

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

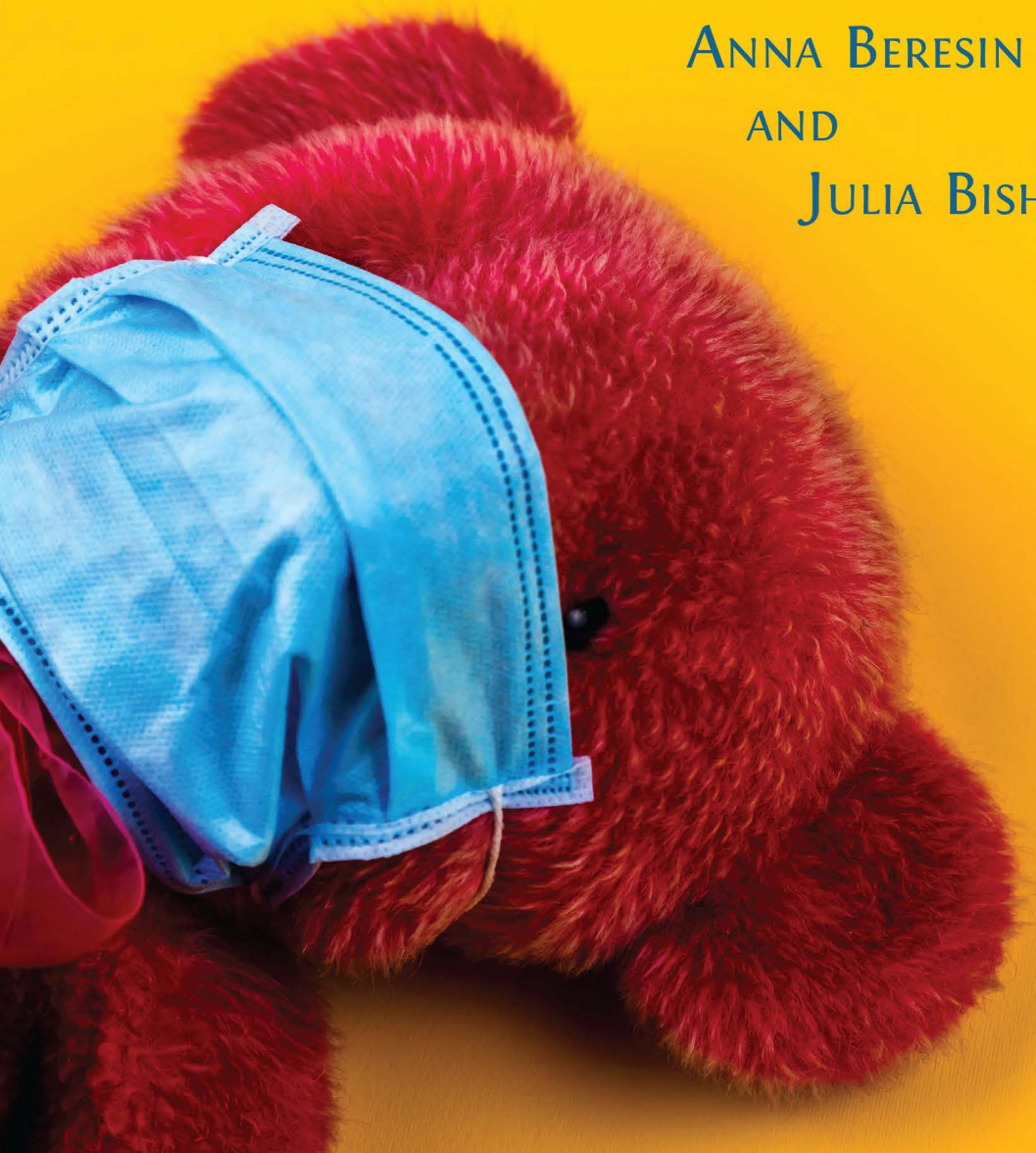
EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY
IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

EDITED BY

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AND

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15. Happy Yardi Gras! Playing with Carnival in New Orleans during the Covid-19 Pandemic¹

Martha Radice

Introduction

This chapter shows how people in New Orleans, Louisiana, played with the form of carnival to create a novel festive phenomenon, the ‘house float’, in 2021. During that year carnival parades, with their conventional moving floats, were banned because of the Covid-19 pandemic and specifically the heightened risk of transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in crowds. The chapter focuses on adults’ play, rather than children’s. Following scholarship on play primarily by anthropologists and geographers (James 1998; Malaby 2009; Malbon 1999; Stevens 2007;

1 I would like to thank Maddie Fussell, Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee, Rachel Lyons, Alastair Parsons, Helen Regis, and Stephen Young for assisting me with this study of house floats. I am grateful to everyone who has taught me about carnival, especially, for this piece, Rob Cambre, Karen Eberle, Brett Evans, Thom Karamus, Jen Pagan and the contributors to Stephen Young’s website. I presented drafts of this paper in 2021 to the annual conference of the Canadian Anthropology Society and the joint conference on Creativity and Covid-19 of the Royal Anthropological Institute and Folklore Society. Alastair Parsons’ research assistance was funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Dalhousie University. My research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Archive. Many of the interviews I have conducted on carnival will form a public archive at the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History at Louisiana State University Libraries.

Woodyer 2012), I conceive of play not only as ‘fundamental to human experience across the life course’ (Woodyer 2012: 322), but also as enmeshed in everyday, routinized life rather than separate from it, as coexisting with rather than counterpoised to activities labelled as non-play. I also think of play as improvisational, embodied and contingent rather than circumscribed within a certain set of times, spaces or rules. Play has transformative potential because it contributes intense, affectively charged experiences to people’s lives. While experiences of play may themselves be fleeting, they are context- and situation-dependent, shaped by the historical moment, place and society in which they emerge.

In this sense, carnival in New Orleans generates many kinds of play that are bound up with living in the city. After the Covid-19 pandemic broke out soon after Mardi Gras day in 2020, people wondered what carnival would look like in 2021. House floats turned out to be one of the answers to this question. This chapter begins by explaining what carnival consists of in New Orleans and presents five overlapping ways in which carnival is playful. It then describes how Covid-19 unfolded in the city and affected its carnival. My discussion of the house float phenomenon explores how house floats were like and unlike regular carnival, in their material and organizational structure, topics, sociality, insertion in urban space and relation to time. The conclusion pushes the comparison further by returning to the themes of play in carnival. I argue that because carnival is re-made every year through improvisation and contingency, resourcefulness is built into its social structure and this is what enabled its playful reconfiguration.

Play in Carnival

Carnival season in New Orleans, Louisiana, is a very playful time. A great deal of carnival activity revolves around the parades organized by voluntary social clubs known as ‘krewes’. Carnival season opens on 6 January, Twelfth Night, when a few parades take place, and then there is a lull until three weeks before Mardi Gras, when parades pick up again at weekends. During the final week, several parades roll every single day. The season culminates in Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, which always falls forty-seven days before Easter Sunday. It is a public holiday in Louisiana, marked in New Orleans by general revelry in the streets

(including the looser costumed ‘rambles’ of some carnival societies), parties in public and private spaces, the big float parades of the Krewe of Rex and the Krewe of Zulu, and the homespun ‘truck parades’ that follow them. The calendar for the 2022 carnival season lists forty-seven official parades in the City of New Orleans, though diverse other informal parades are not listed. Parades need audiences, and many New Orleanians plan social activities around spectatorship, arranging to meet friends or family and attending or hosting parties on the parade routes. Carnival parades in New Orleans are also uniquely interactive, in that krewe members hand out trinkets called ‘throws’ to clamouring spectators—most commonly plastic beads but also plush toys, blinking LED gadgets, go-cups, aluminium ‘doubloons’, and coveted, one-of-a-kind hand-decorated items (‘signature’ throws).

Since they are organized by voluntary social clubs, carnival practices in New Orleans reflect the social stratification and relative racial segregation of society at large. Among the parading krewes, there are men’s krewes, women’s krewes and mixed ones; a few ‘old line’ krewes represent the white male elite and require an invitation to join; other krewes are less exclusive but still expensive to join; still others have more affordable membership dues. There are krewes that are mostly white, mostly African American, or deliberately diverse. Distinct African American carnival traditions include the Black Masking Indians or Mardi Gras Indians (Becker 2013; Lipsitz 1988), whose elaborate beaded, feathered suits pay homage to the Native Americans who sheltered Black people escaping slavery, and the Baby Dolls, whose exquisite fancy short dresses, bonnets and parasols speak to Black women’s power (Vaz-Deville 2018). These groups come out in their neighbourhoods on Mardi Gras day and do not follow published routes as they seek out and meet each other.

My ongoing ethnographic research focuses on what I call the new wave of carnival krewes, which emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and proliferated as the city recovered from the floods caused by levee breaks after Hurricane Katrina. Mainstream krewes ride on big floats pulled by tractors uptown along broad St Charles Avenue, hire professional float-building and costume design companies, and outsource throw production to factories in China or elsewhere. In contrast, new-wave krewes parade mainly on foot, with small mule-drawn or people-powered floats, through the narrow streets

of the neighbourhoods of Bywater, Marigny and the French Quarter, and typically make their own costumes, floats and throws. Their politics tend to be progressive and their parades often feature carnivalesque themes of satire or the grotesque body. They are also influenced by parading practices not associated with carnival, like the annual second lines of New Orleans' African American Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (Regis 1999), and they spill over into other seasons, since some new-wave krewes parade at Halloween or in the Gay Easter Parade. Despite their differences, the various social worlds of carnival overlap, not only because individuals may participate in several different krewes or scenes, but also because their practices can be 'intertextual' (Lazar 2015), referencing and riffing off each other in their themes and symbols.

All these carnival activities provide opportunities for kinds of play. First, krewe members play with words and ideas as they come up with themes for their parades, floats, throws and costumes, engaging in what sociologists call 'interactional humour' and creating 'joking cultures' (Fine and Soucey 2005; Wise 2016). For instance, Krewe du Vieux's theme for 2006, the first carnival after Hurricane Katrina, was 'C'est Levee', shrugging off the levee breaks with a play on *c'est la vie*—that's life. The Krewe of 'tit Rəx (from *petit* or little Rex), a group of artistically-inclined adults who have taken the local children's tradition of making floats from shoeboxes out of the classroom and into the streets, complete with a parade permit and police escort, always make puns on smallness for their parade themes—for example, Too Little Too Late (2011), Wee the People (2014), No Big Deal (2016), That's a Little Much (2020). The Krewe of Zulu, a big African American krewe that has been poking fun at stereotypes of Black people since 1909, gives out hand-decorated coconuts as its most coveted throw—so 'tit Rəx, being miniature, gives out hand-painted pecans. The Krewe du Jieux (pronounced *Jew*), founded in 1996 by Jew-ish (emphasis on the 'ish') people wanting to carve out their own niche in this Catholic holiday, takes inspiration from Zulu to give out decorated bagels. Many krewes have 'royal courts', appointing kings, queens and other officers for the year. Zulu has a Big Shot and a Witch Doctor in their court—so Krewe du Jieux has a Big Macher (a Yiddish term for an influential person) and a Rich Doctor (Vogt 2010). Part of the play of carnival is thus making and getting such jokes which have varying degrees of insideness and often require some decoding.

Carnival participants, especially members of new-wave carnival krewes, engage in a second kind of play as they make their floats, costumes and throws—playing with materials. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013) argues that rather than having an image of what they want to create in their mind and then shaping materials in that image, craftspeople enter into ‘correspondence’ with their materials, tuning into the properties of the substance(s) so that the object they make will have unanticipated qualities. Carnival crafting often calls for this kind of experimentation. Members of the Krewe of Red Beans (a beloved local dish) glue dried legumes onto clothes to make intricate patterned suits; as they do so, they learn how much space to leave between beans to keep the cloth flexible and wearable. Similarly, I made five hundred tiny crystal balls as throws for the 2022 title float of ‘*tít Rəx*, ‘Little Did We Know’, by sticking marbles to a polymer clay base. Figuring out how to shape the base was part of the process (a coil worked best). Over the longer term, krewe members learn from each other and develop their crafting skills. Karen Eberle, who has rolled with C.R.U.D.E. (the Committee to Revive Urban Decadent Entertainment), a sub-krewe of Krewe du Vieux, for over twenty years, characterized the phases of their knowhow. At first, they were ‘like children’, needing to be told exactly how to make the krewe costumes, then they became more confident and quicker to figure it out, and now many of them have the skills to embellish the basic costume as they desire. The pleasure that human beings find in making, building and decorating (Dissanayake 1995) runs through much of carnival.

Carnival is also a stage for play in the sense of performance—dramatic or role play—as people adopt personas and tell stories through their costumes. Again, this is often comedic or satirical. For instance, the informal Krewe of Karens recently emerged from a group of friends dressing up to perform the American stereotype of the Karen, a fussy, entitled suburban white woman who uses her privilege to complain about what she perceives to be poor service or to challenge the activities of people of colour (Nagesh 2020). On Lundi Gras (the day before Mardi Gras) 2022, the Karens, suitably bewigged, paraded around bars in the French Quarter demanding to ‘see the manager’—in order to compliment the staff, enacting the trope only to flip it. Similarly, the costumes that people make for Mardi Gras day often involve a character as well as clothing. The first Mardi Gras after Hurricane Katrina was

especially ripe with comedic, cathartic performances. Jen Pagan, who I interviewed in 2020, costumed as a FEMA Fairy, writing magical cheques in the amount people wished for from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Rob Cambre, a member of 'tit Rəx, was Stop Man, a superhero in the form of a four-way stop sign (which was how traffic was managed for months in a city with no working traffic lights). He regularly stopped foot traffic in all directions throughout the day. The fun of costuming is thus enhanced by acting out the costume, not just wearing it.

Carnival is also playful because it offers sensory thrills, the kind of intensification of embodied experience that Malbon (1999) has called 'playful vitality'. The anticipation among krewe members in the days and hours leading up to a parade—or 'funxiety' as poet Brett Evans, a member of 'tit Rəx, calls it—is visceral, and especially powerful as the parade lines up, preparing to roll. Most parades' walking or dancing rhythms are driven by brass band music: big high school, college and military marching bands play between floats in the mainstream parades; smaller professional jazz brass bands accompany the smaller walking parades. Their music moves people emotionally and physically (see Sakakeeny and Birch 2013). Parades are saturated visual experiences with the colours and lights of floats and costumes and vivid kinaesthetic experiences for anyone walking or dancing. Carnival participants are generous with food—sharing boxes of king cake or fried chicken when they are out and about, and pots of red beans and rice or jambalaya at parties—and there is always plenty to drink or otherwise consume in pursuit of an altered state of mind. Although carnival is deeply embedded in everyday life in New Orleans, it offers playful sensory experiences that surpass routine and that thrum with excitement and a sense of being alive in the moment.

Most of all, and encompassing all these dimensions of play, carnival is playful because it is sociable. Krewe members banter and bounce ideas around together, make the artifacts of carnival side by side and perform for each other's entertainment. They form krewes with friends and watch other krewes' parades with them. They make group costumes for Mardi Gras day. They learn crafting skills from each other (Kelly 2022). Paraders and spectators play the game of throws, the fun of which is often less about acquisition than about making eye contact with the float rider or parader to request and receive something. As carnival-makers

craft, parade, dance or ramble, they experience the pleasure of being in sync with other people (Dissanayake 1995; Finnegan 2005; Gaunt 2006). Carnival play and creativity are thus thoroughly socially embedded, and I argue that it is precisely this social embeddedness and improvisational responsiveness that enabled the reconfiguration of carnival in 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 in New Orleans

The early phase of the coronavirus pandemic hit New Orleans very hard. The first case of Covid-19 in the city was confirmed on 9 March, fourteen days after Mardi Gras (25 February in 2020). Cases spiralled from seventy-four cases and two confirmed deaths by 15 March to 1834 cases and 101 deaths by 31 March. It transpired that the parades and parties of carnival 2020 had been superspreading events (Zeller et al. 2021), and Mayor LaToya Cantrell was challenged on CNN television news for not cancelling carnival parades, even though no American cities were restricting large gatherings at that time. The New Orleanians I learn from resisted the carnival-shaming narrative, countering that it was not carnival but the city's entrenched social inequality—including dependence on tourism and service-sector jobs with low wages and inadequate benefits, systemic racism, unaffordable/overcrowded housing, and privatized, inaccessible healthcare—that made it structurally vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic (Adams and Johnson 2020; Losh and Plyer 2020; Radice 2020).

Unlike many cities in the American South, New Orleans' municipal government, with support from the Louisiana state governor, Democrat John Bel Edwards, generally acted swiftly and firmly to curb transmission of the virus, imposing or relaxing stay-at-home orders, gathering and capacity limits, mask mandates and proof-of-vaccination checks as indicated by epidemiological analyses (see <https://ready.nola.gov/home/>). Moreover, recognizable themes and figures from carnival were recruited into the public health campaigns mounted by NOLA Ready, the city's Office for Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. As a socially embedded collective cultural practice, carnival arguably provided the imaginative bridge from the individual to the collective that was needed to tackle a major public health crisis like Covid-19

(Radice 2021). Still, it was clear that carnival 2021 was going to be very different from carnival 2020.

Given the city's reliance on tourism, the mayor was reluctant to call off carnival parades but many krewes took the initiative to cancel their parades themselves before the official ban came on 17 November (MacCash and Calder 2020). This was only the fourteenth time since their inception in 1857 that formal float parades were cancelled, for reasons including wars, white supremacist violence, and a police strike, as well as two other pandemics—yellow fever in 1879 and flu in 1919 (Dunn and Perkins 2020). Accordingly, New Orleanians began thinking about other ways to mark carnival season. Several new-wave krewes organized alternative celebrations, such as drive-by *tableaux vivants* (Krewe of Joan of Arc), scavenger hunts (Intergalactic Krewe of Chewbacchus), and art installations (Krewe du Vieux) (Clapp, Poche, and Ravits 2020). But without a doubt, the safely distanced celebration that most captured the imagination of carnival-loving New Orleanians was accidentally launched on 17 November 2020 with a joke made on Twitter: 'It's decided. We're doing this. Turn your house into a float and throw all the beads from your attic at your neighbors walking by. #mardigras2021'. The tweet went viral, and the tweeter, Megan Boudreaux, a member of the Krewe of Leijorettes—adult majorettes who dress as Star Wars character Princess Leia and march in the Intergalactic Krewe of Chewbacchus—soon declared herself the 'Admiral' of the Krewe of House Floats.

Traditional New Orleans houses, which are typically single- or two-storey and have generous porches, are architecturally well-suited to this idea, so people could easily imagine how house floats would work. Ground rules were debated and set through a Facebook group and Boudreaux recruited other people to help lead the krewe, including captains for each of thirty-eight neighbourhood sub-krewes that soon formed (plus one of 'Expats' that included the entire rest of the world). A separate Krewe of House Floats website with a series of FAQs and a statement of participation was set up (<https://www.kreweofhousefloats.org/>). It was clear from posts in the main Facebook group that one of the biggest challenges for the leaders of this new krewe was handling the sheer volume of inquiries. By Mardi Gras day, three months later, over three thousand house floats were officially registered and mapped,

though many more households missed the deadline to register so their floats did not appear on the map. Maps went live on 1 February, Mardi Gras day was 16 February and participants were expected to take their decorations down by 1 March.

The rest of this chapter focuses on the house float phenomenon. As I was not in New Orleans when it happened, it draws on digital ethnography (participant observation on social media and analysis of the copious coverage of house floats in online local and national news media), interviews conducted by phone or Zoom, and some in-person fieldwork conducted by collaborators in New Orleans. I also rely on the work of two photographers: Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee (<http://rhrphoto.com>), who has been photographing carnival in New Orleans for a decade and with whom I already work, and Stephen Young, whose website of 360-degree photos of house floats (<http://HouseFloatsTour.com>) captured my attention while I was researching the trend. A marketing photographer in his day job, Young told me in an interview that he volunteered to document the house floats in what was a quiet period for him, and it was his very first contribution to carnival. He photographed 188 house floats, seventy-three of which feature short texts written by their creators in response to questions that Stephen asked them. Hodgson-Rigsbee is an avid documentarian of New Orleans' public culture who works with many non-profit and cultural organizations in the city. He published a book on carnival 2021 featuring many house floats (Hodgson-Rigsbee 2022). Both photographers' work has been crucial in developing my analysis, which is also embedded in my long-term ethnographic study of new-wave carnival.²

Playing with Carnival: House Floats on Parade

In thinking through how the house float phenomenon was like and unlike regular carnival, or at least the parading practices of carnival, five themes stand out: their material and organizational structure; the topics they represented; their sociality (who made them, using what connections); their unique spatiality compared to the usual urban

2 This study has undergone initial and annual review by Dalhousie University's Research Ethics Board.

activities of carnival; and finally, their temporality in relation to a specific historical conjuncture.

Like regular carnival floats and props, the qualities of the house floats reflected differential access to money, materials and know-how. My local fieldwork collaborator Maddie Fussell, who visited many house floats, suggested a three-tier classification system. Bottom-tier house floats were decorated with tinsel, lights and swagging in carnival colours (purple, gold and green) and dollar-store decorations (masks, beads) in the fashion that some New Orleanians decorate their houses every carnival season. In that sense, they did not have a theme besides 'carnival time'. Top-tier floats were the most elaborate, made by professionals. Wealthier people rented props from float-building companies or hired float designers or artists to make their house floats. However, not all professional house floats were constructed at the homes of the rich: first, because artists themselves put a lot of effort into their own house floats or helped their friends for free, and second, because of a Covid-19 relief initiative called Hire a Mardi Gras Artist (HAMGA), founded by float designer Caroline Thomas and Devin DeWulf, captain of the Krewe of Red Beans, which undertook several aid initiatives during the pandemic (Radice 2021). HAMGA raised money to employ workers in the float-building industry during what would otherwise have been a jobless season. They invited people to donate to a fund and each time it reached \$15,000, they drew one name out of all the donors whose house was then decorated to professional float design standards (Figure 15.1). This creative response to precarious labour raised \$330,000, employed thirty-two Mardi Gras artists, and produced twenty-three house floats (<https://www.kreweofredbeans.org/projects-2>). It also raised the profile of professional carnival artists and the studios that employed them; people then sought them out to make things or teach them how to make things for their house floats. The middle-tier floats were those apparently constructed by amateurs—probably by the residents themselves. They often made creative use of common materials, twisting pool noodles into spirals to make fat, flat lollipops, for instance. These types of house floats are the most interesting to me because, like the new-wave krewes I study, they are homemade and emerge through the creativity and experimentation of the people who are closest to them.



Figure 15.1 The first house float by the Hire a Mardi Gras Artist initiative, ‘The Night Tripper’, a tribute to the late New Orleans musician Dr John, is installed on Toledano Street, New Orleans, December 2020 (centre, with right arm outstretched, is Caroline Thomas, cofounder of HAMGA)

Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

The Krewe of House Floats was organizationally structured in a similar way to regular carnival parading krewes. Every krewe typically chooses a theme for its annual parade, with each float representing a different take on the theme. Similarly, each neighbourhood sub-krewe of the Krewe of House Floats—which emerged via Facebook—chose its own theme to inspire their members, though no one was obliged to stick with their neighbourhood’s theme. The Irish Channel neighbourhood chose ‘Channel Surfing’, so there were plays on TV shows, including a nod to *Gilligan’s Island* and an interactive version of the TV game show *Jeopardy*, whose host, Alex Trebek, had died in 2020. The sub-krewe of St Roch chose ‘St Roch and Roll’, spawning floats like ‘Do you Remember Roch and Roll Radio?’ which commemorated boom-boxes and local music venues that had closed during the pandemic. Riffing on the popular song recorded by Marvin Gaye in 1964 and James Taylor in 1975, the Bayou Saint John and Fairgrounds sub-krewe chose ‘How Sweet It Is to Be Loved Bayou’, and many of their house floats featured alligators (Hart 2021).

These sub-krewe and float themes demonstrate some of the word play that is part of carnival. However, the play of satire was strikingly

absent. One exception was a house float by a persistent water mains leak, entitled 'Underwater World of Annunciation St'. It lampooned the New Orleans Sewage and Water Board, often satirized in carnival for its notorious mismanagement: boil water advisories, leaks, blockages, flooding and overcharging. Political satire featured in a few house floats that commented on national politics, with Bernie Sanders in his mittens or Trump in a dumpster fire. Krewe du Vieux kept up its ribald satirical style in its art installations, under the overall theme 'Krewe du Vieux has no taste'. The Krewe of C.R.U.D.E., for example, created an anatomically explicit 'covidgina' accompanied by a poem about the complications of having casual sex during the pandemic. But among the house floats, there were surprisingly few direct satirical references to Covid-19. The oblique ones generally referred to the shared experience of lockdown rather than the virus or public health responses to it. For instance, 'Snacking in Place' (Figure 15.2) pokes fun at the comfort eating people indulged in as they stayed home. In Algiers Point, where the neighbourhood theme was 'Staycation', some house floats played with ideas of escape and boredom ('Covid Island Castaway', "'Bored" Games: Covidland'). The lack of satire can be partly explained by the temporal and spatial structure of the Krewe of House Floats. A carnival parade is mobile and passes in a matter of hours. Krewe members are masked and cannot be personally identified or singled out for any outrageous behaviour. Houses, though, stay in place, and they are occupied by identifiable people. To plaster your private home publicly with satire might be impolitic, especially at a time of both heightened political polarization and local pressure to pull together as a community.

Rather than satire, house float builders embraced sincerity and nostalgia, in the form of the tribute. Many people chose to depict a feature of carnival that they loved. Particular krewes—Endymion, Iris, Muses, and Chewbacchus, among others—were honoured, as were general features of carnival, like Mardi Gras beads and throws, the thrones on which krewe royalty sit, and even parade spectators. Jen Pagan's float, 'If Ever I Cease to Masque', honoured defunct women's carnival krewes, like the Krewe of Venus, which was pelted with rotten vegetables when it was the first female krewe to parade in 1941. Other house floats depicted something their creators loved about New Orleans or Louisiana as a whole. There were many tributes to New Orleans jazz and funk music and musicians, and to local food such as the crawfish

boil. An 'Ode to the Oyster' emphasized how crucial this humble bivalve is to the ecosystem of the Gulf Coast. A house on Fortin Street, right by the Fairgrounds where the fifty-year-old New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival is held every April and May, was transformed into 'Forever Festin'' (Figure 15.3). The Festival, which had been postponed, then cancelled in 2020, and would be cancelled again in 2021, has an iconic visual culture, made up of the map of the stages, signs for the food and drink booths, the 'cubes' or music schedule, and the logo, so this house float was instantly recognizable. It even featured Jazz Fest producer Quint Davis driving a tractor (because mainstream carnival parade floats are pulled by tractors). Several house floats made references to pop culture beyond New Orleans, including two takes on the TV series *Schitt's Creek* which, as one creator wrote for photographer Young, 'brings joy to so many and has helped so many of us find a smile and laugh during a challenging year'.



Figure 15.2 'Snacking in Place', Fern Street, New Orleans, February 2021

Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Figure 15.3 'Forever Festin', Fortin Street, New Orleans, February 2021

Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Tributes to New Orleanian and Louisianan culture and, to a lesser degree, broader popular culture feature in regular carnival. What does not, but did among house floats, are personal themes. A regular carnival float is by nature not personal: it is made by a collective, as part of a collective performance, and is embedded in the ethos and history of a certain microculture. In contrast, house floats could just represent something that just the household loved. One family honoured their pets, past and present. Another, 'Born on the Bayou', celebrated 'the birth of the homeowners' son nine months after the 2020 Bacchus parade' (Hart 2021). One creator wrote on Young's website that she realized the way to get her husband to help build their house float was to make it a fishing boat because he is passionate about sport fishing. The personal themes of some house floats reflect the relocation of carnival from public space and public sociability to domestic space and intimate social networks.

This brings us to the sociality of the house floats. Who made them, and what social ties did they mobilize in the making? These were not questions that Young asked, so there are few creators named on his website. Most of the texts are written by an unspecified 'we', which seems to refer to the household, often a family, perhaps housemates. Some people mention neighbours or friends or relatives who may not

live with them. Others credit artists, though it is impossible to tell whether they were working voluntarily or for pay. This is consonant with the culture of discretion around money and employment in New Orleans, where it is a point of pride that conversations at parties rarely revolve around jobs and people can be friends for decades before they learn what each does for a living. That said, compared to mainstream carnival floats, which are built by professional design studios, and new-wave carnival floats, which are usually built by sub-krewes in rented warehouse spaces, the scale of production of house floats did shift to the domestic unit—a new cottage industry.

Many house floats seem to have been built, or at least directed, by women. Almost all the posts in the Facebook groups were made by people apparently gendered female, and most of the Krewe of House Floats officers' and sub-krewe captains' names were similarly gendered female. While this might be related to their domestic scale, it more likely reflects something that has been rising to carnival consciousness since the turn of the twenty-first century—that 'ladies make parades', as one new-wave carnival captain, Ann Marie Coviello, likes to put it. Not only have massive mainstream all-women krewes like the Krewe of Muses risen to outshine men's parading krewes along the uptown parade route, but women are the driving forces behind many, if not most, of the new-wave krewes or sub-krewes—though the gendered division of labour in mixed krewes often remains unacknowledged. As is typical of heteronormative households, so it was with house floats: even if men did some practical work, women seemed to undertake most of the project management and logistics, including communications—posting on Facebook, talking to journalists, responding to Stephen Young's questions.

It also seems that most participants in the Krewe of House Floats were white, like most carnival krewes in non-pandemic times. As mentioned earlier, African American New Orleanians have their own carnival traditions but they were historically excluded from formal carnival float parades except as torchbearers, mule or tractor drivers, or streetcleaners (Gill 1997). There are some important Black krewes, like Zulu and NOMTOC, and some quite mixed krewes among the float parades. Black women have recently founded a new sub-krewe in the Intergalactic Krewe of Chewbacchus, Women of Wakanda. However,

beside such notable exceptions, most mainstream and new-wave carnival krewes remain majority white. Now, unlike regular carnival krewes, the 'members' of house floats were not often visible in documentation. This means it is hard to tell who made or commissioned what, particularly among the middle-tier, handmade floats. But of the house float creators on Young's site who supplied photos of themselves, nearly all were white.

Moreover, at least in the documentation I have analyzed where authorship is discernible, Black creators in particular set their house floats up as sites to pay homage. Four of the five Black participants in Young's website (as ascertained from the creator-supplied photos) had made floats that were explicit celebrations of African American contributions to New Orleans culture—famous African American women or Black jazz musicians, for instance—rather than, say, jokey or personal themes. Similarly, city council member Jay H. Banks commissioned a professionally made house float as a homage to his beloved Krewe of Zulu, over which he had reigned as King in 2016. This reflects the point made by Black scholars Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer that Black cultural artifacts are 'burdened with an inordinate pressure to be "representative", and to act, as a delegate does, as a statement that "speaks" for the black communities as a whole' (Julien and Mercer 1996 [1988]: 455). While some white folks' floats paid similar homage, the sincerity of these house floats, which firmly asserted the importance of African American culture, contrasted with the overall whimsicality of the phenomenon.

As creators figured out how to make their house floats, they mobilized their social networks in similar ways to new-wave carnival participants. They turned to the Facebook groups to exchange advice on techniques and materials. Experienced carnival artists held workshops on how to work in papier-mâché or how to make the beautiful painted cardstock flowers that are an iconic carnival float decoration. People learned from each other and from YouTube, often by trial and error as they went along, in correspondence with their materials. The two neighbours who made 'Forever Festin' experimented with posterboard, glue and wire to make their float elements, and used yacht varnish to protect them from the rain. Jen Pagan re-purposed election signs to make giant doubloons for 'If Ever I Cease to Masque'. Thom Karamus, who had made a shoebox

float as a guest artist for 'tit Ræx in 2019, jumped scales to turn his house into a float in 2021. Although he had never worked in papier-mâché before, he decided to use it for his float. When I interviewed him about it, he told me he said to himself, “How hard can it be?” And I looked at a YouTube video, I'm like, “Oh, little kids do it”. Yeah, well, it's easy if you're doing something eight inches big'. Thom's piece, though, was a caterpillar's head to hang on the front of his house that was six feet high, four feet wide, and eighteen inches deep. It used nine rolls of paper towels, seven pounds of flour, half a gallon of glue, one and a half pounds of glitter, 'and a LOT of coffee', as he wrote on Instagram (@thomofnola).

Thom's house float was part of a remarkable group project: five households on his block made house floats on the theme of *Alice in Wonderland*: the Cheshire Cat, the Queen of Hearts, the Mad Hatter, a Wonderland featuring the White Rabbit and Thom's Blue Caterpillar with the hookah (Figure 15.4). The joint effort emerged from a newfound neighbourly sociability. Before the pandemic, Thom told me, he knew his neighbours 'in kind of a regular know-your-neighbours kind of way, where you wave and say hi, and you look after each other if a storm comes, you check on your neighbour, make sure they have water'. But early in the pandemic, when most people were working from home, if at all, and bars were closed, they decided to socially distance together:

We ended up having a root beer float party in someone's driveway. And I guess it was May or June, it was pretty hot, and we all decided we kind of liked each other, and we laughed and got along. And then, 'Okay, let's do this again'. And we'd have a pizza party, and we would play some kind of game, and it just kind of grew from there.

In mid-December, the first Hire a Mardi Gras Artist house float, 'The Night Tripper', a homage to New Orleans musician Dr John, went up near Thom's house (Figure 15.4), and the neighbours decided to make their own house floats. The theme of *Alice in Wonderland*, Thom said, 'plays very well into Mardi Gras, the whole little bottle, "Drink me", and the cake, "Eat me", and some of the more trippy, dreamlike imagery. And just the idea of Alice having this adventure and experiencing things she had never experienced before. I think it's very Mardi Gras'. Because 'The

Night Tripper' was heavily publicized, Thom's street got a lot of visitors and he enjoyed watching them realize that the other nearby house floats shared a theme. He and his neighbours even decided to celebrate Mardi Gras day together with a 'Mad Hatter's Tea Party':

We all dressed up and we had little foods based on ideas from *Alice in Wonderland*, and we made a pot of tea. And we had a really great time. Just thinking about it now, I'm smiling. It's definitely going to go down as one of my absolute favourite Mardi Gras. And there were no super krewes, there were no parades going down St Charles, there were no masquerade balls. The city was very, very quiet. And yet we celebrated in the most wonderful way. We did not feel lacking for anything.

The pandemic and the house floats project brought Thom and his neighbours together as a community—'now we're very comfortable and we spend time in each other's homes and drive each other to the airport and go grocery shopping together and celebrate birthdays'. While their closeness might be exceptional, their joint project illustrates well the spatial shift that the house floats represent.



Figure 15.4 Thom Karamus in front of his house float, Dryades Street, New Orleans, February 2021

Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Indeed, the most obvious way that the house floats differ from regular carnival is spatial, turning Mardi Gras into 'Yardi Gras', as people soon called it. Symbolically, I think they echoed the 'open house' party invitations that many New Orleanians extend to friends, friends of friends and almost-total-strangers during carnival season, when private homes—especially those near parade routes—become more public than usual. In 2021, the party invitations were not to enter particular homes but to visit homes in general—at a safe distance. This, of course, was their whole reason for being. The house floats were designed to disperse rather than concentrate human bodies and their viruses. The Krewe of House Floats' statement of participation, which people had to agree with to join officially, emphasized compliance with Covid-19 regulations. It stated, 'All Krewe activities will be carried out in such a way as to avoid attracting crowds'. Dotted as they were throughout the city, the house floats reversed the centralization that has been one of the dominant trends of carnival in the last two decades, whereby nearly all mainstream float parades in the Parish of New Orleans roll along the uptown, St Charles Avenue route. The Krewe of Mid-City, for example, no longer rolls in the neighbourhood called Mid-City where it started out. The pressure to centralize comes from the municipal government which is keen to have a single route to police and clean up. Yet New Orleanians speak with nostalgia of old neighbourhood-based carnival celebrations, and they saw the house floats as a way to regain that atmosphere.

Because of this relocation to neighbourhoods, I expected to find traces of tensions between neighbours on the house float social media discussions but there were none. Anxieties surfaced occasionally about unmasked crowds forming outside the most popular houses but that was a tension between residents and sightseers, not neighbours and neighbours. There were, of course, people with whom the idea just did not resonate. Some were put off by the intense debates around 'rules' that sprang up in the house float Facebook groups as people established parameters for this novel practice. Others thought the dispersion of house floats diluted the fun: an isolated house float was hardly equivalent to the critical mass of a big parade. A few people grumbled about house floats staying up too long after Ash Wednesday. For others, 2021 represented a chance to take a year off from making

things for carnival. Still other people would have liked to participate but lacked the necessary time, money or materials, or were not allowed to modify their house. I noted one case on Facebook where a woman had started making a house float only to have her landlord rescind his initial agreement. Fortunately, she found someone else to take the decorations she had begun to make.

Overall, New Orleanians regarded house floats as a blessing rather than a nuisance. At first, poet Brett Evans feared the house floats were going to be 'admirable'—a term he coined for the efforts made during the pandemic to lift people's spirits that fell flat, like drive-by graduation congratulations—but when he saw 'the level of gusto people were doing it with', he realized the house float phenomenon could be a 'bonus, not a consolation'. According to Brett, carnival gives New Orleanians an irrepressible impulse to 'more-it', to be extra creative and flamboyant. House floats were clearly an expression of this impulse.

Lastly, house floats were the product of a unique temporal conjuncture. Thom Karamus' commitment to the serious play of papier-mâché was only possible because his regular work, in film production, had been put on hold due to the pandemic, as had his usual conduits for carnival creativity—helping friends make throws or floats and, in some years, parading with 'tit Rəx. The success of house floats was specifically bound up with the circumstances of the pandemic in early 2021, which left many people with more time on their hands than usual. This was made plain in 2022 when the easing of Covid-19 regulations meant the regular activities of carnival could resume. Although the Krewe of House Floats relaunched, far fewer people participated, because everyone was caught up in the familiar hectic rhythms of making mobile carnival parades and costumes alongside their jobs and other commitments. Some house floats of 2021 were re-used in 2022, a practice that is rare in regular carnival where people generally do not use the same costume two years in a row and floats are redesigned and repainted every single year. The re-use of house floats reinforces the sense that they were made during an unusual time. When the ban on parades was lifted for carnival season 2022, New Orleanian carnival-makers were happy to put their energies back into their usual celebrations.

Conclusion

House floats were an unanticipated and hugely successful response to the pandemic-related restrictions placed on carnival in New Orleans in 2021. They resembled regular carnival krewes in their material variety and the ways people improvised and made the floats, in some of their themes, and in the gender and race of most of their makers. They departed from familiar carnival in their lack of satire, their mobilization of households and micro-local social networks, and their spatial shift to neighbourhoods. Thematically, the house floats often represented things people loved, in their city and their lives, and things they felt nostalgic for during the pandemic. Yardi Gras was an exceptional iteration of the annual ritual calendar, emerging from an exceptional time.

The very creativity and playfulness of carnival was what made Yardi Gras possible. The idea of house floats emerged from a joke, a play on the image of a carnival float that made it domestic and hygienic. The themes of house floats showed that people played with words and ideas as they usually do in carnival, even if there was not as much satire as usual. Making the house floats gave people an opportunity to play with materials. The plays of performance and pleasure, in contrast, were far less possible in Yardi Gras than in Mardi Gras. Performance needs an audience, and while house floats could physically resemble stages, they were not supposed to invite crowds. Besides, it was the houses, not their residents, that were in costume, playing different roles from usual. Similarly, the sensory intensity of carnival was thoroughly diluted in Yardi Gras. The house floats offered a visual spectacle, and some even gave musical ones in the form of porch concerts, but these had to be kept small. Although New Orleanians could pursue their own pleasures in small groups as they enjoyed the house floats, the excitement of moving in sync with a parade, interacting with strangers in a crowd, or thronging the streets in costume was impossible to reproduce.

That said, the house floats phenomenon was still playfully social. A contagious idea for the pandemic times, it captured New Orleanians' imaginations, allowing them to collectively and creatively declare their love for the city and its culture and to assert that flattening the curve did not have to completely flatten carnival. Playful improvisation and contingency are built into the social structure and creative practices of

Mardi Gras in New Orleans. New Orleanians re-make carnival every year, in dialogue with materials, traditions, current events, and each other. It is precisely this resourcefulness and collective creativity that enabled the playful reconfiguration of carnival during Covid-19.

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