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Genius Loci:
Towards a (Folkloristic) Ethnography of Creativity

INTRODUCTION

Last year, when I first introduced this project to an AFS audience, I framed it as my own response to the national debates that had erupted after the hurricanes of 2005 that put into question the wisdom of rebuilding an American city on swamp, or wetland. The futility of living in a place where one's life could so easily, or so it seems, be swept away was perhaps best captured in images of Cameron Parish, where no building was left standing except for the courthouse. Let us forego, I suggested, for a moment the confusion on the part of national entities that one's life is equal to buildings. Instead, let us focus on the people themselves, try to get inside their heads and understand what they see when they look out on a scape — dare we prefix land? — that seems so easily transmuted from land to water and back again in a blink of the eye.

As folklorists, our eyes are drawn to the things that people say and do: "we are an artifactual people." And so last year I outlined, albeit briefly, one of the verbal artifacts I had come across and then spent most of my time on what has really come to be the star of the show, the crawfish boat.

The crawfish boat is the *sine qua non* of an imagination that is not anxious about the transmutation of land and water. If, for the rest of us, there is some lingering concern about contamination, that land made wet cannot ever be trusted as land again, then the people living in south Louisiana do not share it. Cajun cattlemen long ago learned to reclaim coastal wetlands by building levees and then draining the water off. In the late nineteenth century, German farmers built levees on the gulf coastal prairie and flooded them to grow rice. The operative pairing in south Louisiana is not wetland or dry land but whether you are "pumping on" or "pumping off."

And so, my rhetorical response to the Katrina conversation is only the husk for a project whose kernel is the role of imagination in producing a response to the slow unfolding of history. If we as folklorists orient ourselves toward what is traditional, we do so because we understand that the passing of time is perpetual, incremental, and inevitable. It is the beating of our hearts that moves us always one beat further from our first and one beat closer to our last. Tradition is one way to negotiate a relationship to time, not necessarily to defeat it, but to harness its power to our own ends.

For everyone else but perhaps folklorists, tradition stands opposite creativity, but creativity was exactly my quarry and there could be no more striking example than a modern metal machine gracefully wending its way through the water to the clatter of its small bore engine and then lunging itself onto dry land, where it blithely rolls down the road to the next bit of water.

At the time of last year's meeting, I thought I had identified the maker of the first hydraulic boat, as they are known, Gerard Olinger, but it turns out that the first crawfish boat — or boats (more on this in a moment) — was hydraulic. It was, however, a pull boat, and Olinger was probably the first to produce a push boat. What followed the initial boat was a period of experimentation by fabricators and farmers before the current form was settled upon in the late eighties.

And so, my once simple story gave way to a complex one of simultaneous invention and diffuse experimentation. This complex story was itself set in a larger, unfolding social and economic matrix which is at the heart of modern American farming — and for which there is no time here to discuss.

What I would like to do here is to tell one very small part of the larger story before turning to a consideration of some of the issues at stake. I begin at what is one of two beginnings for the modern crawfish boats, one of two inventors: for the crawfish boat enjoyed a twin birth. (Yes, I can now confirm that it seems my destiny to be fated to a perpetual *pas de deux* with Levi-Strauss.) Moreover, the twinning will be one that rings continually through the history of the crawfish boat: that its makers and users are always

both Cajuns and Germans. The initial twinning is of the Cajun, Harold Benoit, with the German Tedmon Habetz, but much of my focus here will be on Mr. Benoit.

A TWIN BIRTH

Harold Benoit

Harold Benoit grew up in Thornwell, Louisiana about five miles due west of Lake Arthur along an old railroad line, and his childhood and adolescent memories of "crawfishing" was of catching crawfish when they drained a rice field at the end of the season. His family would scoop them up with a sack placed near where they had broken a field levee or, even more conveniently, placed over a drain pipe. His wife Juanita remembers much the same sort of thing happening on her family's farm outside of Morse.

And that was pretty much how crawfishing was done when the two met, fell in love, and married in the nineteen-fifties, shortly before Harold left Louisiana to serve in the Air Force. Juanita stayed behind, living with her family, and she remembers quite clearly the meal her family served her before she left to join Harold in Canada, where he was stationed: it was a heaping plate of crawfish étouffée made with crawfish caught in a thirty acre pond that her father, Alphe Simon, had set aside with the express purpose of fishing it. Over the next twenty years, Juanita returned time and again, whenever Harold was stationed somewhere she could not go, and she watched her father's business grow and grow. By the late seventies, she remembers, they were taking orders three weeks in advance, the demand was so great.

This timeline places Alphe Simon as an early entrant into the commercial crawfishing scene. Why did he start? Harold Benoit noted that Simon loved to experiment and he loved the outdoors. He loved to go crabbing and fishing, which he did often in nearby national wildlife refuges. But most of all, he loved talking, and so it seems to have been somewhat inevitable that Simon would find a way to combine his work as a rice farmer with his practices as an outdoorsman with his social nature, and in 1959 he started inviting the public to go into his rice fields, after he had harvested and re-flooded them, to catch crawfish for themselves using their own traps.

In the mid-seventies, Harold and Juanita's son Kevin began to work his grandfather's field while he was still in high school as way to make some money of his own. He fished the fields the same way everyone else was doing it, by placing traps around the edges of the field where he could get to them easily. He walked along the shoulder of a road or the crest of a field levee and emptied the traps first into a five-gallon bucket he carried in his hand and later into a small john boat that he pulled along as he walked.

Kevin graduated from high school in 1979 and gave up crawfishing when he took a full-time job. His father Harold retired from the Air Force in 1978 and, though he had started work as an assistant manager at a local feed store, decided to take Kevin's place in what was a decent, if also labor-intensive, side business for the family. In the fall of 1979 and the spring of 1980, Harold Benoit followed, quite literally, in his son's footsteps, pulling a boat through his father-in-law's flooded rice fields, emptying traps placed along the edge of the field and that were sometimes picked over by other crawfish predators: birds, nutria rats, people.

Benoit ran traps like everyone else that year and the following year, but he spent the summer of 1981, in the time-tested Louisiana rice culture's belief there had to be a better way, thinking about what kind of boat he could build that would not only pull him around, instead of him pulling it, but also allow him to fish the middle of the cuts. The middle had two things going for it: there had to be more crawfish there and it would be harder for lazier predators, especially people, to get access to the traps. As he daydreamed, he began to collect potential parts, scrounging reel motors from combines as well as various valves and controls.

On his very first boat, Benoit used a valve from a reel and a valve from a grain elevator off an old John Deere combine. They and a three-way valve were all mounted to the floor and operated by long handles so Benoit could operate the boat while standing up. There was, Benoit points out, nothing commercial on that first boat. No store-bought parts. He built the boat over the course of the summer and fall of 1980 and waited for his chance to try it out in the fields once they were flooded. While he waited, he ran it repeatedly in his carport, testing his lines to make sure their connections would hold. Everything seemed to

work, but when he put it in the water one thing became immediately obvious: the boat went too fast. Benoit had no way to vary the speed, to slow the boat down. He noted, “When you gave it fluid, boy, it took off.”

A year passed and then, in the fall of 1982, Benoit went to the first crawfish field day organized by his friend and fellow vocational agriculture teacher, Louis Kramer.

Louis Cramer

While Louis Cramer, a tall, lean German, seems an odd partner to Harold Benoit, a stocky Cajun. they formed a team that would launch a veritable revolution in crawfishing. They began by focusing on production efficiencies but by the time they were done they had participated in or created any number of organizations that sought to build and maintain a viable market for crawfish. They sought to turn what was then a variable windfall into a sustainable business for an area that faced an always competitive agricultural marketplace. Both were systematic in their approach to things. Cramer was the kind of man who not only taught a subject but knew its institutional history. He had observed the change in vocational agriculture programs from production to agribusiness, and he wanted to apply the same logic to crawfishing. Benoit was the retired military man who had experienced the cold war up close and understood that small things led to large outcomes. Together the two understood that while fishing crawfish out of fields occupied a nice niche for many farmers, bringing in extra cash that could offset a bad rice season, farming those same crawfish could be a viable business for others, perhaps one more stable and less subject to international pressures than agricultural commodities. They could not have, in that moment, anticipated the oil crash that would befall Louisiana’s economy in the eighties nor the influx of cheap Chinese crawfish in the nineties that would drive a number of folks out of business, but it may have been their ability to put crawfish on a business footing that allowed those who did survive the economic turmoil of those two decades the chance to do so.

Cramer started crawfishing in 1974 when he stocked a small, eighteen-acre field near his house. In 1975 he started harvesting the field, pulling a small, plastic children’s swimming pool behind him as he went. He had seen some folks trying to use boats equipped with

Go-Devils, but he felt they made too much of a mess. In 1980 he had helped to start a trade show of sorts: it began as a crawfish tasting at a dance hall between the town of Scott and the city of Lafayette. Increasing the market for crawfish had gotten him thinking about increasing production, and so in the fall of 1982 he held the first crawfish field day, a home-grown version of the larger field days held by the state university's agricultural research station. He invited folks to come out and his plan was to have a crawfish buggy made in Texas demonstrated; he was pretty sure it would get people talking.

Sure, everyone talked when Amos Roy of Beaumont demonstrated his machine. What wasn't there to say about something that seems to have looked a bit like the lunar land rover set down in the middle of a muddy Louisiana rice field? The operator sat in the middle of four large wheels that tracked through the shallow water reasonably well. He drove right up to a crawfish trap, grabbed it and emptied it to one side. It was an amazing machine, but it appears to have been eclipsed that day by a machine that turned up at the last moment, a johnboat-come-lately that was built by Tedmon Habetz, who wasn't entirely sure what he had just gotten himself into.

Tedmon Habetz

The Habetzes are a German family from "the Cove" as Roberts Cove is known among its denizens, but Ted Habetz did not grow up in the Cove. Instead, his father farmed near Loreauville, which is something of a center for boatbuilding in south Louisiana. It is the home of a number of boatyards, none of which have anything to do with the current story.

Habetz's role as the man credited with inventing the modern crawfish boat began in 1964, when his father decided to drain one of his fields that had been flooded by Hurricane Hilda. [Ironic, no?] He started crawfishing it. As far as I know, the Habetz family crawfished it like everyone else, using set traps and working from lightweight john boats pulled or pushed through the water.

Some time just before Louis Cramer's field day, Habetz' brother Bruno built an eighteen-foot boat. It was pulled through the water by a spoked wheel turned by a worm drive pulled from a combine. Ted Habetz built a somewhat smaller boat with a chain drive.

On the day of the demonstration by Amos Roy of his crawfish buggy, Benoit remembers seeing what he called "the first combine that anybody had ever seen. At some point Habetz must have switched the boat over to hydraulics, because, admiring what Habetz had done, Benoit turned to his friend Lawrence Adams and said, "Look, it's my boat."

Habetz ended up taking orders for four boats that first year, selling most of them to J. F. Noel of Kaplan. Later he would form his own company, Crawfish Combines, Incorporated, which would end up building three hundred boats over the next ten years. His partner in the business was David Louviere. Their business was housed in Ury Louviere's Welding Shop, which belonged to David's father. At night and on weekends they transformed first "green hulls" from Monarch and later their own custom-built double-raked hulls into crawfish combines.

Habetz notes that his boats were built with the larger ponds of the Bayou Teche region in mind. They were pull boats, with the driving wheel located at the front of the boat. Such boats, all the pull boat builders agree, are easier to steer, because the boat follows the wheel. Steering is much more important in push boats because the wheel follows the boat, and a boat's direction is subject to wind and shifts in the operator's weight as he leans over to pull or put a trap and then sits up to empty or re-bait it.

Back to Benoit

No one at that first crawfish field day on that crisp October day in 1982 had any idea that such distinctions, and many others, would soon become the subject of arguments over coffee at area feed stores — or for that matter the subject of history in the case of the present research.

By the following fall, Benoit had a working boat in the field. It was built with new parts for the hydraulic system, and he fabricated the additional steel structure he needed: the leftover plow that had been the original arm holding the wheel out in front of the boat

was replaced with a triangular tongue of heavy sheet steel that was hinged at the bow. All the important pieces of the contemporary boat appear to be in place. A high-RPM, small bore engine drives a hydraulic pump that delivers power to a ram that turns the boat and power to a hydraulic motor that can be run in either direction.

[Frugé video.]

Most importantly, Benoit had a working boat in the field. It wasn't long before he had cars and trucks lined up along the roads that bordered the fields he worked to see what was either a crazy contraption or a crawfish combine, depending upon whom you asked. Farmers showed up in carloads to watch Benoit run his traps. As they watched, they counted traps, pounds, and hours and the dollar signs piled up like sacks of crawfish on the bow of Benoit's boat. When he would come out of the field, farmers would tell him, "I gotta have that boat."

Benoit declined, "No, I'll tell you how to make one."

On one of these first days of spectators, one farmer came back. Bill Krielow told Benoit: "I want three, and I'll write you a check before you buy the first part." Benoit replied that that there was no schedule. Krielow's response was that Benoit could make them when he had the time.

"Okay," Benoit said. "I'll build you one and see how it goes."

By the time he had built Krielow's first boat, another farmer, Larry Lyons, wanted one, and so did somebody else down in Gueydan. Looking back, Benoit commented, "And it just snowballed." In the end, Lawrence Adams got the first boat Benoit made for someone else, and he made several more before he decided it was time to start charging for more than just the cost of parts. The first boat on which he made money was for Dexter Guillory, who convinced Benoit, who was tired of building boats by then, by insisting on paying for it.

[Guillory video.]

OTHER BUILDERS, OTHER BOATS

What followed in the rest of the eighties was a period of experimentation. Everyone was trying to find a way to put a boat in the water that could reliably reduce the high RPM of a small bore engine to a workable hull speed. There were a variety of complicating factors, including the overall weight of the boat, especially in relationship to the power plant, as well as the overall cost of the boat and its drive unit. No one was yet sure this commercial fishing of crawfish was going to work out.

In Milwaukee two years ago, Lee Haring suggested that one field ripe for cross-fertilization with folklore studies was cognitive science. My own particular interest in cog-sci is in the subfield of creativity studies. What the creativity studies has to offer us is an investment in precision harnessed to an interest in mental structure and processes. What we have to offer creativity studies is a long history of the study of creativity and the study of objects of sufficient size and complexity to be actually worth studying.

In particular, creativity studies tends to cling rather strongly to the individual. When an individual is studied as part of a group, the studies tend to abstract the group into something like a “field” or to constrict the group to labs of sciences or engineers, often working in close collaboration with stated goals and resources.

There can be no doubt that creativity is one of the central concerns of our time. The corporate raiders of the eighties and the process engineers of the nineties were hell-bent on stripping out the apparent fat of middle management in American corporations, only to discover that that was where institutional memory lives. Without memory, perhaps we could even say without a sense of tradition, a number of corporations blundered into our current era at a time when Asian economies were not only absorbing commodity manufacturing but building design capacity. American businesses staked their survival on the “value-added” ability of American ingenuity.

Creativity has become their battle cry. It has become an industry in and of itself, as any observer of the rapid growth of research parks and business incubators in and around small

cities can attest. My own home town is no different: we are told that our future lies with providing a skilled workforce for content industries. Everyone needs to produce digital media

Meanwhile, we all have bodies and those bodies have their own inputs — and outputs — and someone needs to attend to that. South Louisiana's light manufacturing, especially in the small welding and equipment shops that dot the landscape, seem to be a particularly fertile ground.