre-Lenten season. This tradition is replicated in “*Courir de Mardi Gras*,” where masked riders visit farmhouses, singing and dancing to the traditional Mardi Gras song. The goal of these performances is to obtain a contribution to the communal gumbo, which is shared later that day with the community (Ancelet 85). The riders leave from and return to the center of their community. During their ride, they circle their town, marking the boundaries of their common interests. The implied boundary marked by the ride, involves a series of selections and negotiations, a sifting process that separates insiders from outsiders. The Basile Mardi Gras, for example, generally skips the houses of Protestants, African Americans, and new arrivals in town to affirm its longstanding ties to older, Catholic Cajuns (Lindahl 130). These celebrations often involve such obvious sexual symbols as mock abduction and seduction, real or symbolic nudity and whips, these being part fertility symbols, part instruments of intimidation. In rural areas, Mardi Gras is usually a processional celebration and includes floats to welcome the return of the courirs once they have completed their journey through the nearby villages.

### History of the Acadian Identity

The identity of the Acadians is a history of folklore that is intertwined with the evolution of Carnival. This folklore follows in the tradition of Rabelais and illuminates the customs that have played a vital role in modern Mardi Gras. These timeworn customs have been preserved in part from of a long history of isolation, self-reliance, and constant

oppression from various governing factions. Participation in festivals like Mardi Gras reinforced this insular quality. To better explain the Cajun identity, it is necessary to preface modern practices with a brief history of the poor French farmers who broke ground for the colonization of North America. The long and winding path of Acadian migration from Nova Scotia to Louisiana after their expulsion by the British is the history of folklore. Henry IV's vision to colonize Nouvelle France across the Atlantic provides a vantage point of the powerful influence of the Catholic Church in Western Europe and the political unrest that was occurring in France at the end of the 16th century.

Nouvelle France was a dream of several French kings during the 17th century. Colonizing North America would be a dream challenged by the interests of other colonial powers, especially England. In 1632 the explorer Samuel de Champlain brought to the shores of Nova Scotia, families from the regions of Poitou, Saintonge, Aunis, Anjou, and Touraine in France (Fischer 487). These peasant families were recruited to serve as part of a proprietary colony under the Company of Nouvelle France to realize the colonial dream of King Louis XIII and were required to be at least nominally Catholic (Brasseur 45). These communities were well acquainted with the curses, profanities, and oaths upon which Bakhtin later built his theory of popular language and Carnival. To their benefit, the venture offered the opportunity to build a new future, free from the heavy taxation of nobility in France despite their meager existence and heavy toil. The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants had also plagued the Poitou region, another motivation to leave their native land. Ironically the colonists escaped civil war in France only to be surrounded by feuding nations abroad.

L'Acadie, or the land of plenty as the new territory had been named, symbolized to the poor farming families a place where they could live comfortably without threat of oppressive doctrine. For the most part, these communities coexisted peacefully with each other as well as with surrounding cultures. Acadia was in fact a place of natural abundance, with many resources in fish, fur, timber, and soil. For the ruling class the territory and its resources represented a profitable enterprise. Acadia served as a place of coexistence, where Catholics and Protestants could live in harmony – a vision that came from the king himself (Fischer 153). The colonists forged alliances with local Indians, who generally preferred the settlers from France to those from Britain because, unlike the British who took all the land they could, the coastal French in Acadia did not invade Indian hunting grounds inland (Ancelet 34). The Acadians, as the colonists now called themselves, were skilled farmers and were accustomed to rural existence. The families cemented bonds and were extremely self-reliant in order to protect themselves against the threat of invading forces. During the French Indian Wars, possession over Acadia changed hands ten times between France and England. The Acadians remained neutral and refused to aid France in their military efforts or take an oath of allegiance to Britain.

In 1755, the Nova Scotia Council made the decision to remove every Acadian from the colony because they refused to take the oath of allegiance to British Crown. The English deported 12,000 Acadians to various British Colonies of New-England; some were sent back to England, others to France (Faragher). Many Acadians perished. Families were separated, their possessions were taken away, and their farms and harvests were destroyed by fire. The Acadian exiles who returned to France were dissatisfied with life there because they had lived for so long in a land marked by greater material

abundance and because they were unused to the restrictions and obligations imposed by the French bureaucracy (Carroll 324). By this time several generations had been born in Acadia; they had no roots elsewhere and no loyalties to any nation. The Acadians had developed a fiercely independent identity living off the coastal land of Nova Scotia and this was not easily given up. Such personality traits formed the backbone of a proud but stubborn people. They proved themselves adaptable while also retaining their cultural traits and customs. They would bring these traits with them in their search for a new home.

France meanwhile had been busy planting colonial seeds in other corners of North America. French settlers first began to arrive in Louisiana in 1699, sixty-six years before the arrival of the first settlers from Acadia (Ancelet 33). Many Acadians were enticed to this territory with the promise of finding a place where they could once again thrive off the land and maintain their own religious and cultural practices. Wealthy French landowners were just as suspicious of the incoming exiles as they began to migrate southward. The Spanish acquisition of the Louisiana territory allowed Acadian families the opportunity to cultivate the land, as they had in Nova Scotia. With the close of the Seven Years War, the Mississippi became an imperial boundary, separating British and Spanish North America. Throughout the period of Acadian immigration and settlement, the Spanish regarded Louisiana as a buffer colony to protect against the British in the centuries-old battle for domination of North America (Kolb 2). As they gradually settled along the waterways, primarily the Mississippi River, the immigrants from France interacted frequently with the Native American tribes (Ancelet 34). These settlers established themselves by farming and prospered through trade, adapting to the humid

climate much as the Acadians had adapted and prospered in Acadia. With them, they brought their traditions from France.

When visiting family in Louisiana, I naively described the aim of my research to my cousin, who was quite interested in the origins of Mardi Gras. Her concept of Mardi Gras, much like that of her peers, involved banners of purple, gold, and green, king cakes, and stocked coolers. I briefly described to her the migration of the Acadians from Nova Scotia to Louisiana, from the French colonization and their isolated subsistence on the land, to the traumatic expulsion resulting in an exodus into the bayous of Louisiana. These historical events effectively serve as our liaisons of the cultural tradition of Mardi Gras. I recognized the irony that I, a native of the Pacific Northwest, was explaining the lineage of the Cajun customs to someone who has spent the entirety of her life interacting with the sights, smells, and tastes of this truly festive culture.

In an effort to become distinguished in economic status, Cajun culture has become homogenized. The Cajun culture of Louisiana has become more and more commodified and commonplace. French names like Gattineaux, Thibodeaux, and Robideaux, which once harkened back to the poor farming settlers of Nouvelle Acadie, now plaster billboards for car dealerships and lawns matted with elections signs. Politicians now rely on the Cajun vote to sway elections by boasting of a rural upbringing. In this way, I can understand why my cousin finds the story of the Acadians so mysterious and potentially why the symbolism of modern Mardi Gras has been forgotten in mainstream culture. She understands the assimilation of Cajun culture much better than I do. In popular culture, the celebration has been divorced from its roots. Processions like those of New Orleans have replaced most of the rituals that tie the

festival to Medieval practices and instead have exaggerated the pomp and excess that is now associated with Fat Tuesday.

The popular forms of celebration are removed from the powerful anti-establishment symbolism but still function to remove inhibitions and social constraints. I am curious about the sociological function of orgiastic celebrations, social inebriation, and the value of folly in society as it relates to the symbolism and practices of Carnival throughout history. The division of social classes in Louisiana laid the foundation and possibly the necessity to create a celebration that upturned normal conventions. Mardi Gras allows these cultures to confront each other in a social acceptable format, to ridicule each other and play the part of the “other.” The day is built on opposites and role reversals of power, gender, and race. The debauchery and freedom to act out one’s repressed actions has had a place in the Carnival season ever since the Middle Ages; other community-centered rituals have only been preserved in smaller less attended forms of Mardi Gras.

Researching Carnival and its iterations in Louisiana offer me keener understanding of festival culture and the resulting adaptations from the dominating structures of the Middle Ages. The festival of Mardi Gras cements community ties and serves to protect the cultural identity against assimilation. While the act of inebriation and sexual liberation is commonly associated with the larger forms of celebration, the historical significance of the celebration and its power to cement community ties remains the most important and undervalued element of Mardi Gras.

## Chapter IV: Development of Costume Work

I began developing costumes that explored the history of the Acadians and the regionally specific forms of Mardi Gras in Louisiana first by witnessing the Course de Mardi Gras, which introduced me to the basic elements of the “runner’s” costume. My experiences visiting the remote towns in South Louisiana during Mardi Gras greatly enriched my understanding of the textures and silhouettes that identify these costumes with specific regions. I used the traditional costumes as a template to extend the original form into a more ornate and historically specific context. The original forms are imbued with cultural meaning but I wanted to extend these references to elucidate the historical and theoretical framework of Carnival. Counter to traditional theatre practices which stems from a singular creative direction of the costume designer, the costumes of Mardi Gras obey a few structural rules and operate in a crowd sourcing manner in which innovations and unique twists are developed by the participants. For this reason I felt justified in escaping the traditional forms and infusing elements of period costuming with crude methods of costume construction. I sought to highlight a balance between different and oppositional aesthetics.

I noticed the potential that costumes have to give license to participants but also act as a canvas, which can be activated through movement and gesture. My background in visual art gave me the tools and experience to render scenes of Cajun history and lore through illustration, which could then be adapted into a repeated motif printed on fabric. The idea evolved from a multimedia project integrating painting and sculpture to create the impression of Mardi Gras “runners” that are moving between the flatness of

illustrative storytelling and the spatially engaged action of performance. In the triptych “The Revelers of Mardi Gras, Past, Present, and Future” (Fig. 1) three portraits of Mardi Gras “runners” are depicted in traditional costume and below the paintings steel armatures covered in fringe continue a sculptural form of the figure. In the background of each painting is a tableau of vignettes inspired by a style of textile print known as Toile de Jouy. The background of each portrait resembled this format of textile printing but was in fact a painted version of narrative of scenes. Although the narrative scenes were painted on wood rather than printed on textile it was through this process that I became aware of the potential of textile designs to explore subversive yet decorative subject matter. This foreshadowed my later exploration into textile printing techniques.



*Figure 1 “The Revelers of Mardi Gras, Past, Present, and Future”*



Figure 1 detail "The Evangeline"



Figure 1 detail "Chasing Chickens"



Figure 1 detail "Exodus"

Toile de Jouy refers to distinctive printed textiles manufactured by the Oberkampf manufactory in Jouy-en-Josas, near Versailles, France, from 1760 onward. The designs were originally printed on cotton or linen from woodblocks; later works were printed from copperplates as well. The printed designs are typically characterized by large-scale, monochromatic floral designs or figural scenes (Art & Architecture). This particular style of textile print articulates the popular fashions of the elite in France and Britain and represents a quality of life that is full of sensuality and luxury. The style also became closely associated with colonial fashion in America. By referencing Toile de Jouy textile prints my intent was to create historical parallels between the detached society of the European elite and the traumatic exodus of the Acadians. I contrast the idyllic scenes typically found in Toile de Jouy patterns of the 18th century with historically accurate images of the expulsion of the Acadians from their home in Nova Scotia. The narrative imagery that I inserted into my textile prints suggests a relationship between the oppressed and oppressors and the role of fashion as an overseer of societal values.

In “The Revelers of Mardi Gras, Past, Present, and Future,” the backdrops behind each portrait depict scenes utilizing elements of Cajun culture that are factual, fictional, and include co-opted versions of this history by introducing the Mardi Gras runner as a vigilante. In one painting the background is composed of images of Acadian families are being ushered onto ships by British soldiers and deported from Nova Scotia. In another panel these same soldiers are being accosted by costumed Mardi Gras revelers to suggest a reversal of power and a method of reexamining and reinterpreting history. In this painting Mardi Gras revelers are employing the Carnival spirit to redress grievances and upend dominant ideologies. The triptych was an exercise in bridging a gap between two-

dimensional and three-dimensional work. The relationship of the figure escaping the frame and protruding into viewer's space, and the textile inspired backgrounds facilitating a narrative of Acadian heritage, suggests the immersive environment of traditional Mardi Gras celebrations but in my opinion lacks the implication of participation that one would experience at a Mardi Gras in Southwest Louisiana. Costume became the obvious segue to implement a textile print that informs the viewer about the historical and theoretical framework of Carnival while implying the importance of participation.

In subsequent works, I further established the historical context of the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 by researching fashion trends of the French court during this era. I employed the symbolism of 18th century fashion and its role in dominant power structures in order to subvert the function as a status symbol. Initially, I used the frock coat as a symbol of this power structure and later developed entire ensembles including a capuchon and mask to disguise and transform the participant into a reveler. "The Cut of Men's Clothes: 1600-1900," by Nora Waugh was a great resource in sourcing historically accurate patterns, which were accompanied by historical descriptions and terminology used by tailors of the time. During a summer residency at the Banff Centre, I spent a month researching historical patterns for 18th century frock coats, completing four drawings resembling Toile de Jouy patterns to be printed on the garments, screen-printing the pattern on the garment, and assembling the period jackets. I refined the scenes that I painted in the backgrounds of the triptych into line drawings and created a print pattern that could be spaced evenly and repeatedly printed onto textiles (Fig. 2). The prints reference historic paintings of the Acadian expulsion, rococo paintings of Fragonard, and

appropriate segments of etchings from William Hogarth. Mardi Gras runners performing bawdy acts are laced throughout the prints. The official language of high fashion and high art is fused with a subversive language of carnivalesque imagery.



Figure 2 "The Expulsion"

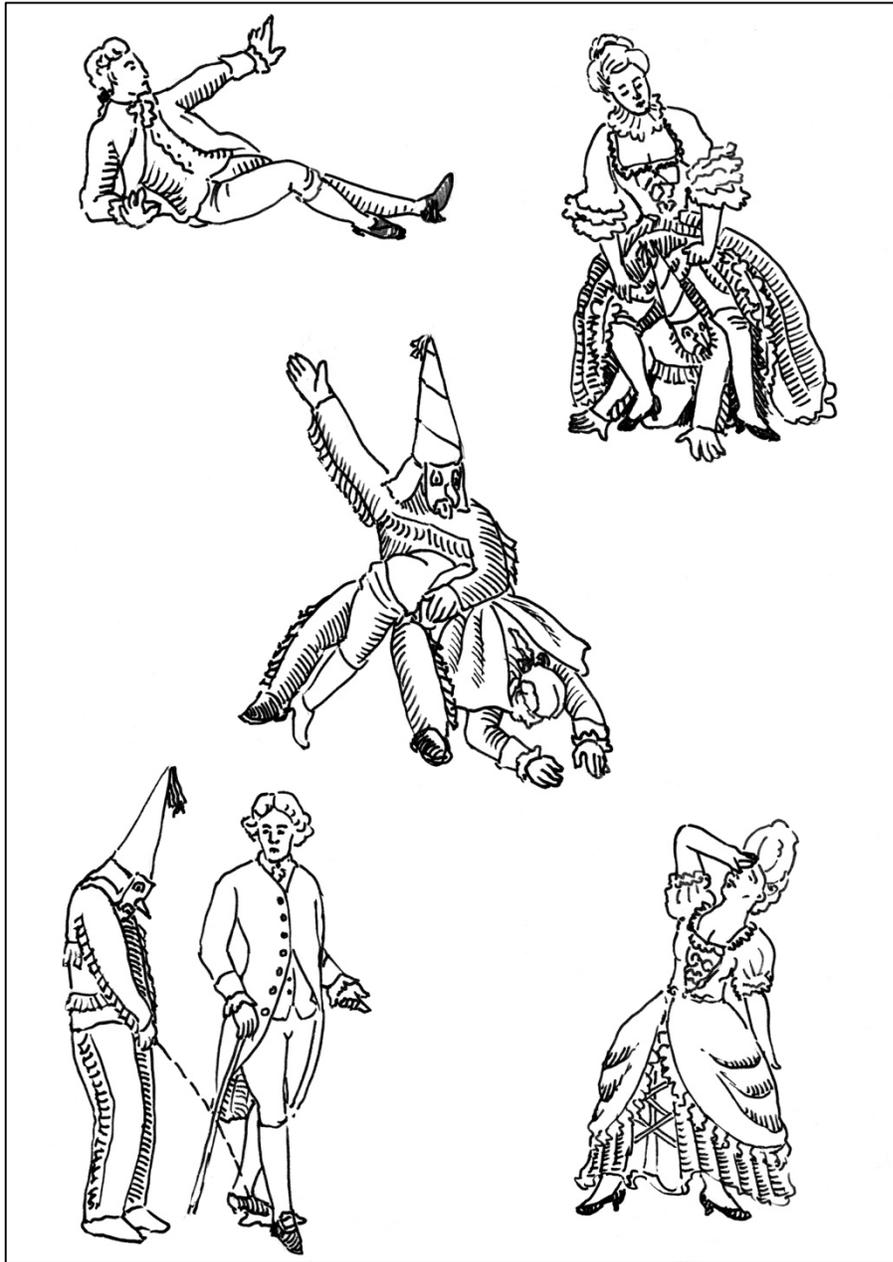


Figure 2 cont. "Pissing on the Wigs"

The carnivalesque informs the materials and elements that I use to construct my period garments. Carnival is a theoretical framework that opposes dominant ideology. It uses subversive methods to contrast the binary relationships between “high” and “low” culture. Carnival is something that thrives to dethrone official and static ideology and influence creative expression. In my first examples of costume construction I experimented with “high” and “low” aesthetics. The frock coats utilized industrial cotton ticking as the fashion fabric and ornate silk brocade as a lining fabric. The less valuable cotton material is presented outwardly while the valuable silk is concealed within the interior of the jacket. I used screen-printing as a method of printing my carnivalesque images onto the fabric because it also contained many signifying elements. It is an accessible medium that has been relegated to the realm of popular culture. Contrary to the elaborate and expensive process of woodblock and copperplate printing used by the factories that supplied printed textiles to the French court, screen-printing has allowed a vast population to cloth themselves with colorful and affordable printed fabrics. Fashion has long been used as a means of instilling the hierarchy of the ruling classes. I wanted to contrast the high language of fashion with that of the accessible and exuberant language of screen-printing, considered to be a medium of mass production.

I was able to transfer my designs to fabric in an efficient and uniform method with limited resources by screen-printing them. This was accomplished by creating a grid on a padded table, which would allow the pattern to repeat evenly across precut patterned pieces. The screen is then aligned with every cross section of the grid, inked, and printed using non-toxic water based ink. This process that I developed during my residency at the Banff Centre has served as the basic process for most of my costume construction since.



*Figure 3 "Finished Jackets with Models"*



At the end of the residency I worked with other artists to model these coats in order to illustrate the blending of social values (Fig 3.). The garment, which was once limited to the social elite, is colorfully mixed into contemporary popular fashion. I juxtapose these different elements as a means of destabilizing dominant structures to disrupt the opposition between high and low.

I am interested in these sites where high and low languages interact. Language expresses the ideology of a dominant culture and can be imagined as a fluid and changing landscape that adapts to social needs. It presents a shifting landscape where the ruling class struggles to maintain control and lower classes encourage change that may overthrow dominant power structures. The body is a site where opposing doctrines are often in conflict. Costumes provide a canvas for this dialogue to manifest and become visible. Physical locations also mark sites of conflict and interaction. The Mardi Gras celebrations of Southwest Louisiana typically take place in the country where a backdrop of farmland frames the festivities. Culverts and irrigation ditches become playgrounds for Mardi Gras revelers to submerge themselves in filth as one is inevitably covered in mud from dancing in the fields and chasing chickens. Bakhtin recognized that tropes of the carnivalesque were inextricably linked to the markets where the lower classes inhabited.

Historically, the processions of the elite took place inside in a private and generally exclusive environment. My research compelled me to attend a costumed ball at Versailles where I was able to experience a masquerade that required participants to arrive in extravagant 18<sup>th</sup> century garb. Once inside a renovated wing of the historic palace, the crowd was regaled with outlandish spectacles while participants let loose

under the cover of masks and powdered wigs. Although the anonymity of masks and costumes allowed people to act outside of their normal behavior, decorum was still very important and evident in the actions of the participants. Participants seemed to embody the same affectation associated with the opulent lifestyle of aristocrats and court personalities. I recognized the perceived power of place and costume that influenced interpersonal interactions. I grew intrigued by the disparity between a country Mardi Gras and a Versailles masquerade. The frock coats that I completed in Banff symbolized an unfinished piece that I knew needed to be resolved by developing complete outfits and presenting them within natural landscapes. The landscapes would represent my environment, the familiar mountainous and arid regions unique to Southeast Idaho.

To complete the full costume, I developed waistcoats, breeches, and shirts utilizing the same material and printed with the same illustrative pattern as each frock coat. I included a capuchon and traditional wire screen mask with each ensemble. The wire screen masks are adorned with grotesque features like phallic stuffed noses, monstrously exaggerated lips, and wagging tongues. Buttons, beads, and floral prints embellish the features that vaguely obscure the wearers face. The costumes create the likeness of a high society social climber of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a personage that one could envision at a swanky masquerade ball but bristling with imagery of subversion that signifies the roots of Carnival and my Cajun heritage. I could see myself revisiting the masquerade at Versailles as well as a Cajun Mardi Gras and receiving questionable glances from either party. These costumes signify a meeting place, a confluence styles and opposing doctrines. I modeled these costumes with backdrops of craggy lava fields, open fields of sagebrush, and grassy plains enclosed by mountain ranges; all features

specific to my local environment (Fig. 4). Documenting the costumes in local landscapes creates a personal context and intimates the continued migration of cultural customs.



*Figure 4. "Mardi Gras Reveler"*



*Figure 4 cont. "Mardi Gras Revelers"*

The illustrations that are printed on the costumes also serve as costume renderings and provide inspiration for developing new costumes like an endless feedback loop. The costumes of 18<sup>th</sup> century aristocracy describe one power structure that influences and reinforces ideology. On one ensemble, textile prints depict characters in clerical garments performing sacrilege gestures of salvation or punishment with mock flagellation. I used these characters to base two more costumes, which reference an older and more central tradition of Carnival. Choosing a mock bishop to preside over the festivities is one of the oldest rituals of Carnival. The oppressive presence of the church in medieval life of has inspired the lowest ranks of the church as well as the laity to parody significant positions of power.

I researched the historical designs of clerical costume in order to develop a pope and cardinal cassock that acknowledges the important symbolism of the garment enough to subvert it. I was very interested in the specific importance of imperceptible details that litter clerical garments. Where the lavish fabrics and fashionable cuts of 18<sup>th</sup> century clothing implied wealth and power, religious garments offer very concrete distinctions of status and class within the church. Specific colors and vestments are reserved for authoritative positions and stately fabrics are sourced from exclusive distributors. Other details, such as the front closure buttons, have such specific importance to signify the years Christ's life. It is not only considered objectionable to dawn these garments but also deemed an offense to be worn by unsuitable persons. The act of fabricating and impersonating these characters undermines the control that the church asserts on its parishioners. The costumes that I construct are clearly not used in any official context but strive to be accurate enough to achieve some sort of cognitive dissonance when worn in

public. While bishop costumes are a common device of Mardi Gras, my religious costumes patronize these characters by overlaying a textile print, which “carnivalizes” iconic images of papal figures (Fig. 5). The decorative illustrations portray masked bishops embracing each other and indulging the admiration of wealthy patricians. Depictions of sedentary popes sitting in their thrones are printed on the rochet of the cardinal cassock. These illustrations reference famous works such as the Portrait of Innocent X by Velasquez.

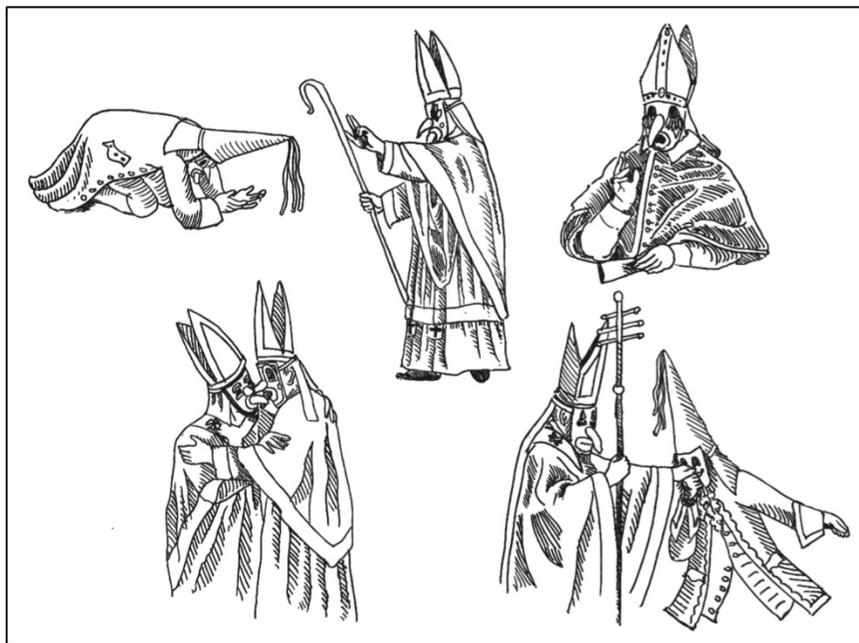
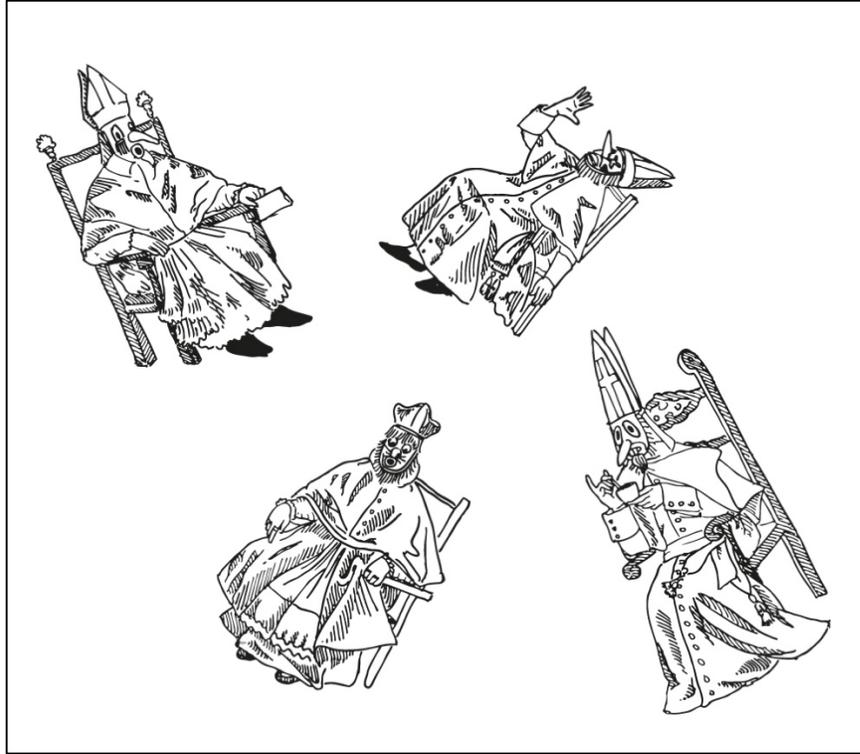


Figure 5 “Kings of Fools Print”



*Figure 5 cont. "Kings of Fools Print"*

I develop identical or very similar costumes in order to create the appearance a group, gang, or tribe. Rather than being an isolated or outlying character, these groups of characters have the power to make others feel included or excluded. The costumes are exhibited by being worn and interacting with audiences. The performers are bonded by a visually coherent uniform and are encouraged to engage in rowdy behavior evocative of the illustrations printed on the garments. I was able to present one of these costumes at the 2015 Prague Quadrennial, a global festival of scenography, which highlights innovations in each field of technical theatre. Outside of presenting my costume I also volunteered to participate as a model for the Tribes section of the festival. The Tribes section is a forum for costume designers to develop cohesive bodies of costumes, which

are then modeled by volunteers and activated through performances like walking through the center of the city, riding the metro, or entering businesses and interacting with an unsuspecting public. This was a fortuitous experience because I was similarly searching for methods of engaging my costume work and interacting with the public outside of conventional theatrical settings. This experience cemented my idea of developing groups of participants that are bound by performance, costume, and ritual.

In my most recent body of costumes I have integrated elements of modern fashion and period fashion. At a second extended residency at the Banff Centre I developed five jean jackets using floral print fabric and screen-printed scenes of Mardi Gras revelers performing bawdy acts onto each panel of the jacket. I modified my printing process to create a continuous narrative image that crossed over the seams of the garment. Rather than using a repeating motif that would likely misalign at each seam when constructing the jackets, I screen printed one panel at a time with unique imagery that merged with surrounding panels. I accomplished this by drawing the illustrations inside of each pattern piece and aligning the imagery in the seam allowances. I then scanned each pattern piece including the outline of the seam allowance so that it could be transferred onto a screen to then be screen-printed onto the floral printed fabric, cut, and assembled (Fig. 6).

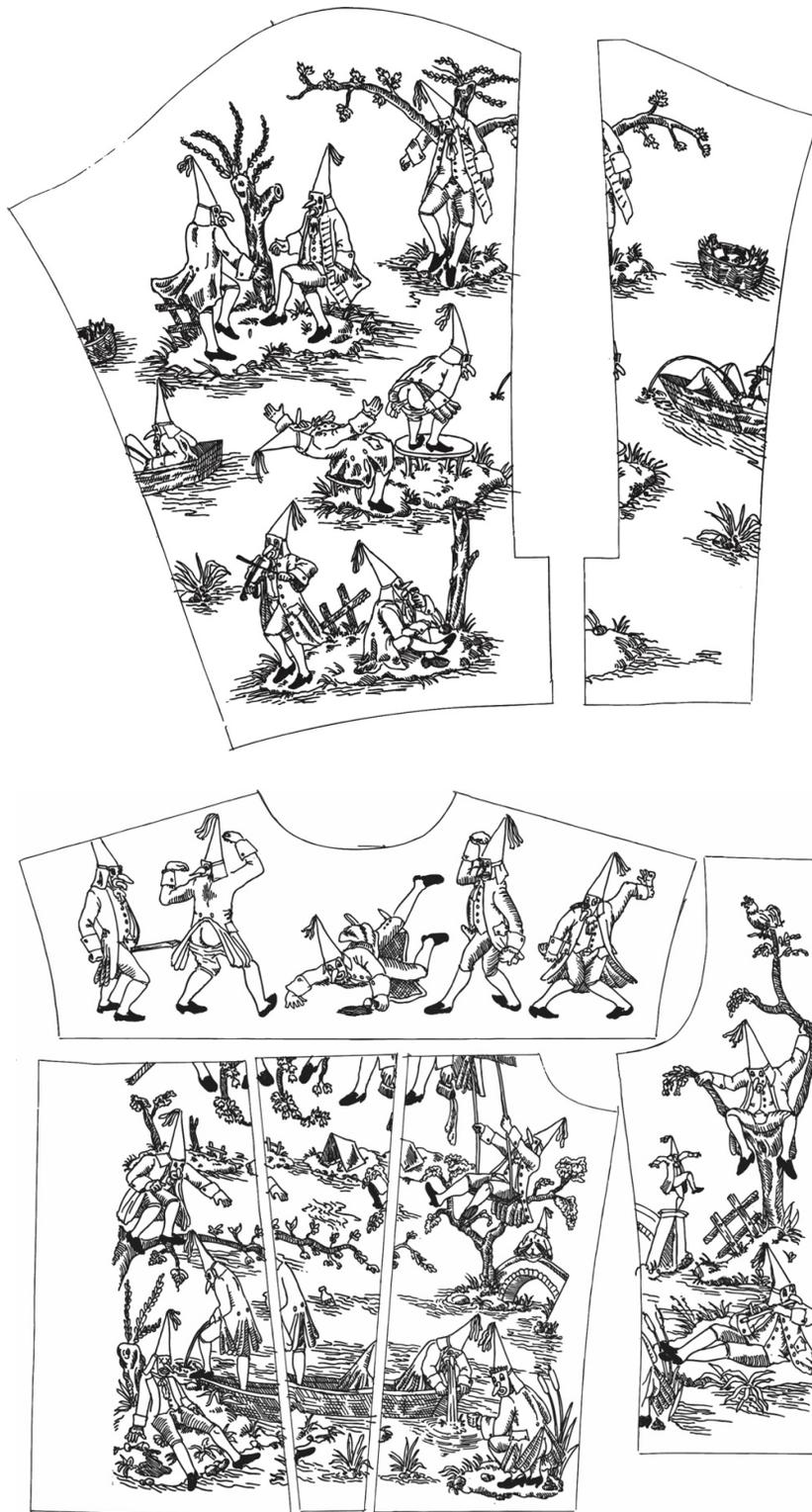


Figure 6 "Jean Jacket Screen-print Pattern"

This saved a great amount of time printing because there was no alignment necessary to ensure that each illustration lined up. The same continuous image was printed on each floral fabric except for the center back panel. I created five different portraits of Mardi Gras revelers, much like the first triptych painting that initiated this body of work, and screen-printed a different portrait on the back of each jacket. These portraits are encircled in a frame of rococo ornamentation but also resemble insignias of motorcycle gangs. Along with the five jackets I patterned and constructed breeches and a garish western shirt with a ruffle that puffs from the collar down the center front (Fig. 7).

These ensembles are different than previous costumes because they are creative approaches to influences that have played such an important role referencing the historical context of Carnival practices and fashion of the elite. The jackets and accompanying garments juxtapose fashion influences spanning hundreds of years which are playfully mixed without respect to authenticity. The breeches and shirt merge the cut of 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion with that of modern garments. The ensembles seem to form an entourage like the Bowery Boys of Clockwork Orange or Marlon Brando and his raucous gang in the Wild One. The jean jacket is both symbolic of working class dress and rebellious youth, yet the dainty floral prints and clown like portraits of revelers seem to up end this notion of rigid masculinity. The breeches have screen printed flowers sprouting from the genital zones as if to draw attention to the areas that are considered to be private. These costumes are the flowering of a unique identity which pays tribute to the historical framework of Carnival but is in the process of further identifying itself.



Figure 7 "Mardi Gras Bowery Boys"

## Chapter V: Conclusion

Bakhtin may argue that Mardi Gras represents a spectacle and pales in comparison to the powerful, creative event of Medieval Carnival, but the “life force” he ascribes to Carnival flourishes in rural Mardi Gras celebrations of southwest Louisiana. Its celebration reflects 500 years of tradition and clerical symbolism and a genuine inversion of the roles of authority that the grand pageantry and excessive behavior of bare-breasted women in New Orleans and hyper-sexualized carnival dancers in Rio de Janeiro lack. Admittedly, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro provide revelers a sanctioned place for a day of insanity and an acceptable placement for the “other,” much like the Dionysian and Bacchanalian festivals that allowed the removal of inhibitions and social constraints. However, they both lack a shared feast, much like the Feast of Fools of the Middle Ages and the origin of the communal gumbo shared at Cajun Mardi Gras. The Feast of Fools encouraged a festival atmosphere, a communal congregation, a synthesis of cooperation and participation without regard to dominating structures as all levels of clergy disposed of rich food and drink during the days leading up to Lent. If one were to stumble into a handful of the remote towns of Southwestern Louisiana like Mamou, Church Point, Eunice, or Basile in the weeks preceding Lent, one would be transported into a realm of excess and debauchery that carefully balances the limits of social structure and chaotic anarchy.

Bakhtin delights in the images of Francois Rabelais’s grotesque characters, Gargantua and Pantagruel, and celebrates their earthy, carnevalesque behavior. As language implies a power structure that tends to favor a dominant class, Bakhtin

welcomes their subversive corporeal language. He considers their “low” behavior refreshingly authentic and recognizes the need for those who are powerless in society to experience a brief celebration as one in power. I maintain that costumes representative of this political subversion exist on the dirt roads of Church Point, Mamou, and Basile, Louisiana. Furthermore, they embody the collective experience one sees in the Feast of Fools in 1496. When the coureurs, or runners, gather in the town’s center to beg for ingredients for the evening’s meal, and when they chase after chickens that will soon end up in the chicken and sausage gumbo, they know that the evening’s feast will be shared with all in the community, rich and poor. Furthermore, no shame results from their begging as exaggerated masks obscure participants’ identity as they destabilize notions of ideal forms. When I observe the phallic-shaped nose of a fellow Mardi Gras reveler, I am reminded of Bakhtin’s views on the body and its unlimited potential, especially since we all comprise the body of celebration.

Bakhtin’s “grotesque realism” revels in the collective experience and celebrates the body’s penetration. The orifices of the body, which are highlighted in Rabelais’s text as well as by the masked revelers who cavalcade in the streets of Church Point and obscure the boundaries between interior and exterior. The feasts of Carnival emphasize the body in its nature through eating, evacuation, or sex; these actions abandon the individual and resolved body and instead praised the unresolved collective form. These actions illuminate the limits of the body and locate sites of transgression. The temporary freedom of Mardi Gras welcomes young and old and rich and poor to perform transgressive acts in a socially acceptable format. Likewise, Bataille’s theory of “base materialism” venerates the lower strata of the body and questions hierarchic value

systems. His transgressive texts use the erotic body to destabilize idealized forms and move outside of an ordered reality which is reinforced by an ideological doctrine.

Foucault elucidates Bataille's transgressive studies which he believes help individuals to deconstruct and reestablish identity within their society. Bakhtin, Bataille, and Foucault confront the rationalism of the Enlightenment Period with sincere skepticism. Under the pretense of individual liberty and universal values, all three theorists agree that humanist thought brought the collapse of authentic Carnival culture, the marginalization of madness in society, and the repression of sexuality. The tenants of idealism constructed hierarchic value systems and this action enabled participants to venerate the "spiritual" and "ideal" over the "lowly" and "common."

One can easily observe these three social theorists influence in my costume work. My costumes invert the hierarchy of power. The "high" silken, costly vermilion-colored material lines my jackets and the "low" ticking material dominates on the outside. Additionally, silk-screened characters in subversive positions people the costumes' jackets. These characters represent Cajuns and Acadians alike as both populations were lowly in the hierarchy of power. I began developing costumes that explored the history of the Acadians and the regionally specific forms of Mardi Gras in Louisiana, by witnessing the Courir de Mardi Gras, which introduced me to the basic elements of the "runner's" costume. I noticed the potential that costumes have to give license to participants but also act as a canvas, which can be activated through movement and gesture. I became aware of the potential of textile designs to explore subversive yet decorative subject matter. Toile de Jouy refers to distinctive printed textiles manufactured by the Oberkampf manufactory in Jouy-en-Josas, near Versailles, France, from 1760

onward. This particular style of textile print articulates the popular fashions of the elite in France and Britain and represents a quality of life that is full of sensuality and luxury. I further established the historical context of the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 by researching fashion trends of the French court during this era. The carnivalesque informs the materials and elements that I use to construct my period garments.

Fashion plays a role in maintaining hierarchy but also gives voice to participants of Carnival who wish to subvert these symbols. Costume plays several distinct roles in transforming the person into the participant. Through the use of masks and costumes, the human form can be exaggerated with grotesque features. During the Middle Ages, the costumery of Carnival enabled participants to reject sumptuary laws imposed by the elite and, for a broader population, it gave license to disobey rules of decorum. The costumes and masks of Cajun Mardi Gras analogously reinforce the liminal freedom of Carnival and provide anonymity to act outside of normal social boundaries. The mask and costume which provide anonymity and allow individuals to engage in the debauchery also transform individuals into collective members of a festive forum where they are unified in their actions and lively demeanor. In the context of a traditional Courir de Mardi Gras, the costumes also present a symbolic attachment to the past and a historical lineage, a road map to cultural origins. I reflect on the use of textile patterns to pass on historical narrative through imagery and allude to the function of textiles as a placeholder of hierarchical relationships.

The symbolism and traditions of Mardi Gras in southwest Louisiana embody the historic passage of the Acadians. Coming from impoverished regions of France and blighted by continuous warfare, the lowly farmers colonized L'Acadie under the auspices

of the king and his wealthy land owners. With them they carried what was most accessible and most important, their cultural traditions, stemming back to a Medieval peasant's existence of toil and oppression. Though the Acadians came from humble beginnings, their celebrations give insight into a truly festive culture full of the billingsgate and folk humor that Rabelais championed hundreds of years earlier. The unquenchable spirit of the popular culture that Bakhtin references in his theory of the carnivalesque is clearly apparent in modern iterations of these festivals. The symbolism, although archaic, links contemporary renditions of Mardi Gras to a cultural heritage which understood the context of Rabelaisian imagery.

The Mardi Gras costumes of rural Louisiana utilize the archaic symbols of Medieval Carnival which mock the nobility, the clergy, and the scholars. The outdated symbolism does not only reference archaic power structures but also projects the ones to come and provides a method of satirically engaging with them. The Acadians encountered invariable power structures throughout their migratory wanderings before and after their expulsion from Nova Scotia. The expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755 provides another point to contrast the fashion trends of the elite and power structures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Acadians were successful in preserving their unique customs due in part to their geographic isolation, abandonment by governing bodies, and their precarious exchange of wardship between warring nations. They also held a tool to sublimate these experiences and further forge their identity, the celebration of Mardi Gras and the communal meals which were central to the festival and cemented their social bonds and reinforced their own ideology. This characterizes the resilient spirit of the Acadians during times when it would serve most beneficial to assimilate.

It is precisely because of the traumatic experiences of the past that it is necessary to uphold the traditions and protect them from further assimilation. The lampooning attitude of Carnival provides a key to hold on to old symbolism while playing with new forms. My research and costume work holds this point in mind. Practices to reaffirm and preserve community ties are still apparent in rural examples of Mardi Gras, although much of today's Carnival culture is informed by diluted and commercialized forms which lack the impact of Medieval and Renaissance Carnival, as Bakhtin makes clear. The popular forms of celebration are removed from the powerful anti-establishment symbolism but still function to remove inhibitions and social constraints. The value of researching Carnival and its iterations in Louisiana poses great understanding of festival culture and the resulting adaptations from the dominating structures of the Middle Ages. Investigating festival rituals associated with Mardi Gras also connects authentic celebrations to a larger cultural and theoretical framework.

Religious carnivals both make fun of traditional symbols and invent their own ludicrous symbols. The essences and archetypes of the Cajun performance of Mardi Gras are important clues to relate these customs to their ancestral home. The Feast of Fools began because of incongruities between the status of upper and lower level clergy and was emphasized by the growing alienation of the public by the church. The mocking of clergy, nobility, and scholars was based on the dichotomy between these classes and the majority of the public. It is one of the most interesting celebrations associated with the Catholic faith because it was celebrated for its own sake and the sake of the public, not directly to serve the part of religious service. In fact, Mardi Gras is not acknowledged by the Catholic Church as a religious holiday and is not placed on the liturgical calendar. Yet

it is practiced all over the world. The celebration focuses on the polarity of classes, status, gender, race, and allows the participants to assume the roles of the “other.” It embraces the taboo and engages the participants in a cathartic experience, although temporary, to “blow off some steam” and remove themselves from the harsh and disparate reality of social status in the Middle Ages. It was emblematic of a time of rural existence. It was in the rural areas far from the watchful eye of the hierarchy that these celebrations were given the freedom to express their base and animalistic nature and almost a millennium later these practices are still faithfully practiced in the rural cities of Louisiana. In an area where segregation is still apparent, the ability to abandon societal roles and poke fun at these inequalities still seems extremely relevant. Mardi Gras is a unique opportunity that gives participants a chance to vocalize the stresses of hierarchy.

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