

Bridge Work

Repatriating Mardi Gras Indian Photography with the House of Dance & Feathers

Rachel Breunlin

On a cold winter's night in 2009, Ricky Gettridge invited me into his ranch home on Tennessee Street in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. He had recently moved back after renovating his house that had been flooded in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina, and everything was new. We had not met before, but he welcomed me because his good friend, Ronald W. Lewis, wanted to include some of the artwork he had donated to the House of Dance & Feathers—Lewis's small, grassroots museum located in their neighborhood—for a catalogue we were creating. I pulled up a photograph of a beaded rhinestone patch on my computer that was part of a digital photography archive we were creating (Fig. 1). In 1990, Gettridge sewn this patch for a headpiece, known in Mardi Gras Indian vernacular as a "crown," for Lewis's son, Rashad. As Gettridge leaned closer to look at the stitching, he was taken back to his own childhood, explaining,

My daddy taught me how to sew in this style of stonework. Place the stone, thread the needle. There is a hole in each side of the rhinestone. The center one, in this picture, has four holes. You come up from the bottom, go over the edges and back down a couple of times for durability. To make it stationary. Then you shield it with sequins and beads to come up with different layers.¹

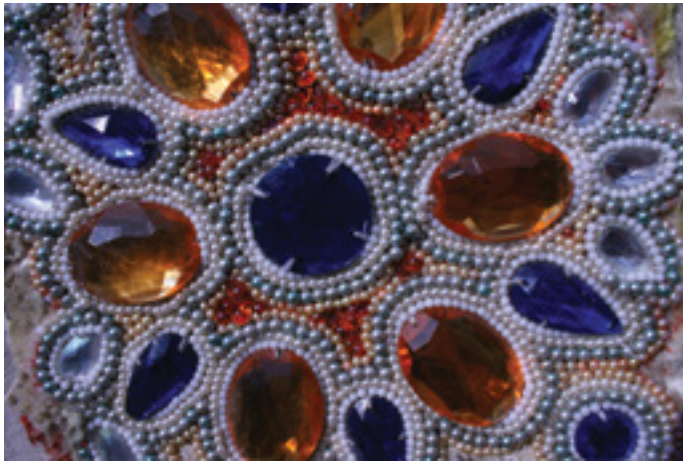
The long hours that go into creating an Indian suit can be an individual pursuit, but more often, a complex network of relationships go into supporting the creativity. Henry John Drewal, who has studied the work of master beaders has found that, "the act of beading requires intense concentration and small-scale, delicate repetitive actions—something that makes time pass without notice ... and creating a dream-like state Beading is thus a physical as well as a metaphysical experience in which art-

ists become both masters and mastered by their own medium" (Drewal and Mason 1998:54). Lewis's experience is similar. He says, "You get the feel in your hands, in your eyes ... In the year of making a suit, you may go through numerous hardships and distractions. The sewing becomes a meditation." It is through the long hours of sewing patches that bonds like Lewis and Gettridge's are created. And when two tribes meet on the street for a ritual battle of "who's the prettiest," it is the beadwork (Fig. 2) they are going to assess (ya Salaam 1997).

Recalling the years of labor, Gettridge said, "I always felt good to help any and everybody who would be serious about this ... I like to inspire and see it happen ... I've helped start plenty of them, and some became better than me. They were students of mine. I helped birth them into the game." One of his early converts, Lewis was initiated into the world of beading while they were in middle school in the mid 1960s. Lewis remembers, "I went [over to his house] not knowing that I was going to end up with a lifetime addiction to the thread and needle."

On Lewis's tours at the museum, he often recounts the origin story of Mardi Gras Indians in the city: "Coming out of slavery, 'You're not going to give us a place in society, we'll create our own.' In masking, they paid respect and homage to the Native American for using their identity and making a social statement that despite the odds, you're still not going to stop." Yet the ritual cycle of "masking"—a word with a broad connotation in Mardi Gras Indian vernacular, which means to wear and perform in an "Indian suit" on carnival day—also has roots in other black vernacular forms as well (Fig. 3).

The writer Kalamu ya Salaam, who grew up in Lower Ninth Ward, has written, "Like blues, jazz, and other deeply rooted examples of African American culture, 'Injuns' (as neighborhood people affectionately refer to them) date back to the post-Recon-



1 Close-up image of a beaded patch by Ricky Gettridge that is on display at the House of Dance & Feathers.

PHOTO: DEVIN MEYERS, COURTESY OF THE HODF

2 Ronald "Buck" Baham, Big Chief of the Seventh Ward Warriors, known for his meticulous beadwork, wearing a suit he sewed in the "downtown" three-dimensional style.

PHOTO: RONALD W. LEWIS, COURTESY OF THE HODF



struction era ... a significant period of racist repression and outright terror" (ya Salaam 1997:11–12). At other periods of time in New Orleans history, carnival masking was also used in the black community in the struggle for equality. For instance, Lewis often cites a cultural organization based in downtown New Orleans, Tambourine and Fan, for being an inspiration for his own activism. The cofounder, Jerome Smith, was a member of the Congress for Racial Equality, and supported many Indian suits while also participating in Freedom Summers. As an organization, Tambourine and Fan directly articulated the connection between Mardi Gras Indian culture and organizing for civil rights.²

Similarly, Gettridge and Lewis grew up during the Black Power movement, worked on countless suits together for people who masked all over the city, and eventually helped start a tribe in their own neighborhood called the Choctaw Hunters. When Lewis retired in 2002, he apprenticed with a community-museum in Tremé called the Backstreet Cultural Museum, then took his collection of art objects and photographs, and turned it into his own museum.

Like Lewis's experiences with sewing Indian suits, his approach to building the House of Dance & Feathers was collaborative. He invited people involved in what he refers to as "the culture" and asked scholars and photographers to donate objects and images that were significant to the story he was trying to tell: "I want to educate the world about our great culture, and why we are so successful at it even though the economics say we ain't supposed to be ... People come to New Orleans, and the first thing they want to signify is our economics instead of looking at our creativity." This creativity is connected to what Stuart Hall calls "the Black repertoire," in which "people of the black diaspora ... have worked on [them]selves as canvases of representation" (1998:27). For Lewis, the museum exhibits he creates at the House of Dance & Feathers become even larger ones.

In this article, I explore the collaboration between the House of Dance & Feathers (referred to in this essay as HODF) and the Neighborhood Story Project, a collaborative ethnography organization in partnership with the University of New Orleans that I co-direct. The two-year project (2007–2009) had the goal of recording Lewis's journey from artist to curator, and documenting his collaborative curatorial strategies. The result was the publication of a book, *The House of Dance & Feathers: A Museum by Ronald W. Lewis*. Working together, Lewis and I created a rough draft of all the text, photographs, and objects that we wanted to use, and then talked to the people represented in the images or who had donated objects to gain their approval and to develop more nuanced stories behind the images. The consultation process can be seen as a kind of "call and response" that has been so important in African American culture (Ashe 1999:280). Following the structure of many performances in both sacred and secular realms, it was interactive, participatory, and broke down barriers between the curator, ethnographer, and artists/performers.³ The stories that came from this "repatriation" project were included in extended captions that created a multivocal collaborative ethnography of both the museum and the culture it represents.

COMMUNITY MUSEUMS

In a survey of contemporary ethnographic and indigenous media, Terrance Turner points out that self-representation and self-objectification are important components in the struggle to "redefine ... identities and places in the social and political-eco-



3 The Creole Wild West, with Big Chief Walter Cook second from right, is the oldest Mardi Gras Indian tribe in the city.

PHOTO: RONALD W. LEWIS, COURTESY OF THE HODF

nomic” world-order (1995:104). Along with other forms of media, community-based museums have become important sites to develop counter-hegemonic visions and voices. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepard’s research on the development of community museums in the United Kingdom has produced a useful definition:

The defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms (2009:74).

Although many organizations self-identified as community archives or museums do not make a strong distinction between the two activities, they understand the power inherent in establishing a formal, institutional status, as a way of honoring the knowledge embedded in a community (Schwartz and Cook 2002:14). In this way, these grassroots institutions often make important strides in improving the self and external image of particular groups and locales, and contribute to collective “memory production.” However, in scholarship around these museums, more attention is often given to their broader political statements than the collections that have been developed.

Prior to working on the catalogue, Lewis’s deep commitment to the African American performance traditions in New Orleans had drawn thousands of visitors to the museum, but the importance of the collection itself had not been critically examined or articulated outside of his tours. Part of this disconnect comes from how he has archived his collection. Visits to the museum are centered around a presentation and question-and-answer session from Lewis, with the museum objects on display around him. These tours allow visitors to feel a genuine personal connection to the artwork. Swept up in Lewis’s narrative, the museum tours create memorable experiences that inspire visitors to rethink their notions about public cultures of the city, and the rebuilding of neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward.⁴ However, for those expecting a more conventional museum experience, visiting the HODF can produce cognitive dissonance. More conventional museums often construct a particular “aura” (Smart 2001) around objects by spacing

them out on white walls next to small plaques with information about them. In contrast, Lewis’ exhibits consist of a layering of objects that form shrine-like assemblages cutting across time and place, and often work on a metaphoric level without any text panels for further reference (Fig. 4). Sometimes, these richly layered displays can be perceived as disorder, as was the case when a major national foundation interested in supporting grassroots museums did not fund the HODF, in part because of his non-traditional methods of display and lack of written information about his archive.

Lewis’s collaborative and interactive approach to museum display, however, does fall within the rubric established in the field of African art history. For example, African art exhibitions typically feature music and dance, as well as visual arts. This curatorial approach began more than thirty years ago, when Robert Ferris Thompson wrote that “Africa introduces a different art history, a history of danced art, defined as a blending of movement and sculpture, textiles, and other forms” (Thompson 1979:xii). Many curators of museums and traveling exhibits have responded by inviting ethnographers and photographers to contribute supplemental text and images to their projects as a way to represent art objects in practice (see, for instance, Cosentino 1995; Fagaly 1997, 2011; Drewal and Mason 1998; Lamp 2004). Much of the scholarly literature on Mardi Gras Indians also includes discussions of these kinds of sensory layers—they can be found in the artistry of the suits, the tribal structure, the songs and dance that accompany different positions, and the ritual meetings of gangs at practice and on the street (Nunley and Bettelheim 1988, Roach 1992, Lipsitz 1988, Smith 1994, Turner 2009).

In addition to an integrative approach to the display of African art, many art historians and ethnographers use photography to illustrate artistic production and to display art within a cultural context. Meant to be representative, the subjects of many of these photographs often remain anonymous. In my work with the HODF, however, I quickly realized that we could not use the images in Lewis’s collection without acknowledging who the people in them were and how work fit into the intricate social and artistic relationships involved in the production of Indian suits. As Lewis said, “One of the greatest things I learned from the Mardi Gras Indian culture was to get to know the person out of that costume. Get to know him as an individual. When you see a photo of mine, I usually know the stories behind the suits ... We got to know each other on a personal basis, and this is how I try to run my museum, too.” To create a catalogue with Gettridge’s beadwork without acknowledging his friendship with Lewis would have diminished the understanding of the culture of sewing. Yet, to honor these relationships while turning Lewis’s collection into a book, we also had to recognize, and then navigate, the complex relationships between Mardi Gras Indians and the media, especially after Hurricane Katrina..

AFTER THE STORM, MEDICINE

On Tupelo Street—named after a tree that grows in the Louisiana swamps—the House of Dance & Feathers sits between Bayou Bienvenue and the Mississippi River. Just over a mile away from the Intracoastal Navigational Canal, which channeled Hur-

ricane Katrina's storm surge into the neighborhood, the museum sits behind the Lewis's modest home. The building's distinctive roofline can be seen from the street (Fig. 5). The architect, Patrick Rhodes, who rebuilt the museum in 2006, explained it this way, "We had to elevate it out of the private realm. We had to make it a public building in some way. We used the roof to express that idea ... It's got this big rolling curve and it's flowing above the building ... This idea of floating" (Breunlin 2008:88).

As one of the first buildings in the Lower Ninth Ward to be rebuilt with the help of a large number of volunteers from around the country, Lewis's exhibits and archive showcased what the neighborhood had been, helped people reimagine what could be, and sent a political message that, as Lewis said, "We're not going nowhere and we're going to continue doing what we're doing." The story of the rebuilding of the museum has been extremely well-documented in high profile exhibits at the Venice Biennale in 2006 and the Cooper-Hewitt Design museum in 2007 (Fig. 6), as well as in publications such as *The New Yorker* (Baum 2006; see also Baum 2009, Smith 2007). Yet for the first few months, the museum was nearly empty, as Lewis only had the collection he was able to carry with him when he evacuated from the storm. Many Mardi Gras Indians had lost their own photographs and suits in the floodwaters as well. For the museum to grow again, Mardi Gras Indians would need to sew again.

In October of 2005, the writer Tom Piazza ended his love song to the city, *Why New Orleans Matters*, with images of carnival: "We will pass one another on Mardi Gras Day with the sound of a parade in the distance, or a gang of Indians coming down the street ... and give thanks once again for this beautiful day, this life, this beautiful city" (2005:163). But as Mardi Gras 2006 approached, a great debate in newspapers, amongst politicians, in planning charettes, and around mold-ridden and gutted homes developed (Pareles 2006, Ringle 2006). CNN reported, "The Crescent City remains deeply divided about whether to hold its 150th official Mardi Gras festival at all. Many damaged homes and businesses sit unoccupied after the storm and evac-

uations that have dwindled New Orleans permanent residents from nearly 500,000 to just over 156,000" (Patterson 2006). Darryl Keys, Second Chief of the Comanche Hunters (Fig. 7), addressed the mixed feelings that also existed within the Mardi Gras Indian community, and explained why his tribe decided to work on suits during the first months of the recovery:

The Comanche Hunters was the first gang from the Lower Ninth Ward to mask after Katrina. Three of us said, "We're gonna all chip in and do it." Most people weren't gonna mask or come back for carnival because they lost their homes. Why mask? I decided to do it for the people. While everyone was in Texas and all over the world, I was sitting at home sewing. A lot of my patches and materials in my attic never got wet in the storm—they were dirty, but salvageable. When I saw the patch on my old boots, I felt like I wanted to make new pair, but then I said, "No, I'm going to let people see the dirt. They survived the storm." The original boots were blue, but I took the patches off and chose red material for the people who died.

The day we paraded, we went back in the Lower Ninth Ward. We said a prayer by the barge that broke through the levee and then we started walking up Claiborne to the St. Claude Bridge, singing two songs we made up—"Busted Levee" and "How You Gonna Cross the Water." You got to cross the bridge to get to and from our neighborhood. A lot of people were sitting on that bridge during the storm and had no food, no water. And the bridge was up, so they couldn't cross.

That day I walked across the bridge in the muddy shoes that went through Katrina, I felt like nothing could stop me. If Katrina couldn't stop these shoes, nothing could. I wanted to donate those. A patch is something on your body but the shoes—walking through the Ninth Ward—means a lot.

They pulled money and time together to create the patches, and in taking to the streets on Mardi Gras day, they symbolically reclaimed their neighborhood. Afterwards, Keys donated the shoes to the HODF (Fig. 8), telling Lewis, "Never clean them because you'll take the royalty out of it. These shoes are straight off the land." The dirt on the rhinestone shoes becomes an alchemy of hope for the rebuilding of the neighborhood.

The land in the Lower Ninth Ward has become some of the most contested ground in the rebuilding of New Orleans (Bourne 2007). Early media reports assumed that because the area was a predominantly working-class African American neighborhood, residents would not have owned the property or have control over the rebuilding of their homes. In fact, 54% of the homes were owner-occupied (Green, Bates, and Smyth 2007:327–28). The museum became a symbol of the commitment to return. It was donations like Keys's that helped to rebuild the collection.

By the time the catalogue was completed in 2009, the one-room museum was overflowing with donations. On the wrap-around deck, a pirogue and the tailgate of pick-up truck with a landscape of the city skyline, seen from the Lower Ninth Ward levees, was spray-painted in neon orange. Inside, Lewis's collections filled every free space. Pale peach, bright yellow, baby blue, and dark navy ostrich plumed fans from second line parades hung from the ceilings. Hand-sewn beaded patches from Mardi Gras Indian suits were on display in glass cabinets. There is a wall of photographs honoring the leaders, or "Big Chiefs" of many of the prominent tribes, and a long table full of books and photography albums.

5 The House of Dance & Feathers in Ronald W. Lewis and Charlotte Lewis' backyard on Tupelo Street in the Lower Ninth Ward.

PHOTO: PATRICK RHODES, COURTESY OF THE HODF





7 Darryl Keys, Second Chief of the Comanche Hunters from the Lower Ninth Ward in 2006.

PHOTO: ELLIOTT HAMMER

8 Darryl Keys' shoes from Mardi Gras 2006, donated to the House of Dance & Feathers.

PHOTO: DEVIN MEYERS, COURTESY OF THE HODF



On a back wall is an exhibit called “The Katrina Story” (Fig. 9). Along with memorabilia from the first months after the storm, Lewis laminated copies of articles about the neighborhood that came out in the local paper, *The Times Picayune*. Headlines include: “What Took You So Long?” “After the Water, Utter Emptiness,” and “The Return of the Ninth.” There is also a photo essay from Mardi Gras 2006 entitled “Native Spirit,” which documents members of another Lower Ninth Ward tribe who masked that year, the Red Hawk Hunters. The photograph displayed in a central and prominent place on the spread is of Gang Flag Alphonse “Duey” Robair next to a wooden building that has been nearly pushed to the ground by the force of the water. His flag is covered in white ostrich feathers dipped in blue dye. Looking at this image, and many others like it, it is tempting to use the work of Robert Ferris Thompson to analyze the significance of feathers to Mardi Gras Indian traditions. Thompson makes the following connection between the use of feathers amongst the Bakongo people of Central Africa and diasporic masking traditions:

Feathers on masks or headdresses in Kongo are medicines, referring to confidence and strength built into the vaunting powers to fly. They teach that it is possible to cure illness by rising out of ourselves, emerging from our physical situation into full spiritual awareness and potentiality. Then, by means of radiant sky-implying feathers, heaven can speak of cures we need (1988:25).

While the Bakongo conception of feathers does not necessarily translate into the context of Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans, Thompson’s interpretation can serve as a metaphor for tenacity of New Orleanians to overcome adversity after Hurricane Katrina. And while the turkey feathers and ostrich plumes used in Indian suits come from grounded birds, depending on how an image is framed, a photographer can evoke the idea of flight (Fig. 10). This metaphor of art rising above the destruction caused by the storm has captivated New Orleanians of diverse backgrounds, and explains why images like Robair’s are so powerful. To borrow Thompson’s analogy, feathers have become medicine. Yet as poetic as it is, the way photographers have gravitated to the suits of Mardi Gras Indians has brought up a conflict inherent in photography: Are photographs the representation of truth or a mechanism for metaphor (Watriss 1998:3).

REPATRIATION: DONATIONS AS RECIPROCITY

The powerful symbolic possibilities of Mardi Gras Indians—within a post-Katrina recovery and before, within the broader context of the African diaspora—has led to many documentary and academic projects that are often resented by the Mardi Gras Indians and considered exploitative. Lewis’s good friend Big Chief Ray Blazio of the Wild Apaches (who has donated a significant number of photographs to the museum) was not shy about articulating the feeling of many, “A lot of them came around with that education—Ph.D.s and stuff—and stole a lot. They’re just repeating what they done heard and using extravagant words. They never masked, but people be believing what they say.” (see also Clifford 2004) The HODF joins other community-based organizations like the Backstreet Cultural Museum and the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame as interventions into the politics around who has the right to represent black cultural traditions in the city—an issue that was present before Katrina, but have been magnified by the storm (Regis 1999, 2001; Barrios 2010; Regis, Breunlin, and Lewis 2011).

On St. Joseph’s Night 2011, one of the largest gatherings of Mardi Gras Indians of the year, documentation and surveillance were happening all at once. As I stood on the corner of Washington and LaSalle in Central City with hundreds of other people to enjoy the street theater, I talked with some friends from the Ninth Ward who I’d worked with on book projects in the past. While they were waiting for their cousin, Darryl Keys of the Comanche Hunters, to come out, I made arrangements with a colleague to submit a panel discussion for an anthropology conference. In between, I met up with Cynthia Becker, who was working on her article for this issue, and ran into neighbors, curators, social justice activists, and “diasporic tourists” as well as residents of other neighborhoods who came out to see the tribes from their area.

As the cobalt blue of dusk faded into darkness, the streetlights and an enormous full moon illuminated the street. The Red Hawk Hunters came up Washington Avenue, bringing a huge crowd, known as a second line, that sang, “Hey, don’t go nowhere, the Ninth Ward’s on its way!” On each corner, police officers stood in twos to monitor the Indians and the crowds, while a group of activist-lawyers were there to watch the police, who had unjustly shut down the event in 2005 (Barrios 2010,

Reckdahl 2010). Documentary equipment ranged from professional video cameras, iPads, and still photography cameras to cell phones. All were interested in taking images to record the multilayered spectacle of the night—some as you would any personal event, such as graduation or the prom, and others for professional uses. The issues have become so contested that some Indians have enlisted lawyers to explore how they can copyright their suits in the public realm. These lawyers were out on the streets as well, monitoring the event (Robertson 2011).

Artist L.J. Goldstein, who has photographed street culture in New Orleans for more than fifteen years, reflects on the tension between documentation, commercialization, and art:

How previous photographers have handled the socioeconomics of their work, whether real or perceived, has created an emotional topography in this community difficult to navigate. The general belief is that photographers are making money while those photographed receive no compensation— not a dime, a print or a thank you. Generally, it's true, the economic stream is unidirectional, but it also negates the creativity involved in the art form. It is not helpful that the language of photography uses words like "taking," "shooting," and "capturing." This is why I am adamant about saying out there in the streets that I am "making photographs."⁶

And once taken, the images, created for many different purposes, take on a life of their own, which can change over time and who has access to them.

In the book *Pictures Bring Us Messages*, anthropologists working for the Pitt Rivers Museum examine what happened when they returned an archive of photographs to the Kainai, a Blackfoot-speaking tribe, in Southern Alberta, Canada. The photographs come from the collection of an Oxford anthropologist, Beatrice Blackwood, who traveled across Blood Reserve for two days in 1925 taking pictures. She had an ethnographic interest in the subject matter, photographing how people wore moccasins, shawls, earrings, farm overalls, straw hats to show the blend of "traditional" and "assimilated" aspects of Kainai culture, but she did not document individual names and biographies of the people she photographed (Brown and Peers 2006:267). Archived at the Pitts River Museum, the photographs remained anonymous until, through the work of Pitt Rivers museum staff, the images were returned, and the stories and lineages came together in personal memories. As Peers and Brown write, "We seldom know much about their other realities, about the quite different sets of meanings attached to them within their source communities, about who the people in such photographs are to their relatives, who often recognized them and reattach biography and history to their images" (2006:267).

In the case of taking photographs at an event like St. Joseph's Night, images of Mardi Gras Indians are often representational as well. Coming in for a day or two at big events, photographers rarely know the people in the pictures they take. In



or the name of the tribe or role within the tribe that someone is "running"—"Spyboy," "Flagboy," which are positions that are often identifiable by beadwork or accessories.

Since the storm, the Red Hawk Hunters have become especially popular with photographers. When we talked about the images of their tribe that had been produced, the Big Chief of the tribe, Nelson Burke, identified a different set of priorities:

Everywhere I go, I see myself in places I didn't expect to see my picture. A lot of them cats try to get a good facial shot to show off the feathers. But what we're looking for is the artwork—I want to see what you've done that year. I know you gonna mask, but I want to see what you've sewn. The feathers only take a few days to put on a suit. It's the beadwork that counts.

The facial shots that Burke describes are similar in many respects to the images produced by early portrait photographers of American Indians. Often unconsciously, the image of the "stoic" Indian, as represented by photographers such as Edward Curtis, is reproduced in the framing of images of Mardi Gras Indians so that what might have just been a bored moment in between activities is digitally captured as ponderous thought (see Faris 2003 for a discussion of Curtis's images).

While there is not a lot of literature on the "return" of images to community-based archives, there is a growing body of work around returning images from larger Western institutions to indigenous communities.

Photographs, effectively locked away in institutions, were potentially important voices in indigenous histories, and have had a profound effect on practices of ownership, access to images, right to knowledge, and to ideas of evidence and value. Increasingly, indigenous people have begun to demand control over their own histories, represented by material and visual collections in Western museums and archives, a process that ... is increasing their ability to assert their own identities and political voice (Edwards and Morton 2009:18).

Of course, photography is a reproducible medium, which allows for copies of the same images to exist in multiple locations, side-stepping some of the more contested issues in museum repatriation (Pinney 1989:57). In New Orleans, Lewis has considered his museum as a site for repatriation—an archive



11 Photograph of Super Sunday, near A.L. Davis Park (often still referred to as Shakespeare Park), by L.J. Goldstein expands the frame to include the “third line.” Here we see three pairs: a mother holding her child, a Mardi Gras Indian dancing with a little boy, and a photographer with her camera. Goldstein is a board member of the HODF, helped rebuild the museum after the storm.

12 Photograph of Percy Francois, of the Comanche Hunters, is part of Lori Waselchuk’s series, “Love and Concrete,” which explores the North Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.

for photographers who want to donate images they take at large public events like St. Joseph’s Night.⁵ Since his initial call-out, he has also begun to receive unsolicited donations as well. The following email, sent to Lewis, is not uncommon:

I am going through my photographs and I found about 30 digital photos from Super Sunday 2007. Of course, I was there and saw the “third line” myself so I know there are many, many photos floating around out there, but sometimes they just never make it back to the people who really ought to have access to them. Certainly you all are much more likely to know the people in these photos, so I would be glad to donate these to you (Anonymous, Jan. 17, 2011).

The “third line”—a term coined by photographer Michael Smith—refers to the artists and documenters who follow the participatory parades (Fig. 11), known as second lines, led by Mardi Gras Indians and Social and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans (Smith 1994, Regis 1999, Regis, Breunlin, and Lewis 2011). Many of the professional and amateur photographers take stunning images but do not have the relationships, or perhaps the financial resources, to share the images with the people they are documenting. After seeing so many of these photographs on display around the city, it is sometimes shocking to see the collections of images that Mardi Gras Indians own themselves—often mostly 4x6 snapshots taken with disposable or inexpensive powershot cameras. For photographers who are particularly concerned with aesthetics, donating images to the museum not only gives them an opportunity to have their work shown in a grassroots museum located in a neighborhood with strong Mardi Gras Indian connections, but has the potential to help “repatriate” them to the tribes represented.

For instance, documentary photographer and arts activist Lori Waselchuk’s image of Percy Francois, of the Comanche Hunters, crossing the North Claiborne Bridge (Fig. 12). Waselchuk says, “I continue to think about New Orleans as an island: its bridges standing irresolutely as either a link or a barrier to

the rest of Louisiana and the country.” Donated to the HODF catalogue, the image enters into conversation with many other images and artwork from and by the Comanche Hunters. We paired it with Darryl Keys’s donated shoes to help illustrate his story and create another bridge—this time between different mediums and aesthetics (Fig. 8).

THE FAMILY ALBUM GOES PUBLIC

Despite the contested politics photography on the street, taking pictures plays an important role within Mardi Gras Indian culture for a number of reasons. The first is the most straightforward—most people involved in sewing would agree with social anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who said that photography could be a “kind of historiography” (1962:26). For Mardi Gras Indians, who often disassemble their suits after they are worn because of space constraints or reuse or lend the patches for future suits, photographs become an important record, and not just for the person who is wearing the suit. For many of the people who sew for tribes, but do not mask or own the suits, the photographs document their creative labor and their evolution as artists as well. Melvin Reed, for instance, has worked on hundreds of suits for the Yellow Pocahontas Hunters and has mentored many people in the art of sewing and design. He said,

I worked at Swiss Bakery as a cake decorator, and would come home and sew until two or three in the morning. One year, nine Indian suits came out of this house. The cats who sit down and discuss schemes and designs for suits always tell me, ‘I was in Reed’s school.’

Reed has a large collection of photographs documenting years of work (Fig. 13). The pictures are not taken as art, but as documents that record the artistry, and to record his relationship to particular people and tribes.

Lewis’s initial interest in taking pictures of the suits fits into this model as well. He documented the Choctaw Hunters through snapshots, and when he wasn’t following them into battle, he was wandering the city with other tribes, taking photographs of suits that were special to him. He wasn’t looking at the symbolism of resistance often evoked by professional documentarians, but the individual stories and artistry. As we went through his photo albums, Lewis explained, “I always say, when you recognized by your peers for what you do, that’s one of the greatest accolades that you can receive. People who are in the culture know that your commitment shows.” He printed the



glossy 4x6 photographs at Walgreen's and organized them into photo albums to be mulled over amongst family and friends. When the HODF opened, the photographs that Lewis had kept in albums as a hobby entered the public domain.

In one of Lewis's favorite photographs, he is standing next to his son, Rashad, in 1993. Rashad is masking as the Spyboy for the Choctaw Hunters (Fig. 14). The unknown photographer has tilted the camera so they are on an angle. Lewis has his arm around his son, but they seem to be looking at another photographer. Spectators walk by in the background. As an image, there is nothing remarkable about the snapshot except that it represents, to Lewis, the pride of his family's involvement in starting a tribe "way downtown."

As we talked through what images should be used for the catalogue, Lewis said this one needed to go in. He talked about his devotion to his son and his group of friends who helped him sew the suit—whom he called his "dream team"—a group of Lower Ninth Ward residents who have participated in the tradition all over the city. These include Walter Cook Jr., Big Chief of the Creole Wild West, who inherited the oldest Mardi Gras Indian tribe on record; Ricky Gettridge, who grew up with Lewis and masked for years with the Yellow Pocahontas; and Gilbert "Cosmo" Dave, who, according to Lewis, was the "greatest Mardi Gras Indian sewer to never wear a suit."

One afternoon, Lewis and I talked to Dave about his involvement in Mardi Gras Indian culture at the museum. He said he learned to sew from his mother, a seamstress. He credited his mother for introducing him to the Indians, too.

When I was a little boy, my mama took me by the hand and showed me the Mardi Gras Indians. When I got older, I hooked up with the real boys. There are people in the shadows that make Mardi Gras happen. That's how I look at myself. I love to go out on carnival day to see how people react to the suit—I love being behind it and representing it I got a needle and thread stuffed in my back pocket just in case something happens out there on the street. I'm prepared.

We asked Dave to tell us his perspectives on the collective effort of the "dream team," and showed him this picture that

documented the suit he helped sew. He had a good look at the image, and remembered how the Choctaw Hunters and its second line paraded all over the city that year. He explained,

When we made it uptown, we met up with another gang that had a yellow Spyboy, too. I had sewed for him years ago. His second line started talking trash. One of them raised up his apron and said, "You can't beat this!" Underneath was all beadwork I created more than ten years ago. It was still looking sharp. I jumped up and said, "You want to talk fire to us, who Spyboy you is?" If they're gonna come at us with all that noise, I made them know it. I made him say it: "I'm your Spyboy, Cosmo."

His memory of that day illustrated how, in the heat of an artistic battle, the other Spyboy must admit not only to reusing patches, but he must acknowledge his debt to Dave's labor. None of this was evident in the photograph, but it came alive through the stories told. It took a tilted snapshot by an unknown photographer to help explain why people like Lewis and Dave—those in the shadows—might devote themselves to the labor of creating suits for other people to wear—for these fleeting, but poignant, moments when "the culture" recognized their power. Both men "looked past" the posed image to these other memories of the day, demonstrating the inherent uncontainability of a photograph (Edwards and Morton 2009:5). As Trachtenberg has commented, "the relationship between images and imprinted meaning is fraught with uncertainties, for like opaque facts, images cannot be readily trapped within a single explanation or interpretation. They have a life of their own" (1989:xv).

Besides documenting the art work, another important, if more implicit, reason for taking photographs is that they demonstrate and reinforce social ties (Baquet 2000:9). On Mardi Gras day and other large gatherings, photographs are routinely taken by or with a wide network of people who support or actively participate in the tradition. When we showed a wide variety of these images to people who were involved in the making of the catalogue, we found it was often the person *not* masking—who may even have been off to the side of a picture—that became the subject of a story. For instance, Ronald "Buck" Baham, Big Chief of



13 Melvin Reed with his collection of photographs of Mardi Gras Indian suits.
PHOTO: RACHEL BREUNLIN

14 Ronald W. Lewis with his son, Rashad, masking as the Spyboy for the Choctaw Hunters, courtesy of the HODF.
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



the Seventh Ward Warriors (Fig. 2), saw a picture of his second line in front of the Backstreet Cultural Museum and narrowed in on a man in a wheel chair. He said, “Tyrone Miller loved the Indians and no one could sing ‘Shoo Fly’ like he did. When the song begins, everyone backs up. They let him sing it alone.” In this way, the act of taking a picture, or reflecting on one later, are ways of pulling the wide network of people who come to support and/or participate in a particular tribe. For Mardi Gras Indians, the experience of making art together over decades creates both tight and complicated bonds between biological and fictive family.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND KINSHIP

The stories of Lewis’ closest friends came out of conversations at the museum itself. But the museum is much more than Lewis’ personal stories—in its exhibits and archives, other people’s lineages and stories are documented as well. For instance, a significant amount of the wall space is devoted to an exhibit of Big Chiefs of Mardi Gras Indian tribes—both past and present. It includes a combination of images taken by Lewis, and ones donated by photographers or people who mask as Indians themselves. There is a special emphasis on tribes from the Lower Ninth Ward. Among them are pictures of the late Rudy Bougere, Big Chief of the Ninth Ward Hunters, as well as the tribe’s current Big Chief, Romeo Bougere (Fig. 16), and the Big Chief of Red Hawk Hunters, Nelson Burke (Fig. 17). In each of the three photographs, the late Bougere’s influence was clear in the pictorial beadwork accented with rhinestones and bordered with ruffles and ribbon, which was his signature style.

During a tour of the museum, Lewis might explain that Burke’s tribe branched off from the Ninth Ward Hunters. While we were putting the catalogue together, Lewis explained that, “When Rudy retired, he decided to give the gang to his Second Chief, Nelson Burke, but then changed his mind and made his son, Romeo Bougere, Big Chief. When you talk about how Romeo took the lead, and Nelson started his own tribe, you’re talking about a story of the real brotherhood found in Mardi Gras Indian culture.” Many people speculated on what might have gone on between

Bougere and Burke, but Lewis felt it was not his story to tell.

As part of our collaborative process, I met with Bougere at his family’s home in the Lower Ninth Ward and showed him the image we wanted to use. I was hoping that we might be able to include the larger story, but worried it might be too painful. Tentatively, I brought up the split. He said, “Everyone asks about it. They think we don’t communicate. That’s not true. We talk almost every day.” He went on to explain:

The year Nelson was supposed to become Big Chief, he didn’t mask and my father was mad. He told me since I had been sewing, I’d be the Big Chief instead. I was only 18-years-old and I had some big shoes to fill. I masked as Big Chief that year, but after my father died, I supported Nelson’s new tribe, the Red Hawk Hunters for the next two years. It was a hard position to be in. Nelson was like my father’s other son. All my life I’ve known him, and he’s an older brother to me. I still tell him to this day, I would love to run under him. I respect him as my Big Chief, but once you become one yourself, you can’t demote yourself.

I had to start over and, at first, no one respected me. No one believed in me, and I had to develop a name for myself. During Indian practices, the other chiefs just saw me as this young, crazy ass dude and I’d get put out. They said they didn’t want to meet me, but I kept coming back and eventually, I gained their respect.

Bougere looked at the photograph of him in a green Mardi Gras Indian suit, and said that it was taken in 2007, the year he “really started sewing.” He knew, “You can’t scream, ‘I’m a big Chief’ and not build a Big Chief’s suit.” In the style of pictorial beadwork—often known as the “uptown style,” but used by the tribes in the Lower Ninth Ward as well—a Big Chief’s suit contains beaded patches that magnify their size—the central piece is the apron—sometimes it is one large panel, but often it contains other panels off to each side as Romeo’s does in the green suit. In addition, one’s chest, arms, and back are also covered in patches. When Bougere knew that his suit met the standards, he:

made a stick and put heads on it of all the Indians that messed with me—the color of their scarves are the colors of their suits that year. I wanted to let them know, “Don’t play with me.”

Burke, still living in Atlanta after his family’s home was destroyed during Katrina, came back to New Orleans hav-



16 Big Chief of the Red Hawk Hunters, Nelson Burke, in the Lower Ninth Ward.
PHOTO: RONALD W. LEWIS, COURTESY OF THE HODF

17 Big Chief of the Ninth Ward Hunters, Romeo Bougere.
PHOTO: RONALD W. LEWIS

ing created a purple suit. Documented in Lewis's photograph, his apron contains images of an Indians sewn in dark red beads dressed in elaborate feathered headdress, arms transformed into wings, about to lift into the air. Another red hawk flies out of the smoke of a fire. Each hawk representing the ascent of his tribe, Red Hawk Hunter. It was the first year that he would meet Bougere as a Big Chief. Bougere remembers:

I was real anxious. I waited on the corner for him to come out for more than an hour. When we finally met, I was playing so hard, but he didn't meet me like he would meet another Big Chief.

When I talked to Burke later about Bougere's interpretation of the meeting, he agreed, "He's right. I didn't meet him like I do the other cats. I didn't meet him as rough cause I look at him as a little brother." The moment was bittersweet. Bougere said, "We will always be family, but because we're two different tribes, we don't collaborate. After we meet, he goes down the street one way, and I go the other." Over the last few years, the Ninth Ward Hunters and the Red Hawk Hunters have created some of the most stunning beadwork around the city. Bougere and Burke both have committed groups of people who mask with them.



CONCLUSION

In March of 2009, the Neighborhood Story Project and Lewis hosted a book release party at the HODF and members of many tribes documented in it attended. Everyone who participated in the making of the book received a free copy that night. In addition, Lewis received fifty free copies of the book, and buys books from the NSP at cost to sell at the museum. More than 300 people braved a very rainy night to attend the event. We asked other Mardi Gras Indians to begin the ceremony by singing Indian songs, and then Lewis gave a speech, where he called out to the crowd, "For a long time people have been writing about us, now we've written our own story. I didn't write this book alone. This book is for all of us." In response, the Indians sang out, shaking their tambourines (Fig. 18).

As a scholar committed to collaborative ethnography, it was a powerful moment. I wanted to work with Lewis to create a book that would be grounded in the community it came from, and to see all the people who helped us put the book together celebrate it seemed like a confirmation that the process worked. In the years since it came out, I have also had a chance to see whether the book has had an impact, as Lewis had hoped, on the way that academics and other cultural documenters have approached research with Mardi Gras Indians. On numerous academic and literary panels, I have often heard Lewis say, "Many of them are still like Chris-



18 Gilbert "Cosmo" Dave, Ricky Gettridge, and Ronald W. Lewis at the book release for the HODF catalogue.

PHOTO: JEFFREY DAVID EHRENREICH

topher Columbus. They come and think they've discovered the Mardi Gras Indian. Guess what? We've been here."

Thinking about this critique, I bring myself back to the times when I learned about a new cultural or artistic practice that captured my imagination. No matter where it is, in those moments, you feel like you are standing at the beginning of a new world. That's what falling in love does—you feel born anew (Carotenuto 1989:17). But as Lewis and I discovered as we worked with the images in this catalogue, whether one wishes it were so or not, this love is inevitably, and intrinsically, tied to the personal and public histories of documentation that already exist. What we learned was taking the time to understand the complex relation-

ships that people have between their art and photography can be an important and fruitful part of the ethnographic and historical research. This bridge work displaces the documenter from the center—the myth that, "I am the first and only one"—but, like any powerful call and response, gives the opportunity to be in a true dialogue with the past, and participate more fully, and honestly, in the present.

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Notes

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1 As part of the creation of the museum catalogue, in-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with Ronald W. Lewis by the author from August 2007–May 2009. Interviews with other people involved in Mardi Gras Indian sewing were conducted or super-

vised by the author during fieldwork between August 2008–May 2009, with the help of Lindsey Darnell.

2 The connections between Tambourine and Fan and the Yellow Pochahontas Mardi Gras Indian tribe were developed in conversation with Ronald W. Lewis in April 2008 and former members of Tambourine and Fan, Collins "Coach" Lewis and Victor Harris, during May of 2011.

3 For an example of a hybrid catalogue of local and scholarly knowledge inspirational to this project, see Crowell, Steffian, and Pullar 2001.

4 For a discussion of the Ninth Ward's relationship to African American performance traditions in the city, see Breunlin and Regis 2006.

5 Jeffrey Ehrenreich, who contributed a photo essay on Fi Yi Yi and the Mandingo Warriors to this issue, has also been a regular contributor to the House of Dance & Feathers. A number of his images were featured in the catalogue. See also Ehrenreich 2004, 2010.

6 Conversation with L.J. Goldstein, February 2013.

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