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The Matter of Mardi Gras

How People Use the Tangible Things of this World to Create the Intangible

Introduction

[2]

Much of my research for the past seven years has focused on the material folk culture of Louisiana, focusing especially on agricultural practices. Why agriculture? First, because Western agriculture, which we usually presume to be fully in the clutches of agribusiness, is so rarely the focus of ethnographic research. Second, because if there is a common experience for humans, it is dealing with, thinking about, and acting upon their environment in all its complexities—many of which are completely indifferent either to us as humans or to us as individuals. The agricultural environment offers such an environment, one especially where nature — and, as any farmer knows, the Chicago Commodities Exchange — is regularly “red in tooth and claw.” And, third, because working as I do in Louisiana where practically anything will be used for either tourist or entertainment industry purposes, I imagined that nothing could be more boring than a bunch of farmers riding around in tractors and, as it turns out, boats, trying to make a living from a landscape that has always been rather poor at providing one.

What I love most about the *material world* is the way it makes manifest something abstract like culture. *Material culture*, as Henry Glassie observes, is an “ungainly conjunction of the abstract and the concrete [that] cautions us to recall that we can know about culture only as it cycles in flashes and scraps through the sensate” (1999: 41). Put that way — and I do think that **that** is the only way to put it — everything we do and say is *material*. It’s all tangible. Words are tangible. We form them in the wet, muscular embrace of our mouths and push them out into the world with the contraction of our diaphragm. From our mouths they radiate out in waves that, luckily or not, vibrate thin membranes inside the heads of others, some of whom are not only human but also share enough

Let us for a moment play with what matters, with what is matter, and consider verbal culture to be a part of material culture — words, after all, always appear in material form: as letters pressed upon a page or waves of compressed matter that

make up the air we breathe. Out of these material things, the things we say and the things we do, we create immaterial things like, say, a fun time — for example, a country Mardi Gras run — and out of that fun time we build something even more immaterial, like a community.

[3]

The Krewe de Foux [the crew of fools], as they call themselves, traverse the small corner of the south Louisiana landscape known as Mermentau Cove. Over the decade that I have passed my time with them, people have done a number of things that matter to them or have done things to mark what matters to them: there has been a marriage during the run and there has been a somber celebration of death.

This presentation seeks to sketch a simple matrix of objects and ideas, in an attempt to understand not only how people manifest themselves in the world but also how they make their world manifest using both the ordinary and extraordinary means available to them during the particular moment that is Mardi Gras in the Louisiana prairies.

Structures

To understand the Krew de Foux, we must understand the larger constellation of Mardi Gras of which they are a part. And since we are binding ourselves to a material understanding of things, we will begin there, with the outward structures and work our way towards, inwards if you like, to the kind of mental structures which surely must lie behind such externalities.

[5] Since we are modern, we will begin with a cartographic view of the Mardi Gras enterprise and first consider that the country Mardi Gras is not one thing, but many things. Not one event, but many events. Not one collection of activities, each with its own collection of actions, but many collections of activities. The map before you roughly locates about a dozen *courirs*, but there are not only a myriad of smaller *courirs* of which I am aware, but I am also sure that there are a myriad of which I am not aware.

I am not alone in traveling the landscape at this time of year, and each of us that has driven about has a story or two about the *courirs* that you stumbled upon, sometimes by literally driving into the middle of it while you were not paying

attention. I once came upon a *courir* made up of men on horseback, kids on four wheelers, and a few trailers in a part of southwest Louisiana known as *L'Anse Maigre*, Starvation Cove. I chatted with the captain, as he towered above me on a horse, and then they slipped back down a dirt road to continue their business of the day.

But what is their business and what is their day?

We will get to the business in a moment, but it is important to understand the temporality of Mardi Gras.

[6]

Mardi Gras is, of course, a festival as folklorists call such things: a moment when the ordinary order of things is set aside for review, revision, and refutation. In cities and towns throughout south Louisiana, this means busy four, five, and six-lane streets are blocked off for parades, with people often sitting in lawn chairs all day with an ice chest nearby. That is, public drunkenness is in many ways not only tolerated but encouraged. (Up to a point. Always up to a point ... and that *point* is part of the active negotiation of social order and cohesion.)

The Mardi Gras season begins, in the present moment, shortly after the Christmas-New Year's holidays with balls and other kinds of social parties held in convention centers, VFW halls, hotel ballrooms, and community centers throughout the region.

[7]

Mardi Gras itself is the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday and the three and a half days leading up to the Tuesday. (What amounts to a very long weekend — which is one of the reasons I can be here with you today.)

Most of the *courirs* take place during this four day period, with a few taking place, or running as we will discuss in a moment, the previous weekend.

The Mermentau Mardi Gras always takes place the Sunday before Mardi Gras, except when, and this is important, it is SuperBowl Sunday. In those cases, it occurs on the Sunday before.

So holidays are flexible. Easter is a holy day. Ash Wednesday is a holy day. Christmas is a holy day. But Mardi Gras and New Year's are also holidays. How these things are weighted are subject to individual experience and desire. I once had a sheriff's deputy, who when he was a younger man an avid runner of Mardi Gras, report to me that whenever he starts work with a new employer he tells them: "You can have Christmas. And you can have New Year's. But you can't have Mardi Gras. That's my day."

[8]

Running & Stopping

Well what happens on this day that makes it so important to all the people who participate in it?

[9]

Perhaps the best place to begin is with how the participants themselves talk about these things. *Courirs de Mardi Gras* is usually translated as Mardi Gras Run. The groups that embark upon the enterprise are known as *runs*. As they move from *stop* to *stop* — more on this stopping business in a moment — they are said to be *running* Mardi Gras.

And so, during Mardi Gras, which is not the day but a flexible collection of days, a group of people constitute a *run*, a collective noun, in order to *run* a *stop* — note that *run* is a transitive verb here. The run is usually called *the* Mardi Gras, and individual runners *a* Mardi Gras. As in, "Hey, Mardi Gras, come over here!"

So, during, or on, Mardi Gras day, the Mardi Gras gambols around its part of the countryside stopping at houses and running them.

[10]

The Mermentau Mardi Gras does this in a part of the Louisiana prairies known as the Mermentau Cove, from which they draw their name, and so they call what they do "running the cove."

The cove is a peninsula of land bounded by three major waterways: Bayou Plaquemines Brûlées to the north, Bayou Queue de Tortue to the south, and the Mermentau River to the west. The Mermentau is itself the confluence of three

major bayous —Plaquemines Brûlées, Bayou Nezpiques, and Bayou des Cannes — and it is the source for Lake Arthur. The town of Mermentau sits near its head, where thanks to the size of the river it hosts a number of shipyards and where, thanks to the passage of the Southern Pacific rail line through it, it also hosts the Louisiana Rice Mill (which is on Mill Street if you are curious). Despite these advantages, the town itself is not large — indeed, the lines on the map you see may represent most, if not all, of the streets in the town — but it does draw significant traffic to it, which plays some part in the history of the Mermentau run that we may have time for later.

[11] So on a Sunday either in February or early March, the Krewe de Foux gathers in the town of Mardi Gras to prepare for their day's activities.

[12] They prepare the trailers in which they will ride, some of which have names like the Ben Gay trailer or the party trailer, and ...

[13] ... they listen to their captain Jimmy Cormier remind them of the rules as well as give them any special instructions for the day. E.g., Betty Hargrove's breast surgery.

When the time is right, the cry of "Load up, Mardi Gras" is heard and the run begins. Over the course of the day, they will stop at a number of places: some places are homes, some places are bars, some places are grocery stores, and every now and then, when the Mardi Gras is feeling particularly cocky, one place might be the Baptist Church in the nearby town of Estherwood.

At most of these places, there is an established rhythm, mostly for show since in almost all cases for a large Mardi Gras like the Kewe de Foux — which has hosted one hundred participants in some years — the stop has been pre-arranged between the run's organizers and the householders.

[14] Most households already have a sense of the time of day that the run is going to arrive, and, during nice weather, people are already out awaiting the run's arrival. As you can see in this photo, in the current moment, stop's rarely amount to only the household members, but typically include extended family and close friends — in some instances the household can outnumber the Mardi Gras, engulfing and assimilating them at some stops in a way that is entirely in keeping with the larger program of the day.

[15] The first to arrive is the captain, here riding a gallant white steed in the form of a crew-cab pickup truck usually known as a duallie. The dual rear wheels signal that the truck not only has the horsepower but also the tack to haul a trailer — if memory serves, this truck actually has a goose neck and not a fifth wheel hitch.

[16] The rest of the Mardi Gras arrives and the captain demonstrates [16], or performs if you prefer, his authority, keeping them “penned” up, or “trailered,” until after he has gotten permission from the household.

[] The captain *gets down* from his truck and he asks official permission for the Mardi Gras to get down to collect money for the local church.

[] Tight shot with the Thibadauxs reveals “B” armband on Cormier’s arm.

[] Swirling cape.

[] With permission granted, the captain turns from the household and to the Mardi Gras and calls them to approach the house, but, as he makes clear, as supplicants.

[] The first supplicant at this house this particular year was the Negresse, a controversial character that has remained a part of many Mardi Gras for better and/or for worse — we could talk about this for more hours than there are in this day, and so I will leave it for a question, if anyone is interested.

[] Others soon follow. All closely monitored by the krewe’s captains. Other runs have a more clear cut distinction between captains and runners, with some even having elaborate hierarchies, but the Mermentau Mardi Gras seems content to have its captains mostly denoted by baseball caps and open faces. A few captains, like Dale Trahan seen here in the foreground, prefer to keep their *capuchons*, as the tall conical hats are called, and their masks, so that they can also have fun.

[] - Dale Trahan.

[] - Burly Deshotel.

[] After the initial approach to the gathered crowd, the Mardi Gras begins to infiltrate, begging as they go.

[] As the begging unfolds, as the Mardi Gras unfolds, weaving itself in and among the crowd in a way that makes contact inevitable, the begging can become something more, something more like a threat.

[] As supplicants crawl sometimes on their hands and knees or sometimes on their bellies, they are quite literally, less than human, often animalistic in their form. Other Mardi Gras use this animalistic effect with great delight and they proceed in literal packs sometimes whooping, heightening the effect. The Mermentau run mostly likes to play with the idea of begging, where one asks for something with little or nothing given in return, with stealing, where one takes what one doesn't have. In some cases, the theft becomes a moment for blackmail, extorting money from the victim that should have been given in charity from the outset.

[] Ultimately, the begging (and the blackmailing) are about raising money, for the church in Mermentau to which most people in the Cove go ...

[] ... and so when people do give, and some give quite generously — substantially more than the requested “cinq sous” (five cents), they are rewarded with perhaps a thanks, perhaps a necklace (as the Krewe of Foux increasingly adapts some of the urban Mardi Gras' traditions), perhaps a hug.

[] Eventually the two groups are, as a result of the dramatic force of the Mardi Gras, intermingled in such a way that they are no longer two groups but one. And, as is usually the case in south Louisiana, a whole lot of visiting takes place. For some, these are part of conversations that happen daily or weekly. For others, these visits are less frequent, less regular. For a few, this is the annual visit.

[] At some, younger Mardi Gras, having less to talk about, get bored, especially the young men, and they begin to display their boredom in a variety of ways.

[] One of the more common displays is to climb into trees. Because actions require reactions: the captains must demand that they come down, which the Mardi Gras refuse to do. In Mermentau, the usual response from the captain's is to whip someone out of the tree. (Elsewhere, in other Mardi Gras, this sometimes leads to the Mardi Gras falling out of the tree in such a way that he becomes in fact *fallen*, and he must be revived, usually with stronger drink than the beer that otherwise flows freely throughout the day.)

[] What generally happens next is that more and more Mardi Gras begin to find ways to get into trouble.

[] Perhaps by springing from a garbage can like a jack-in-the-box.

[] The overall effect is of a half dozen little dramas playing out for whoever happens to pay attention. No announcements are made, no playbills handed out, curtains pulled back.

[] Still scripts are followed. Ordinary materials — a garbage can, a dolly, a barbecue pit, a wheel barrow, a crawfish trap — are turned into things which they are not — a jack in the box, a people mover, a treasure chest, a coop for a small plastic chicken.

[] Off-stage, the elders confer about the time, when they are due at the next stop, how much money has been gathered, and if it is the moment for the final act in the performance.

[] When the captains decide the moment is right, the Mardi Gras does what has become the most famous part of the *courir*: the chicken chase.

[] If there are documentary filmmakers or journalists present, then this is the moment that cameras get turn on and focused — in my experience only the play gets noted, recorded; all the visitation, all the making of community, is ignored.

[] And everybody else gets their cameras out, too, because, let's be honest, the chicken chase is fun.

[] Just as importantly, the chicken chase opens the door to a myriad of other social...

[] ... and socializing activities.

[41] And the Mermentau Mardi Gras is a decidedly very social *courir*. That is their principle focus over all other festival dimensions.

[42] But at some point it is time to go, and the stop comes to an end. The Mardi Gras loads up and heads to the next stop.

[43] Making a final salute as they pass.

The Ordinary Extraordinary

One run done, near the end of our time together, it is perhaps time to pause to consider what all has been accomplished and how it was accomplished.

[] One group of individuals costumes itself in order to visit a number of other groups of people. At each group, they first approach as outsiders but then intermingle in order to form a single group.

[] As the stop, or visit, progresses, masks are slid to the side, beer is drunk together, news is shared, children are held.

Each of these actions is manifested materially in the world, and it is to that material world we attend.

The Extraordinary Extraordinary

And that is why I wish to leave you today with an account of an extraordinary moment in the extraordinary event that is Mardi Gras. A moment that reminds us of our material nature.

[] If you recall an earlier image from our time together, Jimmy Cormier wore an arm band with an elegant B embroidered on it when he greeted the Thibodauxs in 2012. He wore that “B” because Burt Hargrove, the husband of the couple whose house was the next stop had been killed that winter, killed when a young woman, a high school girl, drifted into his lane on while texting. Burt swerved to avoid her, and in saving her life, he gave up his own.

When the Mardi Gras contacted his wife about what she wanted to do that year, she asked that they please come, please don’t stop, as it were, making the world bright.

And so the question was how to proceed: how to honor Burt’s death and Betty’s desire to continue, to maintain life in the presence of death.

And this is what they did.

[51] They did not come swaggering in riding on their trailers. They did not play loud music. They did not stop in front of the house, calling attention to themselves and making everything else come to a halt.

Instead, the they stopped well short of the house, walked down the road, and ...

[52] ... as they neared the house, they knelt down, and stayed there while one of their own played “Amazing Grace” on a button accordion.

[53] Grown men cried.

[54] And cried.

They cried because an important cog in the creation of the community had ceased to turn. They cried because they knew that as much as they missed him, his wife and his family missed him more. They cried because on one of the happiest days of the year, one feels sadness all the more. Finally, they cried because they could, and should, and their chosen form, the Mardi Gras run, made it possible for them to be fully human in ways that we perhaps deny ourselves during ordinary times. The extraordinary can do that for us.

[55] And so embracing others in this moment meant so much more, and when Betty Hargrove called out, “Okay, y’all, let’s have some fun, because Burt would’ve wanted us to.”

[56] They did.

Thank you. [57]

Other Topics

- History of Mermentau Mardi Gras (and the role of C’est Bon).
- Story of the trucker on Route 90.
- The line dance.

Lafayette, Louisiana
March 2014