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# The New Orleans Festival Arts Community: Embodying Culture, Performing Afrocentric Identity

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THE NEW ORLEANS FESTIVAL ARTS COMMUNITY:  
EMBODYING CULTURE, PERFORMING AFROCENTRIC IDENTITY

by

Shukrani K. Gray

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2016

ABSTRACT  
THE NEW ORLEANS FESTIVAL ARTS COMMUNITY:  
EMBODYING CULTURE, PERFORMING AFROCENTRIC IDENDTITY  
by

Shukrani Gray

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor William Wood

Anthropologists have evaluated art as indices of culturally specific intentions that express the artist's view of his or her social relations. New Orleans Festival Arts (NOFA) community is filled with art objects and other forms of cultural expression that express artists' social relationships, historical contexts, and cultural beliefs. Social aid and pleasure clubs, Black Indians and other organizations orchestrate elaborate parades that incorporate costumes, street decorations, banners, music, dance and song. These artistic expressions index identity within the community. This research, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, is focused on the city's vibrant Afrocentric community and its festival arts community. Using Alfred Gell's theory of the anthropology of art, this research examines how art is used as an expression of African Diasporic Identity, agency, and a tool for social change. The Afrocentric community of New Orleans has been a part of the city's landscape since the 1960's and continues to thrive today. Although there is no exclusively Afrocentric group who practices NOFA, there are members of New Orleans Afrocentric community who play various roles creating art in NOFA settings. It is my argument that art can be used to examine the intersection of African Diasporic Identity and New Orleans Festival Arts to make sense of the behaviors of participants in the context of specific social relationships and historical contexts unique to New Orleans. Finally, this thesis examines how Afrocentric NOFA practitioners utilize art, symbolic language and performance to

create change in their community. I seek to understand how art is used as a tool to construct and transmit identity, and how art empowers actors as they express their identity and address community concerns.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the living memory of Baba Kabaila Charles Gray and Mama Tabasumu Rosetta Gray, my loving parents. It is their guidance that gave me the fortitude to complete this program. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to the many wonderful people who have aided my journey along the way, specifically Dr. Cheryl Ajirotutu, without whom I would've quit years ago. I give a heartfelt thanks to the staff at The Bean Gallery and Café Nicauld because they gave me the proper environment to hash out my ideas. Finally I dedicate this thesis to the many men and women who served as mentors throughout my process, including, but not limited to: My committee members, Dr. Zada Johnson (who saved me from myself) and Dr. William Wood; Dr. Kendra Harris, who gave me the insight and resources to carry on; Dr. Rachel Carrico, who walked this journey with me, and soon to be Dr. Monique Hassman, who lent an ear to my many rants and raves. Thank you all for your support and kind or stern words. Because of you this thesis is possible.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BMOL	Black Men Of Labor Social Aid and Pleasure Club
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
NOFA	New Orleans Festival Arts
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SPAC	Social Aid and Pleasure Club
YMO	Young Men Olympian Jr. Social Aid and Pleasure Club

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Indian Red is a song used to signal the beginning of any Black Indian event. It's a song of reverence. Indian Red expresses the Mardi Gras Indians' resilient spirit, resourcefulness and tenacity. Those who sing the song hail their pride in a tradition that has continued uninterrupted in the Black community since the 1800's. There are two ways of singing the first stanza of the song:

Madi cu defio, en dans dey, end dans day  
Madi cu defio, en dans dey, end dans day

We are the Indians, Indians, Indians of the nation  
The wild, wild creation  
We won't bow down  
Down on the ground  
Oh how I love to hear him call Indian Red.

This is how many of the Mardi Gras Indians sing this part of the song. However, Chief David Montana of the Washitaw Nation makes a point to use the song to emphasize his connection to the Black and African traditions represented in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Even the way he and his queen, Ausetua Amor Amenkum refer to themselves, "Black Indians" is indicative of a "Black consciousness". When Chief David Montana sings Indian Red, he changes the line from "We are the Indians" to "We are Black Indians, Black Indians, Black Indians of the nation". By changing one word in the song, Chief David Montana teaches everyone around him that the Mardi Gras Indian tradition is more than just a tribute to Indian culture. His insistence on using the phrase "Black Indians" instead of "the Indians" declares who he is as a participant in such events, and what his participation in these events mean to him.

It is this use of art as a vessel for communicating Identity that is the focus of my research. New Orleans is filled with festival traditions, which I refer to as New Orleans Festival Arts (NOFA), and they are performed on a regular basis. Within this tradition, there is a network of African-Centered artists who use artistic expressions within NOFA such as art, song, dance, and symbolic language, to convey their unique worldview.

My thesis looks at the topic of art and identity. This thesis fits into the larger conversation within anthropology on art, identity and agency. It stems from Alfred Gell's work on art as an index for expressing identity and effecting social change. I began my research with the intention of analyzing African retentions in NOFA. My preliminary literature review and research goals were focused on furthering the discussion of classical arguments which began with Melville Herskovits' work, *Myth of the Negro Past* (1958), and were carried through works of well-known researchers like Joseph E. Halloway, Jason Berry, and Michael Smith. Like these authors, my interests lay in understanding the African "spirit" displayed in New Orleans music, dance, iconography and songs. My research goal was to trace such expressions to their roots, through Congo Square, the Caribbean and finally back to West Africa. The problem with these early works and with my conceptualization of my research is that I (and they) assumed an innate African connection, demonstrated in their support of the theory of African Cultural Continuity (the belief that certain behaviors were practiced due to an innate cultural connection). Unfortunately, these early researchers failed to explicate the complex myriad of identities in the American Black community and in the African Diaspora. In other words, we both failed to account for the multiple ways African Americans express their identity and connect to the world in which they live.

By focusing on the art as an expression of identity, I am able to discuss how people, living within a specific social landscape, (a specific historical and social context), construct an identity and use it to express their place in a given community. Artists like Shaka Zulu, Mardi Gras Indian Chief, are taking the already established parading traditions, in his case, that of the Mardi Gras Indians and using them to express their unique view of New Orleans culture, history and place in the world. Culture incorporates all aspects of a community's lifestyle. Each individual chooses pieces of the culture they live in to construct their individual identity. When Zulu creates a suit, like his 2015 scarab beetle suit, his decision to choose Egyptian symbols means something specific to him and to those who see him in his suit. The message is clear to those who understand the language of the suit he created (a suit that indexes his social identity). The suit becomes a secondary agent of Shaka Zulu through the act of communicating identity to his audience.

Swidler emphasizes the connection between community enclaves and individual agency by stating "collective action is understood to rest on the choice of individual actors (276)." Amit, Vered and Rapport, Nigel (2002) also emphasize the importance of individual actors within a collective, when they provide alternative ways to analyze community. African-centered artists use NOFA to create art that communicates their beliefs and values. NOFA provides the ritual setting of second line parades, Mardi-Gras parades and other gatherings in which we can see African-centered identity in action. Because art is interactive, we are also able to analyze what agency art has once it is created. I am able to ask: "What does the art do?", and "How does the art affect change in the individual who sees it, and in the community in which it is displayed?" Gragory Minissale (2009: 11-13) helps us to understand the role of art in

anthropology, because art “provides a visual and mental topography of our own conscious involvement, a process of intersubjective negotiation by visual mean” ... he continues, “art makes it possible for the viewer to see thought... organized.”

This study makes an important contribution to the literature on art and African identity in New Orleans in several ways. First, NOFA have been the subject of many researchers who try to connect NOFA to its African roots (Holloway 2005, Regis 2001, 2012 Smith 1994). These studies have attributed the African connection in NOFA to “unconscious African and/or Native-American cultural retentions that dramatize unconscious collective memories” (Johnson 2010). This research takes a different approach, which gives voice to the active choices made by men and women who create new ways to manifest Africa in NOFA today. At the core of this research is the understanding that contemporary NOFA artists have decided to express their connection to Africa, not from an African essence, but from a conscious socio-political affiliation, which is used as a strategy for resistance and change. This study shows how a New Orleans tradition has changed due to certain historical movements that have influenced the views and beliefs of the artists who create index in current NOFA events. This research specifically focuses on index created in the second line and Mardi Gras Indian traditions, which includes suit making, accessories and decorations that transform participants, buildings and streets into artistic expressions. This study also is important because it shows how individuals use art as a cultural tool to address social change. By studying identity through art, data from this research can be used to identify cultural practices that assist New Orleans residents in negotiating issues of cultural identity and historical consciousness and resistance.

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter Two (New Orleans Festival Arts) begins with a brief discussion of the NOFA that are relevant to this study. This chapter uses Alfred Gell's Anthropology of art to discuss specific art indexes. The descriptions include the indexes that will be the primary focus of study and will include concepts that the reader should be familiar with in order to understand the concept of identity in NOFA. In Chapter Three (Research Design and Methodology), I give a detailed description of my methodology, going through my process of data collection and my introduction into the NOFA community. Chapter Four (Symbols, Art and Identity in New Orleans Festival Arts) discusses different conceptions of the use of art in anthropology, beginning with symbolic representation. This chapter reviews the theoretical discussion of art and anthropology and ends with a review of relevant ethnographies that discuss art and anthropology. Chapter Five (Afrocentric Identity in New Orleans) discusses the historical context that influenced the development of the New Orleans' Afrocentric community so the reader will have a better understanding of the symbolic language represented in the art index and the artist presented in my data chapters. Chapters Six, Seven and Eight are my data chapters. In Chapter Six (Aestheticizing the Clubhouse) I discuss the how the Black Men Of Labor use to the art display created for their annual parade to convey key messages of identity to the community. In Chapter Seven (We are What We Wear) I discuss how the BMOL and how Mardi Gras Indians, Ausetua Amor Amenkum and Victor Harris use African spiritual ideology to communicate through art. I also discuss how, following Gell, their art displays its own secondary agency in NOFA events. Chapter Eight (Connecting NOFA through Spoken Word), the last data chapter discusses how NOFA and symbolic language represented in narratives, chants and song are used as effect change either through historical reconnection or political resistance. In the

final chapter (Chapter Nine: The Power of Active and Passive Agency in New Orleans Festival Arts), I review key findings from the data chapters and their implications for the art created through NOFA. I also summarize how art can be used as a cultural tool to affect change and to express identity.

## **Chapter Two: New Orleans Festival Arts**

New Orleans Festival Arts is a phrase used by Daniel E. Walker (2004) to describe a set of performance behaviors practiced in New Orleans. He coined the term “Festival Arts” to connect the performance practices in New Orleans with the festival traditions of West Africa. Festival arts in New Orleans and West Africa incorporate music, dance, masking and iconography as part of a “collective whole. In this study, I follow Walker and refer to a specific set of behaviors as New Orleans Festival Arts (NOFA).

This chapter describes some of the NOFA, and in particular, the ones that are the focus of my observations and interview questions. However, not all of the arts included in the NOFA network are included here. I follow the descriptions with sections discussing these behaviors as they are related to Congo Square. Congo Square is a historical space located in New Orleans’ Armstrong Park. This space holds a special place for NOFA practitioners and is honored by them as “the root” of NOFA. I include this context because Africa-centered practitioners often mention Congo Square when they refer to NOFA. It is important to address Congo Square to understand how these behaviors connect to the African-centered practitioners who serve as a part of this study. Figure 1 directly below illustrates how the three expressive cultural forms are a part of NOFA.



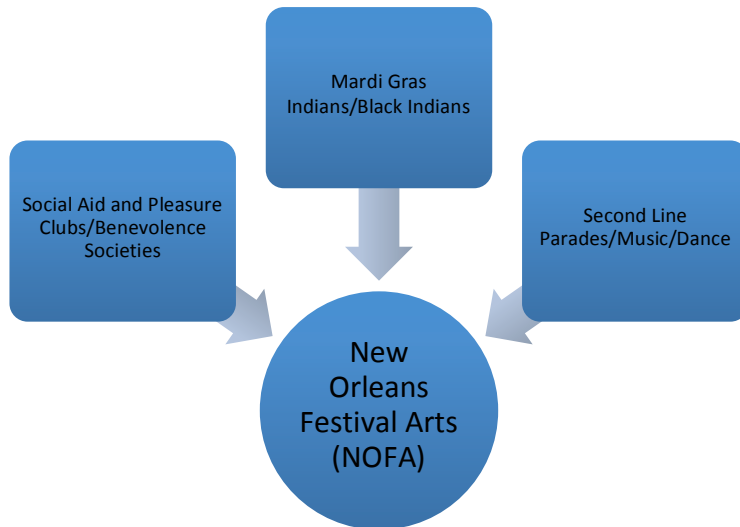


Figure 1: New Orleans Festival Arts (NOFA)

## **Second Line Parades**



Figure 2: Second Line Parade  
Tama, Mario. *Second-Line Parade Winds Through New Orleans*

Second line is a phrase that describes the dance, “I ain’t never seen nobody second line like that”, the event “the Black Men of Labor will have their Second Line this Sunday” or music “I heard that second line playing and I just had to dance”. (The second line music can be played either by a live band, or may be referring to recorded second line music often played at parties

or on the radio.) This unique event has been described as a walking block party. The traditional second line parade, organized by social aid and pleasure clubs (SAPCs) consists of a brass band (bass drum, trumpets, trombone and tuba), the members of the organization, and spectators. All three groups move collectively through the streets of New Orleans, following a designated parade route. The brass band and the members of the SACP head the parade. They are referred to as the “first line.” Immediately behind the brass band and SACP are community members who come from far and near in response to the music. These impromptu dancers are referred to as the “second line.” The second line parade begins at a pre-designated place that usually has some significance to the SACP sponsoring the event. Second line parades usually last up to 5 hours. Second line routes include several rest points, called “stops.” The stops serve two purposes, one, to provide the hundreds of participants a place to rest, buy food, and gather with other parade participants; and second, to signify an important relationship between the parading organization and the space where the stop is located. This could be the home of a deceased club member, a business that supports the parading organization or an important person in the organization’s network.

As community members and artists begin to embrace an Afrocentric identity, we can see shifts in the music, instruments songs, and dances integrated in the traditional second line parade. Artist and community members have begun to add Afrocentric symbols in their clothing/costumes, djembe drums and djun djun drums parade alongside traditional jazz band ensemble as well as other shifts in the culture. These shifts will be explored in detail in my data chapters.

### **Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs)**



Figure 3: Black Men Of Labor Annual Parade 2015  
Photo taken by author

Social aid and pleasure clubs date back to the late 1800's. These organizations were created as a means to combat the racism and extreme segregation of the Jim Crow South that blocked them from financial resources. Blacks had to pool their money together to pay for funerals, to aid in times of sickness or for any major expense a family might have incurred. Current SAPCs represent a wide range of New Orleans' demographics. The Black Men of Labor (BMOL) is a club that has added an Afrocentric identity to the SAPC tradition. They have infused African fabric, African iconography and Afrocentric principles of economic empowerment and community building into their clubs representation.

## **Mardi Gras Indians/Black Indians**



Figure 4: Big Queen Ausetua Amor Amenkum Super Sunday 2015  
Photo taken by author.

The Mardi Gras Indians (also known as Black Indians) are small, privately organized groups of working-class African American men and women, who observe a set of rituals and ceremonies centered on the day of Mardi Gras, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. Collectively, their organizations are called "gangs" or "tribes". They range in size from half a dozen to several dozen members. The tribes are largely independent, but a pair of umbrella organizations loosely coordinates the Uptown Indians (South of Canal Street) and the Downtown Indians (North of Canal Street). The most recognizable feature of Mardi Gras Indian performance today are the Indians' "suits"--wearable artworks which can be seven or eight feet tall and can weigh 150 to 200 pounds. Mardi Gras Indian suits take at least one year to design and create, and require the work several people sewing, to complete. Mardi Gras Indians wear their suits Mardi Gras Day, St. Joseph's Night and Super Sunday. Some Black Indians also wear their suits during processions around the grounds at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Fest.

The Mardi Gras Indian tradition includes symbolic actions where Afrocentric members can display their identity. Some Indians fuse symbols from traditional African religions, traditional African art and other sources in their suits. As these members create songs, chants and dances that represent their multilayered identity, anthropologist can begin to document the changes in meaning affected by the changing identity narrative.

NOFAs in the context of the second line tradition, SAPCs, and Mardi Gras Indians are the focus of this research. These strong traditions provide multiple forms of art for observing how artist use artifacts, ritual and spoken word to express their worldview, influence and inform their audience. NOFAs also allows us to understand the agency and power of art once it is created and exerts itself a force in the construction of Afrocentric identities within the NOFA tradition.

### **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology**

The research for this thesis was conducted using a combination of participant observation, interviewing and primary/secondary source research. My academic appointment in graduate school (as a teaching assistant) has allowed me the opportunity to visit New Orleans fairly often (sometimes up to four times a year) since 2007. I am currently a New Orleans resident and have been since 2012. I have the unique perspective of being an insider-outsider. I am an outsider because I am relatively new to New Orleans. Anyone who is from here knows how problematic being an outsider can be when you are trying to do anything in the city of New Orleans. Fortunately, I have some experiences and personal identity characteristics that have helped me to develop rapport with my research subjects. First of all, I was introduced to the Black Men of Labor through one of the members of my thesis committee, Professor Cheryl Ajirotutu who has done work in New Orleans. She established a solid reputation as someone trustworthy and dedicated to bringing resources to New Orleans. This was evident by the number of “grassroots” residents willing to work with her. I was greatly aided by working under her during my initial stays in New Orleans. Working with many of her contacts, (setting appointments, facilitating student interviews, running errands) helped to get my name out in the community. It was Dr. Ajirotutu who introduced me to my first community contact, Bruce “Sunpie” Barnes. Bruce is a long-standing member of the benevolence organization, The Black Men of Labor (BMOL). Bruce, in turn, introduced me to Todd Higgins and Fred Johnson, two of the administrative members of BMOL. These men sanctioned me as part of the BMOL’s family, an honor that has helped me to document, interview and see behind the scenes in a way that would never have been possible without their approval.

My academic connections helped me initially, but it was my lifelong membership in Chicago's Afrocentric community (and as a result, New Orleans' Afrocentric community) and my African Diasporic identity that gave me the greatest assistance as I got acclimated to New Orleans. My research focuses on individuals who claim an African Diasporic identity, but for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to them as either "Afrocentric" or "African Centered" (I fully understand this may be slightly problematic, as the members themselves may use other terms to define who they are). The Afrocentric community varies across the United States, but there are some common ties that allowed me to integrate into the New Orleans' Afrocentric community fairly easily.

I was born in 1970 during the time when the United States was in the middle of the Black Power Movement. I attended an African Centered school which my parents helped to open. I am a trained African dancer/choreographer/performer, specializing in dances from Senegal, Guinea, Mali and the Caribbean. All of these details have helped to garner my acceptance into the New Orleans Afrocentric community. My proficiency as an African dancer has allowed me to perform in several New Orleans venues. I am known in New Orleans as a dance performer and instructor. One of my first dance instructors was Mariam Curry, founder and director of a New Orleans African dance company, N'Kafu African Dance Company. Ms. Curry has been training children and adults in African dance and culture since the 1980's. My association with N'kafu allowed me the opportunity to meet other African dancers and musicians, performers, poets and visual artists. These artists are part of New Orleans' larger African Diasporic community. In reality, I've been establishing myself as a part of this community since 2008, a total of 8 years.

My immersion into the community as resident, participant and researcher gives me the opportunity to experience NOFA in a way that most are unable to experience it. When I called Todd Higgins to arrange his interview, for example, his words were, “You are in. You are family. Not many get to be in our family, but you, you are family.” I’ve developed friendships with many of the people I’ve chosen to interview. We’ve grown closer as I’ve visited their homes, met their families, worked with them, performed with them, talked on the phone etc. I’ve “sewn” with Ausettua Amor Amenkum for the last three years, a “rite of passage” in and of itself. “Sewing” is the activity of hand-making costumes worn by New Orleans Black Indians (Mardi Gras Indians). The tradition in the past was that friends and family were the only ones allowed to participate in the secret tradition of sewing. I have been able to learn the art of sewing and continue to learn this skill. I’m also a dancer in Kumbuka, a local dance company directed by Ausettua Amor Amenkum. I performed at Jazz Fest 2014 on the Congo Square Stage and in 2015 as part of Ausettua’s dance company.

These relationships have benefited me personally as well as academically. When I moved here with no job and little resources, it was members of the Afrocentric community that pointed me towards resources, gave me small jobs to keep my income going, brought food, took me out to eat, checked on me during inclement weather, and so on. People in the community know me as a student. Some understand the full extent of my research, others have a general sense of what I am doing, but all have been supportive. People have expressed a trust in my character, a knowing that I will tell the “right story” when it comes to New Orleans performance art and the community that creates and sustains it. They have faith in the fact that I understand, even though sometimes even I don’t know what that means. But I feel it.



Most of my participants were informed of my research even before it formally began. I felt it important that people understood my dual role in the community, knowing that I was observing both for myself and for my research. Many have committed to my research in ways I sometimes underestimated. I had a conversation with a participant one day in December 2014. She called me on the phone because she had been thinking about my research. "Let me ask you, what exactly are you researching?" I explained to her my ideas about the connection between present day Afrocentric practitioners and the early Black Power movement and how that environment created the artists and their unique way of presenting their art today. She thought about what I told her and she responded,

That's good. I'm glad you are talking about being Afrocentric. I get asked to do a lot of interviews as an Indian Queen, and everyone seems to be talking about Congo Square and the African connection. I just wanted to make sure you were doing something that would make you stand out. But that's good... no one is really talking about that.

Talking to her let me know that she was invested in my research and in me as a person. It also made me feel like a part of the community, and not so much of an outside observer. This conversation also helped me to understand the impact my research can have on the lives of the artists I choose to observe. This work is their life's-blood.

Living in New Orleans I was able to attend a number of second line parades, held each Sunday in various neighborhoods around the city. I've observed brass band parties in neighborhood lounges (where people dance to second line music), Sunday drum circles at Congo Square, A Red Black and Green bike ride (a bike event designed to increase community awareness and African-American bike ridership in New Orleans), workshops, lectures, Kwanzaa celebrations and other public community events. Any time I was able to attend an event I made

sure I had my camera or my phone. As a result, I have hundreds of photos and videos of these events spanning from 2012 to the present. My focus was to understand what New Orleans Afrocentric community looked like, what kind of activities were attended by its members, who were the key players and their social connections to one another. During this process I began to recognize faces that were present in several venues, key players in the community. I began to understand certain unifying themes within the community. I chose my initial participants from these informal observations. Ausetua, Kamau, and Fi Yi Yi are people I identified through this process. All of my interviews were arranged over the phone. I started with a text message or phone calls. Some people don't like text messages, and those people I called. I found that face-to-face interaction or talking on the phone seems to get better results. I also learned that e-mails can be seen as an impersonal way of communicating, and usually imply a formality that creates barriers. All of my participants were eager to "help me with my paper." The problem is that ALL of my participants are extremely busy. Being an artist in New Orleans means you likely have multiple jobs. So scheduling was my biggest hurdle. The second hurdle was deciding where to hold the interview. The choices were generally the participant's house, my house, a study room at Delgado Community College's City Park Library or a coffee shop. Out of these choices, the coffee shop was the least productive because it was difficult to find both privacy and quiet, so this was often my last resort. I have yet to use the coffee shop to interview, although they offer a meeting room (for \$20 and hour).

My methodology follows Marcus E. George's framework for multi-sited ethnography (1995). Anthropologists have traditionally followed a single-site approach, which focuses attention on one location. However, I have found that a multi-sited approach is a more

effective method for examining how NOFA artist use their art and other cultural equipment as “strategies of action” within socio-cultural contexts that span and connect spaces throughout the city. The multi-sited ethnography is used when the subject is not bound by one relatively small, bounded, specific location. Traditionally, ethnographic investigation occurs in one bounded location, allowing the researcher to rigorously investigate a small-scale community, organization or family. When the community in question is not easily defined by a geographic location or is very large, the researcher is able to use multi-sited research to follow the occurrences in the spaces where they occur. Using this methodology, the researcher is able to identify a community network that defines and sustains particular phenomena.

George outlines six multi-sited techniques: Follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor, follow the plot, story or allegory, follow the life or biography, and follow the conflict. My data collection is a combination of “follow the metaphor”, “follow the story” and “Follow the people and their lives/biographies.” “Follow the metaphor” is used to follow modes of thought in this case, African diasporic identity and the cultural tools it creates. This method examines signs, symbols and metaphors to “trace the social correlates and groundings of associations... in language use and print or visual media. (108) Daniel Walker’s (2004) work informs my definition of “Cultural tools” artists use such as iconography, song, dance, and masks/costume in the festival arts context to convey concepts of African diasporic identity, spiritual/ancestral connection and community engagement. My primary focus is how African Centered practitioners of NOFA incorporate their identity narratives in art created for NOFA. This includes art, costumes, signage, suits and other artifacts used during NOFA events.

“Follow the plot, story or allegory” is used to analyze the stories or narratives NOFA artists use to justify their claim to an African diasporic identity. Part of my goal is to understand how artists are creating alternate visions to define or redefine their membership of the African Diaspora. My observations of multiple events as spectator and participant allows me to gather data regarding how symbolic language such as speeches, songs and conversations are used to enhance art in the NOFA environment. I also used a “follow the story” methodology to understand the representation of symbolic language, dance and place making of NOFA.

Finally, I use the “follow the people” strategy as an integral part of my methodology. Much of my observations occur while spending time with participants in their homes, at work, while performing and in other spaces where art is created and identity is expressed. My role as an apprentice allowed me to observe many of my participants as they create their life stories. “Follow the people” is a way to gain a deeper understanding the participants’ life stories. This process gives me added insight of watching activities that define the participants’ realities as well as shape and mold their identities. It also informs my interpretation of events as I am constantly adding to my vocabulary of sights, sounds and events. Following the people also helps me interpret data from a more informed perspective.

#### **Chapter Four: Symbols, Art and Identity in New Orleans Festival Arts**

As was discussed in the previous chapter, my data collection is a combination of Marcus E. George's "Follow the metaphor" and "Follow the story". My methodology is based in the theory that anthropologists can use symbols to better understand social identity and culture, specifically, symbols found in different genres of art (Gell, 1998, 1999, Gertz, 1977, Kelly, 2007, Morphy & Perkins, 2006, Schneider, 2010, Svasek, 2007). I chose to use Marcus' methodology because as a student in the field of Anthropology, I endeavor to gain a better understanding of culture. The focus of my endeavor, however, is deeply informed by Clifford Geertz who challenges anthropologists to recognize there are no "universal laws" when dealing with culture. He states, "universals are so general as to be without intellectual force or interest, are large banalities lacking either circumstantiality or surprise, precision or revelation, and are of precious little use" (2000, 134). That is to say, there is nothing that is universal to one group, and trying to understand what "all Afrocentric artists" believe or do is futile. Instead, I recognize that I have a certain perspective, which is based on my experiences, as do those of each of my participants. My "worldview" colors what I see, how I interpret the world, and how I interpret the data I collect. I also must apply this understanding to my research. Instead of trying to define "what New Orleans' African-centered practitioners are", I chose to identify strategies some of these participants use to express who they are within the larger community. Geertz (Ibid: 139) describes two types of social scientists, those whose goal is to "discover facts, set them into propositional structures, deduce laws, predict outcomes, and rationally manage social life", and others whose goal is to "clarify what on earth is going on among various people at various times and draw some conclusions about constraints, causes, hopes and

possibilities—the practicalities of life.” In looking for a methodology and theoretical frame to follow, I choose to focus on symbols and metaphors found in different forms of art. Through art, I am able to analyze the wide range in which symbols are used that reflects the diversity of the artist in the African-Centered NOFA community. I look for a frame that allows me to “clarify what on Earth is going on among” the African-centered NOFA community”, with the understanding that I only have access to a snippet of behavior; a moment in the continuum of time.

Geertz (1977: 483) studied Javanese, Balinese and Moroccan societies by “searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually present themselves to themselves and to one another.” He explains, “whatever accurate or half-accurate sense one gets of what one’s informants are “really like” comes not from the experiences of that acceptance... but from the ability to construe their modes of expression, what I would call their systems of symbols...(Ibid: 492). Victor Turner (1977: page number?) also used symbols to better understand culture, but unlike Geertz, he used symbols to find common themes that can be “identified in every culture.” Turner’s work on “Symbols in African Ritual” identifies ritual as “an important setting for the expression of themes and ritual symbols” (Ibid: 185) (Even the title implies there are universal truths in African Ritual. A notion that seems impossible, given the number of countries, ethnic groups, spiritual beliefs, political strictures, etc. that would utilize “African Ritual”). Geertz and Turner agree on the importance of analyzing symbols in order to understand the relationships shared in a given community. Symbols can be used to understand community values, how those values are shared with others and how the community interacts with the symbols. Turner (1977: 186)

points out, “ritual symbols... may be offset by a loss of clarity of communication” and he goes on to say, “This would be inevitable if such symbols existed in a vacuum, but they exist in cultural and operational contexts that to some extent overcome the loss in intelligibility and to some extent capitalize on it.” This leads us to believe that people with a common context will interpret symbols the same way. Geertz would say, the loss of clarity of communication is a possibility, due to the fact that each individual brings to a situation his/her own set of experiences, values and processes that may skew the way they interpret symbols. Marit Munson (2011: 72) in discussing art in archaeology makes the point,

there is no singular audience for any given work of art, but instead many different audiences, each with its own ways of viewing and understanding art. Indeed social factors such as class, age, gender, knowledge, education, and religion all influence the ways in which individuals encounter a work.

Both Turner and Geertz agree that symbols are active. People use symbols to relay information, to create attachment/distance or emotional responses, and to convey important ideology.

Turner explains (1977: 189-90), “The weaving of symbols and themes serves as a rich store of information, not only about the natural environment as perceived and evaluated by the ritual actors, but also about their ethical, esthetic, political, legal, and ludic (the domain of play, sport, and so forth in a culture) ideas, ideals and rules.” However, Geertz disagrees with the notion of researchers being able to intuit understanding from observing ritual and symbolic representation (one of his criticisms of Malinowski). Instead, he suggests that the researcher must layer interpretations by comparing multiple sets of data and interpret them to gain a deeper understanding. Turner’s approach to understanding symbols is to ask actors to explain “what the symbols mean within the context of the ritual” and then reinforce that information by observing how actors actually use the symbols in ritual (Ibid: 190).

## **Aesthetics versus Agency**

When considering art and anthropology as a theoretical frame, it quickly becomes obvious this is a conversation involving two fields of study, Anthropology and Art History. Therefore, it becomes important to define the parameters in which the discussion will take place. There is a debate in art in anthropology over the classification of artifacts as art. The larger question is if art should be based on institutional standards, or if it is acceptable to include “folk art”, which includes items that have a functional value. Marit Munson (2011: 2-3) uses art in archaeology, where the question of art vs artifact plays a significant role. Munson says,

... these questions are central to archaeological studies of art, as they reveal a fundamental divide in Western conceptions of art and artifact. Centuries of Western tradition, reaching back to Renaissance Italy, suggest that art is the product of civilization and leisure... Art, we feel is for art's sake, removed from the practical concerns of daily life and intended for the sole purpose of display.

There is also a discussion of whether or not art is art based on its aesthetic value, or if art is art based on what it does to those who observe it, and what it allows its creator to express. Howard Morphy (2006) speaks about aesthetics in his study of spiritual power among the Yolngu. Here he defines aesthetics as “a rubric term with no simple, universally acceptable, definition”... he then attempts to define aesthetics as, “concerned with how something appeals to the senses...in the case of paintings, with the visual effect they have on the person looking at them” (302). However, I agree with Munson's assessment that art can be created, by “regular” people, who create art as part of a larger social context. The idea of art as an aesthetic product has been aligned with “Western Conceptions of art” by more authors than Howard Morphy



(Levin 2014, Minissale 2009, Tung 2013). I recognize there are more ways of interpreting what is art and I apply it to the way I frame this study.

The arguments of art versus artifact and the argument of art 's aesthetic value versus what it does to people (art's agency) is the main focus of Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Here Gell lays provides a frame for analyzing art that addresses the above arguments. His work helps us to understand the relationship between the artist, art and viewer as we identify the parameters for which we can analyze and discuss art's effects on "social relationships" (1998: 4). Gell combines theory from of art history and anthropology to create a way of analyzing art (for him, visual art) to explain art's influence on society. Gell (Ibid: 26) defines "the anthropological theory of art" as a:

theory of the social relations that obtain in the neighborhood of works of art, or indexes. These social relationships form part of the relational texture of social life with the biographical (anthropological) frame of reference. Performers of social actions are 'agents' and they can act on patients.

The anthropology of art is a way to use art to focus on "social relationships". This frame allows the anthropologist to place art in a specific historical context, what Gell (1998) refers to as "a certain biographical space" (11). This describes a specific period of time in which culture is "picked up, transformed, and passed on through a series of life-stages" (Ibid:10). For example, this study focuses on the NOFA created in 2015/2016, but through the art, and the artists, I have also analyzed the biographical space that begin in the late 1960's starting with New Orleans' Civil Rights Movement, through the development of African-Centered institutions and carried through to the present expression of African-Centered NOFA.

Gell's theory of anthropology of art is based on the idea of art as a product of "social processes" (Ibid: 4). He explains that to make the anthropology of art work anthropologically,

one must move away from the aesthetics of art and “focus on the social context of art production, circulation and reception” (Ibid: 3). It is more important to focus on art as a “system of action, intended to change the world” (Ibid: 6). When the anthropologist considers art, it is important to ask what that art does socially and culturally in the conversation between artist and viewer. How does the art effect the viewer, how does the art motivate or inform the viewer. This impact is what Gell conceptualizes as the agency of art. It is what art “does” socially and culturally—Gell sees art as a social and cultural actor albeit a secondary one doing the work of the “primary agents” (the people) in his theory of art. This is what makes Gell unique, the fact that he believes the artist exhibits agency through creating art, but also, that the art that is created has agency in and of itself. Gell uses as an example a shield to emphasize the difference between seeing art aesthetically, “a beautiful shield” and seeing the social emotional responses that art creates in its audience. Gell (1998) describes these emotional responses as, “the innumerable shades of social emotional responses to artefacts (of terror, desire, awe, fascination, etc) in the unfolding patterns of social life” (6).

The theory of the Anthropology of art as Gell proposes it does not identify art as an “art object”, “work of art” or “artwork”, but instead as an “index” (Ibid 12). He uses “index” to address visual art specifically and how as a secondary social agent it literally “indexes” the agency of the primary social agent. Gell writes specifically about visual art, but clarifies that this is not the only realm of art to which his theory applies. “Anything whatsoever could, conceivably, be an art object from the anthropological point of view, including living persons, because the anthropological theory of art (which we can roughly define as the “social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency”) merges seamlessly with the social

anthropology of persons and their bodies” (Ibid: 7). When Gell uses the term “index” it is to refer to “real physical things” and not to refer to “performances, readings, reproductions etc.” (Ibid: 12).

Unlike Gell, but in keeping with the wider field of the Anthropology of Art, I will be using more than visual art in my work, however, my focus will be on how various art forms of NOFA community are indexes in the Gellian sense and act as “instrument[s] of social agency”(Ibid: 15). Gell defines agency as “attributable to those persons (and things...) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention” (Ibid: 16). He clarifies, “social agency can be exercised relative to things, and social agency can be exercised by ‘things’” (Ibid: 17). Understanding that agency can be exercised relative to things or by things, we recognize that there is a difference in the type of agency displayed in NOFA. We can see the agency of the primary agent, a person affiliated with NOFA in some way who uses art to create an effect. Or we can see the agency of the secondary agent, the agency the art of the NOFA community has when it interacts with and causes certain things in its audience. This can be something intended by the artist, or something totally unintended. The agency of the art/index is dependent upon the experience and social relationship it has with its audience (what Gell calls “the patient”).

In this study I use Gell’s anthropological theory of art to expand my observations beyond the boundaries of visual art and to include those less tangible forms of art such as performance art, dance and spoken word (symbolic language). Gell does something similar in “Style and Meaning in Umeda Dance” where he discusses the difference between dance and non-dance. Here he differentiates dance as art because of the presence of “style” and “meaning” (Ibid:

155). NOFA includes a wide array of visual art created to decorate the environment (buildings, street lamps, the ground), and to “decorate” the performers in the form of Mardi Gras Indians suits and Social Aid and Pleasure Club Parade suits. I also include the performance art and symbolic language I’ve observed as part of NOFA, which includes songs, readings, speeches, dances and parading. All of these forms of art can be analyzed by employing Gell’s theoretical frame to understand “agency, intention, causation, result and transformation” (Ibid: 6) as it applies to NOFA.

## **Chapter Five: Afrocentric Identity in New Orleans**

The focus of my research is the use of art as a vessel for communicating identity. New Orleans is filled with festival traditions, which are performed on a regular basis. NOFA is representative of a tradition that connects intricate networks of families, organizations and communities. Within this larger NOFA tradition, there is a network of African-Centered artists who use NOFA as a means to convey their unique worldview in song, dance, music, visual art and costume. I use the term African-Centered, but this phrase is used to identify people who have an African diasporic identity. There are many frames of thought that fall under the label “African diasporic identity”, including, Afrocentric, Pan-African, and Black Nationalist identities. Each of the above ideologies stems from the civil rights movement, where African Americans grappled with issues of identity and representation.

### **The Roots of New Orleans’ African-Centered Movement**

The 1960’s and 70’s Civil Rights Movement were a time of change in the United States. African Americans were struggling to redefine themselves as a part of the American fabric, and as a part of a larger, global community. The nature of racism and segregation in the United States led to many negative stereotypes about African Americans and their origins. Michael Wayne (2014: 132) explains that the Afrocentric movement emerged because “many blacks now sought a personal link to Africa,” an ancestral connection of sorts. African Americans began searching for literal and figurative ways to return to Africa and their African roots: visiting African countries, incorporating African language in their daily rituals, wearing African clothes and African prints, buying African art and changing their European names to more

African names (Ibid). This later became identified as Afrocentrism, a socio-political identity. Afrocentricity has become a social and cultural movement among African Americans, and can be seen in its incorporation into many public school curriculum as well as well-established social gatherings such as Kwanzaa, African Liberation Day and Maafa.

In New Orleans, the Civil Rights Movement produced leaders who incorporated a “black consciousness” in their work. This helped to promote the African-centered movement that blossomed in the 1980s and 90s. Jerome Smith was one of many activists in the late 1960s and early 70s to promote a change in how New Orleans’ Black population dealt with the oppression they experienced. In the 1970s, the political climate changed in New Orleans and residents began to look for new tools to add to their “cultural tool kit of habits, skills, and styles from which to construct strategies of action” (Swidler 1986 273). Ronald W. Walters (1993) writes about the transition from “Black Power to Pan Africanism” in *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora*. Walters explains, “The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was one of the vanguard groups which led the break from the older, more conservative civil rights organizations in ideology and tactics of struggle” (59). Throughout the United States, SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were in close relation in the 1960s, fighting for civil rights. However, SNCC didn’t have as strong a hold in New Orleans. In my interviews and conversations about past movements in New Orleans, I heard people mention CORE, but rarely heard mention of SNCC. Samori Camara’s (2011) dissertation chapter on Robert Charles refers to New Orleans as a “CORE city”. He explains that even though New Orleans was a CORE city, “SNCC affected the activists in New Orleans, especially as the movement moved from nonviolence to Black Power” (15). He sites as evidence the fact that in 1962, CORE expelled its

white members in favor of an ideology more aligned with a more Black Nationalist philosophy. It was this ideology that informed Jerome Smith as he created Tambourine and Fan in 1969 and used it as a platform to guide New Orleans' youth.

Tambourine and Fan taught children black consciousness through the arts, through sports and through community engagement. The message was that Blacks had to stick together in New Orleans and make a difference in their community. Tambourine and Fan was a children's camp run by men and women from the community. They provided the neighborhood children with tangible role models and strategies for dealing with life. Rituals like calling the youth together using the snare and bass drum connected children to the NOFA tradition. Children were chosen to play the "Tambourine and Fan" beat, and this would signal the neighborhood that it was time for camp. An example of this black consciousness can be seen in the songs that come from Tambourine and Fan. These songs were used to teach hundreds of youth about community responsibility, Black history and instill a connection with all the members of their community both good and bad. Songs like "Black children were born on the African soul" teach children they are responsible for the lady with the African baby as well as for the boy, smoking weed. The song's lyrics tell the children to "go where I send it, how shall I send it", then instructs with lyrics like "I'm gone send it one by one; one for the little bitty baby, born by the African lady" and "I'm gone send it three by three; three for the boy that smokes that weed". These lyrics express the diversity of the Black community by identifying both positive and negative members, while still including them in the list of people the children should "send" for. Another example is the chant Tambourine and Fan instructors taught children to deter them from the dangers of drugs.

What is dope  
Dope is poison and death  
What is dope  
Dope is poison and death  
What is a man that use dope  
A dead man  
What is a man that uses dope  
A dead man  
Who is Dr. Martin Luther King  
Dr Martin Luther King was a Freedom Fighter  
Who was Malcolm X?  
Malcolm X was a Black Man trying to make things better for Black people  
Who is Bessie Smith?  
Bessie Smith was a Blues singer  
What time it is?  
Nation Time  
What Time it is?  
Nation Time

“Black Children Were Born on the African Soil” and “What is dope” are examples of how Tambourine and Fan used art to teach children the values shared by the adults who incorporated Black consciousness and African-Centeredness into the traditions of NOFAs. The chant “what is dope” uses call and response which is prevalent in many second line songs. The term “nation time” is also a marker of the Black consciousness that came from the 1970’s and 80’s. Nation time refers to the act of nation building, which includes educational, economic, spiritual and physical improvements in the Black community.

Tambourine and Fan is just one small tributary stream feeding the river of New Orleans’ African-Centered community development. From the 1970’s, New Orleans experienced an influx of community movements that began to shape the African-Centered community. The presence of African dance and music has served as a space for New Orleans residents to learn about African countries and traditions. Papa Abdoulaye Camara, the late director of Les Ballet National du Senegal from Casamance, Senegal led an African dance company in New Orleans



from the early 1980's until his death right after Hurricane Katrina. "Pap" or "Papa Camara", as many of his students call him, taught women, men and children Senegalese/Guinean African dance techniques, costume making and about African culture. Mariama Curry, director of N'kafu African dance company and Culu Children's company was one of Papa Camara's students. Also from Papa Camara came Nfungotah, an umbrella company given to Tyrone "Brotha T" Henry. Nfungotah hosts several African-centered events such as Dance for Life, a program dedicated to providing healthy activity through African diasporic dance classes. Also came N'Fungola Sibo African Dance and Drum Company, directed by Mikeal Caesar. Papa Camera taught many of the dancers who are in the forefront of New Orleans' African dance community including Ausetua Amor Amunkum, director of Kumbuka African Dance Company.

### **Identifying New Orleans African-Centered Community**

The elements of the African diasporic identity of the New Orleans community include a spiritual connection to something other than oneself (including a reverence for ancestors), a sense of historical responsibility to knowing your roots in the United States and your connection to the African diaspora, a commitment to educating the youth in the community, and finally protecting and improving the lives of those in your community. Added to this are African based nomenclature (the use of African names, labels and language in daily life), African spirituality, and African symbols (such as clothing, art and artifacts from Africa).

Samori Camara (2012) identifies distinctive characteristics of African-Centered individuals when he says, "Cultural nationalists believed that African Americans had to go back to Africa mentally, spiritually, and culturally in order to free themselves from the shackles of

oppression. Wearing one's hair natural, changing one's name, and wearing African garb were hallmarks of the cultural nationalist iteration of Black Power" (26). I deduce from Camara's statement that a person's name; appearance, spiritual beliefs and other attributes can be assessed for possible markers of an African diasporic identity. Many of the African-Centered NOFA artist I interviewed share common experiences Tambourine and Fan, Ifa, African dance classes or other African-centered activities that tend to overlap.

New Orleans' African-centered community is like any other community; it has members who share common beliefs and practices. However, that doesn't mean every member looks, speaks or believes the exactly same. Nor do they express their African-Centered identity in the same way. When we speak of members of the African-Centered community, we speak of multi-faceted actors. Individuals belong to more than one group; their identity consists of their family, race, religious affiliations, occupation and many other "groups". All of these aspects of identity change over time, allowing each individual to create a unique representation of the African-Centered community. It's important to recognize the diversity of expression that African-Centered NOFA under the umbrella of the African-Centered identity. Otherwise, it is possible to miss important connections.

When I identified participants for this study, I attempted to identify a cross section of the African-centered NOFA community. I recognized how diverse this community is, and was very deliberate in including different kinds of African-Centered members. Bernard Williams (2008) describes Identity as "a benign self-applied stereotype" (62), however, many of those I've identified as "African-Centered practitioners" did not fit the general "African-Centered" stereotype. One of my interview questions was, "When you think of yourself, how do you see

yourself in relation to Afrocentric thought?”. Two of the participants in my study did not self-identify as Afrocentric, but did display several of the common experiences associated with African-Centered thought in New Orleans. For example, one of my participants works in New Orleans Central Business District; he wears formal business attire to work, is Christian and looks like any “Eurocentric” African American man at first glance. However, when he speaks of his views of Africa, he is adamant about the importance of his African roots, his ancestors, and African culture in everything he does. He has traveled to several countries in Africa with the express intention of creating a tangible connection with Africa and using that connection to facilitate business and social networks throughout the African diaspora. On the other hand, another of my participants wears her hair in long dreadlocks, is often found wearing clothing from West Africa, practices African spirituality, has a Kemetic name. Kemetic names are associated with the Auser Auset Society’s spiritual teachings. They are a pan-African religious organization founded in 1973. The organization provides Afrocentric based spiritual training based on ancient Egyptian cosmology and its members study African dance and culture. There are consecrated Orisha in her home, spiritual tools from the Ifa African spiritual system as well as paintings, sculptures and historical artifacts, which reflect both indigenous African culture and NOFA culture. However, even this participant goes to Christian church faithfully every Sunday. This is just a small comparison to emphasize there is no “one size fits all” description of the African-centered NOFA practitioner.

## Chapter Six: Aestheticizing the Clubhouse

There are many differences in New Orleans' geographic and cultural landscapes that make this city unique. New Orleans neighborhoods use space in a way which represents local culture more than any I've experienced in cities such as Milwaukee and Chicago. An example of how the residents and the city use material culture and art to express identity can be seen on the corner of Broad St. and Esplanade. An electrical utility box is painted from the ground up in a portrait of local Black Indian, Chief David Montana, wearing his 2015 "Mardi Gras Indian" suit. The painting depicts Chief Montana in his most recent suit, white with sea green accents. White magnolia flowers, the theme and color of his most recent suit, frame Chief David's face. The artwork on the utility box is connected intimately to this specific area of the city because it is located one block from Chief David Montana's house. This is where he "comes out the door" on Mardi Gras day. "Coming out the door" is a ceremonial announcement to the Mardi Gras revelers that a Black Indian Chief is beginning his route on Mardi Gras day. Chief David Montana's image reminds the community of his legacy as a Mardi Gras Indian, and his connection to the Montana family, known for masking Mardi Gras Indians. His portrait on the corner of Broad and Esplanade transforms an ordinary space into a visual claim of ownership. Art that is a part of the local landscape, as opposed to art located in a museum, identifies and validates leaders who carry on the traditions so important to the community. Todd Higgins of the BMOL explains the sentiment,

*We live in a community. We're part of the community. We breathe eat, die in the community... so that's what we try to really make people understand is that they, you know, this is what our ancestors left us. Be prideful in it, Take care of it.*

Community Visions Unlimited (CVU), an organization that works with New Orleans neighborhood associations, artists and residents to “change neighborhoods for the better” (<http://www.cvunola.org/>), produced the utility box portrait. The portraits on Broad Street include Chief David Montana’s as well as a caricature of the Zulu SAPC, located outside the new Zulu clubhouse on Broad St and Orleans. Residents and community organizations like CVU use art as symbolic language to communicate connections to space, ownership in their community and to make identity claims. It is also used to perpetuate traditions, and of honoring those who have earned a place of honor in the community. Like one of CVU founders, Jeannie Tidy states, *“I grew up in New Orleans, I know these neighborhoods and I know what make them culturally interesting.”* This claim of ownership and identity extends to the greater public sphere, as shown by the fact that the artwork is displayed on city property.

This chapter explores how residents use art as symbolic language, as a tool to communicate connection to space, ownership in their community and claims of identity. It is in this vein that I look at the BMOL’s annual parade. I use this event to illustrate how the BMOL use art to transform space and inform the community about identity, while reinforcing historical connections and claims of cultural ownership. The BMOL employ the art they use to decorate their parade start point to create messages. Maruska Svasek refers to this process as “aestheticisation.” Svasek describes aestheticisation as the process by which “objects are perceived and the ensuing sensory experience used to provide a basis for descriptions of ‘aesthetic experience’, which in turn are used to reinforce abstract ideas or beliefs” (2007 63). Art, as expressed through decorating a building, becomes a tool for expressing a particular worldview. The symbolic language chosen to adorn the BMOL “clubhouse” (the start point of

the parade) is a deliberate conversation between the organization, the surrounding community and other observers.

In my formal and informal interviews with members of the BMOL, one of the prevailing sentiments is that of being “different”. This “difference” was evident when I approached Sweet Lorraine’s Jazz Club (the club house of the BMOL) as the BMOL members decorated for their upcoming parade. Todd Higgins and Fred Johnson painstakingly orchestrated the creation of an artistic presentation that illustrated the BMOL’s worldview. The BMOL are committed to continuing New Orleans’ traditional jazz legacy. They are also committed to honoring the image of the strong working class Black men both past and present, while educating the community of the African cultural roots in New Orleans traditions. The BMOL’s mission is represented in art created on and around Sweet Lorraine’s, and in the suits that adorn the BMOL members Fred Johnson and the founders of the BMOL have created an index in which they are able to convey abstract ideas such as social justice and economic development for New Orleans’ Black community.

The first time I saw the BMOL’s clubhouse before a parade, I realized their goal was to transform the club into a visual monument constructed to honor the legacy of the BMOL, their connection to the Treme community and their commitment to connecting New Orleans traditions to Africa. The BMOL host an annual parade, and each year, the banners, walls, ground and posters change color and design according to that year’s theme. This year, the main colors were orange and gold, red, black, and green as the accent. Approaching the intersection of St. Claude Avenue and Touro Street, it is abundantly clear there is an exciting event about to take place. The corner is in the middle of a neighborhood classified as economically

disadvantaged. There is a check cashing facility located in the next block and a second hand furniture store that caters to low-income residents. But on this day, the corner is flanked in vibrant orange, gold and yellows. The BMOL have taken hours decorating their clubhouse, the adjoining fence and the light poles that face the club on both sides of the street. Normally, Sweet Lorraine's blends into the landscape, painted white with a small digital sign in the window scrolling the club's name. Today, the BMOL have transformed the building by placing a banner across its entire face. The banner announces the day's parade in giant orange letters trimmed in orange raffia. It proclaims, "The Black Men of Labor's Annual Parade", and professes they are "Keeping Our African Culture and New Orleans Traditional Jazz music Alive and on the Streets." The banner's border, in bold black print, displays the following Ghanaian Adinkra symbols (Images from [www.adinkra.org](http://www.adinkra.org)).

**Sankofa:** Symbol of importance of learning from the past.



**Adinkrahene:** Symbol of greatness, charisma and leadership



**Mpatatpo:** Knot of reconciliation



**Dwennimmen:** Symbol of humility and strength



**Aya:** Symbol of endurance and resourcefulness



**Mate Masie:** Symbol of wisdom, knowledge and prudence



**Akoma:** Symbol of patience and tolerance



**Boa Me Na Me Mmoa Wo:** Symbol of cooperation and interdependence



These same symbols appear on the BMOL parade route sheet and the announcement for the BMOL's ball. Todd Higgins and Fred Johnson chose these symbols to represent the philosophy of the BMOL, even if their specific meaning may elude those in the community and even some of the members themselves. Mr. Higgins said "I chose Adinkra symbols that would match what the BMOL stand for". I am familiar with Adinkra symbols because I was raised in an Afrocentric home. I recognize that Adinkra symbols are often used by African Americans to symbolize their connection with Africa, not necessarily Ghana. The weekend before the BMOL parade, I watched some of the members place the banner on the front of Sweet Lorraine's. One of the members was standing next to me, so I asked if he knew what the Adinkra symbols were. He didn't know I was already familiar with them, so he tried to explain what they were. He said, "I'm not really sure what they mean, but I know they're African. I think they have something to do with Kwanzaa or something like that." So, even though he didn't understand that each symbol had its own meaning, nor did he know exactly what African country the Adinkra symbols came from, to him, these symbols represented a connection to Africa. Mr. Higgins addressed this in our conversation about the Adinkra symbols,

*Someone like you would notice the symbols and know what they mean, but most people don't have a clue. They just know they represent something from Africa. I hate to say, but even some of our members don't know what they mean, even though Fred and I give the information. But they know they're African symbols, and they can look them up if they ever really want to know what they mean.*

Choosing these symbols is a conscious act, which allows the BMOL to connect the community they serve with the greater idea of Africa. The Adinkra symbols are on their route sheets, on



their signage and anything else passed out to the community because they want to “keep it consistent for history.”

The BMOL’s artistic index balances symbolisms of African-Centered consciousness with that of social justice in New Orleans Black community. Recognizing the forethought placed in choosing what images is used in the aestheticisation of Sweet Lorraine’s, I draw attention to the 5 ft plus vertical banner that hangs to the right of the entrance. It is an enlarged copy of “A Message to New Orleans”, which is framed in red, yellow, gold and green, with Adinkra symbols in the background. The message is a direct claim to the BMOL’s place in New Orleans as keepers of the traditional jazz legacy, as leaders in the community and as direct descendants to a spiritual and cultural line of upstanding New Orleans Black men. Phrases such as “The Black Men of Labor love the culture and Traditions of New Orleans”, and “For all to know, it is the declaration of The Black Men of Labor that crime, shootings, murder, or violence in any form is incompatible with and destructive to the traditions of second line parading, brass band music and African American Street parades” set this organization apart from most SAPC by aligning them as a guiding force in the community. They have placed themselves in the forefront of New Orleans’ current tradition and have set forth precedent as to how that tradition should be presented. They make specific historical claims and identify with a Pan-Africanist worldview with phrases like,

*We are aware of our historical antecedents in Africa, The Caribbean, South America, and throughout the African diaspora; this is the cultural legacy which influences our style, dress, symbolism, passion and spirit.*

and

*Like the cultural ancestors before us, we honor our families and ourselves, and the persons whose love and sacrifices made us possible. We feel and affirm a*

*direct spiritual and cultural link to the brass bands and second-line dancers of the past, because of the cultural and social history we know and claim, The Black Men of Labor, again, affirm that in the tradition of second line dancing there is no place for crime and violence.*

The BMOL use specific and direct terms such as *“The Black Men of Labor will not indulge in the pathology of self-hatred and racial suicide”*. These statements are both relevant and connected to the Treme community and New Orleans’ Black community. Their banner addresses the very real problem of violence in the Black community and violence that has been associated with New Orleans’ second line traditions. Just recently, Mother’s Day 2013, there was a widely publicized shooting in the same neighborhood, which occurred during the Big 7 SAPC second line parade and injured 19 people, including two child participants.

The BMOL, like many of New Orleans’ African-Centered artists, pull from an arsenal of symbols and behaviors to infuse their identity into traditional NOFAs. These tools are used to express a belief in a spiritual and genetic connection to the legacy of African ancestors and their African American descendants; Or as the BMOL state, *“Keeping Our African Culture and New Orleans traditional jazz music alive and on the streets”*. Their approach to the second-line tradition is unique. The art that surrounds Sweet Lorraine’s reflects the historical place the BMOL hold in the Treme community and their commitment to traditional jazz, community activism and the improvement of New Orleans’ African American community. They combine African fabric, symbolic colors such as red, black and green (The United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), led by Marcus Garvey, created the red, black and green flag as a symbol of Pan-Africanism), photos, and symbols that communicate their organization’s mission. If we look closer at the symbolic language presented in decorating the BMOL clubhouse, we can see they

were chosen to create a certain aesthetic environment that evokes a connection to Africa, New Orleans, Treme and the civil rights movement.

The art is an important part of the BMOL second line parade because of its secondary agency, its ability to work on the behalf of those who created it (the primary social agents) to affect those who attend the second-line parade. This artwork is effective in creating a new paradigm of knowledge within the community, acquainting parade observers with new symbols, concepts and understandings of what behavior is appropriate for Black men in New Orleans. The people who attend the BMOL's parade understand the club's connection to something African through the jazz tradition, and as a result, their own connection. But the members of the community who attend the second-line parade also connect to the BMOL's community legacy. Mixing African fabric with images of community heroes such as Jerome Smith and Danny Barker, on some level infuses a sense of Black consciousness and African pride in a space that is usually void of these kinds of expression. At the same time, a connection is made to the older community members who remember the messages of organizations such as Tambourine and Fan who were instrumental in connecting the second line tradition with community activism and Black pride. This is an example of what Morphy (2006: 302-3) describes as "properties of objects which require them to be seen in a particular way by viewers who, because of their background or personality, are able to appreciate them." The BMOL have a specific audience in mind, mainly New Orleans' Black community. Yes, other demographics attend the parades, and they may or may receive the same message as those who have lived in this community. However, they will get something from observing the BMOL's decorations, even if it's just the recognition that the BMOL are different than most clubs. As Osborne and

Tanner (2007 73) explain, “agency can be exercised by material objects”, and relaying the message of the BMOL’s unique perspective is just one way the art has agency. The art used in the aestheticisation of Sweet Lorraine’s and the surrounding area, allow the BMOL to continue in cultural shaping, local contextualization and creating dialogue. The art itself reinforces and passes on values from the past, as well as the ever-changing values of the BMOL. This is a perfect example of how art can “bring forth a pleasurable feeling while informing or communicating to the viewer or serving a practical function” (Morphy 2006: 302).

## **Chapter Seven: We Are What We Wear**

Clothing and attire is a very important part of New Orleans Festival Arts culture. It is not uncommon to spend a year planning, acquiring fabric, materials, designs, color schemes and sewing suits for the annual parade. This is true for Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs as well as for Mardi Gras Indians. This aspect of parading is both time-consuming and expensive. The suits are both art and performance, as they serve to express a vision and are part of the NOFA tradition. I reluctantly use the term “costume” to describe the suits created in New Orleans festival arts because it insinuates that the suits created are for show, part of a performance. What it does not convey is the spiritual energy, the exorbitant amount of time, the intricate network of people it takes to create each piece. These factors are what qualify the “costumes” created for NOFA as an artistic index, capable of secondary agency. The suits interact with those who wear them as well as with those who view observe them on behalf of those who make and wear them. Gell (1998: 74) speaks of the importance of decorative designs and patterns, which are a great part of creating a suit: “Decorative patterns applied to artifacts attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail”. He also explains that the difference between art and artifact is that art has “style and meaning” (Ibid: 155). Gell uses dance as an example of physical displays that communicate meaning through variations of normal motor behaviors. He applies this concept to visual art as well (Ibid: 74). A normal or mundane act, such as painting a wall, becomes art when the artist adds style and meaning. Gell’s work with the Malakulans allowed him to stray “a long way from the idea that patterns appeal to the eyes or give aesthetic pleasure,” and begin to recognize that artists can use

patterns “as performances” (Ibid: 93. I believe the same is true for the suits created in NOFA. Both examples, the BMOL annual parade suits and Ausettua’s Mardi Gras Indian suits, express a specific worldview, social relationships and social context while also agency—they literally perform the BMOL’s (and Ausettua’s) identity at African-Centered participants in the NOFA community. Keeping this in mind, I am able to classify both the suits created for the BMOL and the more obvious artistic expressions represented in Ausettua Amor Amenkum’s Mardi Gras Indian suits as an art index as a mean of highlighting how they literally “index” the primary agency of such performers.

### **Identity in the Second Line Suit**

When I attended the Young Men Olympian Jr. SAPC (YMO) annual second line parade, I immediately noticed the absence of the aesthetic markers I witnessed yearly at the BMOL second line parades. The bar where they began their parade had no colorful fabric and none of the street poles were decorated. The only material designating the parade route was a rope used to section off the area where the members would parade outside the building and into the street. When I approached the bar from the street, the only way I could tell there was a second line about to begin was by the crowd gathering outside. There were street vendors set up across the street from the bar, but there were was nothing much to identify who the YMO were and what their organization stood for. Missing were the banners declaring the organization’s mission, photos of past parades or past members, no memorials of great community leaders. The YMO’s second line parade began with a brass band and a section of members who exited the building displaying fancy footwork and uniquely tailored suits. Each group of members

(there were 5 separate sections of this second line parade) wore identical tailor-made suits with matching hats, shoes and sashes. Although the suits appeared to be tailor-made, they were typical European styled three-piece suits. What stood out were the older members who wore fez hats. Even though I didn't understand the specific significance of the hats, I did recognize that the addition of this special type of hat was symbolic of something important to YMO members.

This helped me to understand the significance of attire in the second line tradition as part of a performance. These suits were more than just clothing; they were living artistic presentations. The suits worn in a second line parade express a statement to those watching. In this sense, the clothes can be considered art, or even a performance in the Gellian sense. The suit is an important character and has an important role to play as a secondary agent to the primary agent also performing in the "coming out the door" ceremony. This ceremony begins with the brass band playing music to start the parade. Immediately following the band, the club members exit the door of the clubhouse/bar performing a unique dance solo. This is the first time the members will be seen in their unique suits, created for this occasion. The suits and all the accessories are all unique forms of art because they connect abstract ideas such as community status and political and social identity.

The BMOL use their suits to make a statement to the community about who they are and in what they believe. Just as Svasek (2007 67) suggests that "social actors" can use the materials they produce as "powerful communicative instruments, which may actively evoke emotional responses and generate social and political action." The BMOL create artifacts that are used as "pragmatic tools and performative agents to stimulate, enchant and manipulate

their own and other people's feelings and resulting behavior" (Ibid: 67). The BMOL use Adinkra symbols to educate the community and remind participants of the historical and spiritual connection to Africa. Their consistent donning of colorful and vibrant African suits at the annual parade does the same. Each year, the BMOL choose a color, fabric and theme for the year. The designs change, but the process remains the same. Fred Johnson and Todd Higgins begin approximately one month after the parade thinking about the next parade's fabric, colors and theme. The fabric is always an African fabric, but the style and origin may vary.

The BMOL have gone further than just purchasing yards of African print fabric. Todd Higgins explained to me that many of the African fabrics sold in the United States are actually made in China. This fact, and their commitment to developing transnational business relationships with African countries have prompted them to travel to Ghana, Senegal and South Africa to purchase fabric and other material for the parade. For their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Higgins went to Ghana to get Kente fabric. During this trip, they visited Senegal, Johannesburg and Benin. This trip helped Mr. Higgins to understand the true connections between African countries and New Orleans. Mr. Higgins described his reaction,

*We saw our relatives, ancestors, brothers, mothers, aunts, you know, sitting behind a weaving machine and you had a thousand feet of yarn, but it was making a nice garment called Kente cloth... when you look at the red, black, green, gold Kente cloth which most West African people wear mainly in Ghana.*

Making the trip to Ghana and parading in clothe made by hand in Ghana is a way of emphasizing to observers and themselves the importance of African culture and its connection to the BMOL. One important factor is the fabric's authenticity. It was made in Ghana and therefore, not a "knock off". Another important factor is that the BMOL are able to provide



access to material for people who may not be able to get the “real thing”. The BMOL use this authentic Kente cloth material as their “formal” attire for special occasions:

*We say we’re going to go all out the way because most of the groups in New Orleans have banquets, ceremonies, funerals or weddings that they dress up in their coats and on their coats is a little insignia patch. The Zulus have a gold jacket with a Zulu patch. The Sudan have a blue jacket with their patch and so on and so forth. We said, “Nah, we want to have an African single button Kente jacket, so when we go to any function with anybody else, we stand out. We stand out on more than one. It’s not because the color is going to attract you, it’s because this is who we represent. This is what why we do what we do.*

He further explains how the hand-made fabric is used to express African pride and is given even an elevated status within the group:

*Every time we bury somebody of station, an aunt, a jazz musician or a civil rights movement leader, as we did with Dr. Rudy Lombard, which is our mentor, we dress up in that jacket, you know, because it’s an honor. It’s about respect and, you know that’s a way for us to really let people know that we ain’t afraid to be African, a by-part of being African-American... but for us, we was taken away from our land, we don’t identify with that, but the BMOL, we identify with that. So we’re African. We just happen to be African Americans in America... yeah we were born here but we know that heritage that came here, it was brought here. It was stolen here. It was, you know, snatched but we still recognize and a group and as an organization that’s from which we come. That’s for which we got to stand on.*

When the BMOL create the suits worn in their annual parade, they use specific fabric, chosen because of its ability to “do something”. The artistic index created by using specific African patterns, fabrics, colors and designs creates a feeling of pride in the BMOL who wear them as well as in the community members who flock to the streets to parade with the BMOL’s annual parade. The suits serve to connect the BMOL and the community with a positive image of Black men as a product of a great history.

I agree with Howard Morphy (2006: 317), the combination of the suits, the music, and the ritual of the annual parade “have an effect on the mental state of the participants as the content of the art in combination with the ritual has a certain meaning to the participants.” Adding to this perspective the Gellian approach to thinking of the “effect” the suits have as secondary agency serves to highlight the multifaceted ways that African-Centered identities are performed and consequently communicated to participants and observers at NOFA events.

### **Big Queen Ausetua and the Oya Suit**

There is another aspect of art’s agency, and that is of being consecrated to have agency. “An obvious category of objects considered “affective” would include talismans, amulets and apotropaic figures or emblems, all of which are thought to exert power and may be attested in any number of traditions” (Osborne and Tanner 2007 42). This is an important aspect of how Ausetua Amor Amenkum approaches her Mardi Gras Indian suits. In 2015 I had the good fortune of being able to watch Ausetua Amor Amenkum go through the entire process of creating a Mardi Gras Indian suit. The process began the morning of Mardi Gras as we put the finishing touches on her magnolia flower suit. We were pulling an all-nighter, having been up all day sewing sequined designs for the suit and placing the last feathers on her crown. Her conversation went to “next year’s suit.” She wanted to do something more specifically connected to the Orishas, so she chose to work with Oya. Oya is the deity associated with wind and who guards the cemetery. Oya is depicted as a Black woman wearing a skirt of 9 different colors (blue, red, orange, maroon, green, yellow, purple, red and gold), carries a horsetail and is known as a warrior spirit. Over the year, Amor Amenkum created the design for the 2016 suit,

incorporating symbols associated with Oya. The suit's apron is worn as a piece that drapes over the shoulders and ends in a skirt, which drapes the front of her lower body. Her apron was designed to look like the 9 colored panels of Oya's skirt. Amor Amenkum spent many months looking for the right face to represent Oya's image on the front of her crown and on her chest piece. She wanted the face to be recognized as a Black woman's face, not as a light skinned face or a white face. This was very important to Auset as she expressed several times "I want her to look African! I don't want her to look "Indian."

This suit is the first suit Amor Amenkum created with her own specific ideology in mind. Previously she had shared the creative process with Chief David Montana and was unable to incorporate a specific concept connected with her spiritual and cultural beliefs. In prior suits, Amor Amenkum included small reminders within the designs Chief Montana created. In the 2015 suit, mentioned above, Amor Amenkum performed divination, a process of communicating with the spiritual realm through shells or cards to determine the spirit of the suit. Amor Amenkum does this for each of her suits, even if she doesn't incorporate the spirit into the actual design. The 2015 magnolia suit connected Amor Amenkum to the spirit of the ancestors. In the African spiritual system of Ifa, ancestral interactions are done wearing all white (as will be seen in the next chapter when discussing the Maafa ceremony). The 2015 magnolia suit was predominately white and was a suit of magnolia flowers, (white flowers are also associated with ancestors in the Ifa tradition). So through divination, Amor Amenkum's Mardi Gras Indian suit was transformed from to a vessel which connects her to a spiritual energy.

Amor Amenkum's 2016 suit took the process even further. To incorporate the spirit of Oya into the suit, and to connect Amor Amenkum to the spirit of Oya, she brought in a priest to bless and consecrate the suit. This act enhanced the suit's ability to "do" something. The act of consecrating the suit helped to activate the suit's agency for both Amor Amenkum as she wore the suit and for the parade participants. Amor Amenkum explained what the suit "does",

*There's something...a connection, the spirit finds a way to manifest itself through art, you know, through paintings and through carvings and through objects. There's something about objectifying the spirit. The spirit needs a point of contact where it can enter in at and that's what the Mardi Gras Indians allow to do. The sequence, because it reflects the light, that allows that spirit to lock in, which energizes the suit and the suit becomes, you know, not just oh it's a pretty suit, it becomes something that is the objectification of the spirit that is moving through communities in a very circular fashion. They're circular, they kind of go all around the neighborhood, circle the block, it's just a different kind of approach and that's very African because Africa do that too in terms of going in and out of neighborhoods, you know, bringing that energy to heal the neighborhood, you know. It is the same concept of masquerading and well I just answered it in how the suit becomes energized in the point of contact with the spirit. It can come in several ways. It can come to the person, right? It's also manifested with the energy of the people who sew on the suit. All that makes the suit come to life, you know and it's an explainable feelings I can tell you when you put it on, that's when you really feel it. You know it's not just like putting on a dress, I just don't feel the same thing like going to Macy's and buying a dress and put that on as compared to when I put the Indian suit on because it is a totally different feeling. But that is how it becomes alive and what happens is all those stones, those rhinestones and the sequins and the feathers, because feathers represent people rising above their environment, whatever they're dealing with. Whenever you see feathers on someone, that's really represents having the ability to be above it and so having the feathers on too, it is the greatest example of what you can do, what we can do when we come together, you know?*

Amor Amenkum's 2016 Oya suit demonstrates Osborne and Tanner's point that objects can have agency—but not just of the performers as this quote from Amor Amenkum demonstrates but the agency of "spirits" as well. African-Centered artists such as Amor Amenkum identify

specific materials and processes to incorporate a spiritual aspect to the art of their Mardi Gras Indian suit.

Such suits are both aesthetically pleasing and functional, and most importantly spiritual. The same sentiment was expressed in my interview with Victor Harris, who has masked 50 years and is known as “The Spirit of Fi Yi Yi”,

*My suit is spiritual and it's Godly. I don't just have no suit on and have fun with it just to be pretty and all of that. This is spiritual for me. This is Godly. This is, this is, this is the spirit right here, the suit. I'm the spirit of the suit. That's why they say the spirit of Fiyaya.*

Harris also speaks of the power of the suit to affect those who interact with it:

*...yeah and one guy swore to God that he was sick as a dog, about felt like he was going to die.. and that was the first year the spirit of Fi Yi Yi came out... He say when I came out, when I came out and he saw me, he jumped up and he wasn't sick no more.*

African-Centered NOFA artists like Amor Amenkum and Victor Harris create pieces of art through the year-long process of making a suit. There are artists all over the city who make Mardi Gras Indian suits, but the process and perspective of the African-Centered artist creates a different expression and interaction with the suit. Incorporating African spiritual concepts, whether they are based in traditional practices such as Ifa or if they are created through a sense of Africa as is the case with Victor Harris, allow the artist to create a different type of agency for their art.

Such artists, their suits and the spirits that inhabit them and their suits as they perform exhibit agency and expresses certain world-views to the community. Amor Amenkum is able to effect parade participants and observers through her suit, including the symbols and folklore of Orisha spirituality. She's also able to invoke the spirit of Oya as she parades through the

neighborhoods, as she, like her suit becomes a secondary agent for the spirit of Oya who interacts with the neighborhoods she visits through Amor Amenkumand her suit. Victor Harris empowers his suit with the spirit of Fi Yi Yi, which allows Fi Yi Yi to uplift the spirit of those who interact with this spirit as they interact with Victor Harris as he parades through the neighborhoods. In this way, the African-Centered artists, acting as secondary agents for these spirits, are able to heal and uplift the spirits of those in their community.

## **Chapter Eight: Connecting New Orleans Festival Arts Through Spoken Word**

This chapter switches focus from the visual art represented in decorations and suit making to the art of symbolic language, specifically that of narratives and performance. Again, this study aims to identify how African-Centered artists use art to express their values and world-views and to effect change in their environment. As Gell (1998:18) points out, “Social agency can be exercised relative to ‘things’ and social agency can be exercised by things.” This chapter will demonstrate how performance and symbolic language can also exert social agency and effect change or make claims of historical relevancy. The events in this chapter fall under the NOFA umbrella because they are connected either to the tradition through practice or through narrative. The first episode discusses the symbolic language of the “Congo Square” narrative, which is common knowledge among all the African-Centered artists I observed and interviewed during my study. The second episode falls under the NOFA umbrella because it is an example of how the second-line tradition is used to effect change in the community.

I have had several conversations with my interviewees about NOFA culture and its historical connection to Congo Square and the traditions that come from that time. Amor Amenkum uses the story of Congo Square to set the mood of the class and as a teaching moment for students to embody the energy of Congo Square into the movements she demonstrates during the class. Several times during class, she reminds her students of the meaning of the songs and how they connected to the dance, how certain movements were flirtatious, etc. She keeps bringing students back to the marketplace of Congo Square.

The Story of Congo Square is empowering to artists like Amor Amenkum, who are from New Orleans and who connect with this historical narrative because it is also from New

Orleans. Amor Amenkum's passionate portrayal of the traditions of Congo Square was demonstrated physically as she taught the class the movements. She was able to connect the movements to an attitude, a situation, a song lyric that made the lives of the slaves of the 1800's more concrete and understandable. Ausetua Amor Amunkum was scheduled to teach "dances of Congo Square" as a part of a yearly program showcasing local New Orleans dancers. The class was filled with a diverse group of New Orleans dancers of all levels. The class featured two dances from the Congo Square era, Calenda and Bamboula. Amunkum's class was the third of a day of one-hour classes. The previous classes began with a warm-up, a brief introduction to the dance and dance style, then the instructor began teaching steps. Amor Amunkum began her class with a short history class about Congo Square:

*In order to get the feel of the dances I'm going to show you, it's important to understand the history of where these dances come from. You see, every Sunday, the slaves would gather at Congo square. People say the slaves would dance and sing, but you have to think about it. This is the only time they'd get to see their friends and families that worked on other plantations. They would exchange information, sell the vegetables they grew and things they made. The dances that we see in New Orleans now come from the dances they did at Congo Square, The Calenda and Bamboula. These dances were brought from West Africa and were done when everyone gathered. They danced to drums made from wood and other materials we had here.*

When Todd Higgins introduced me to Fred Johnson, President of the Black Men of Labor, I asked Mr. Johnson to tell me about the BMOL. He began his answer by stating, "In order to know the Black Men of Labor, you first have to know about Congo Square". He then began to tell me the same story Amor Amenkum told to the class. This narrative has been repeated several times in conversations with my informants, in performances, in interviews with jazz musicians and other NOFA performers and in my interviews. It is an important part of the narrative of the Afrocentric NOFA participants in New Orleans. In the course of my research,



I've come to understand the importance of connecting NOFA traditions with their historical roots in Antebellum, and consequently, African and the African Diaspora New Orleans.

Todd Higgins explained the connection between Congo Square's legacy and NOFA in his interview as follows:

*So you have the traditions of what slaves, our ancestors as slaves did, kind of manifested in certain things here in New Orleans. You can go back to when the slave owners allowed our ancestors, who were slaves, to go practice their religion, their culture, their heritage in Congo Square, which is in the Treme... we try to keep the traditions of our ancestors that they practiced in Congo Square that they did on Sunday in Congo Square up, to educate young men and young women that, you know, you got to know from whom and where you came from to know exactly where you're trying to get and go and we try to teach young black men especially how to be a man because a black man here in New Orleans or any other metropolitan city gets a bad wrap, you know.*

*So yes we do try to teach and, you know, preserve our culture as it was not voted in, not legislated in, but as it was practiced here in New Orleans. I mean our ancestors was allowed to leave the plantation, go to Congo Square on Sunday and share in trading their goods, cooking, singing, dancing, you know, finding out which slaves made it, who didn't make it through the passage, things of that nature. So Sunday was a significant day here in New Orleans... So it was a day that we jubilantly celebrated and we try to take and continue that tradition on through Benevolent Societies and things of that nature whereas all those mechanical things were there for us to become better people, to understand who we are, to, you know, ensure and encourage one another that, you know, if you needed something you had this big, vast, extended community that was going to help you get whatever you need.*

New Orleans is unique in the fact that it is home to the festival arts. Although other cities have some aspects of festival arts (parading, social aid and pleasure clubs, etc.) no other city has the intricate network of festival arts and organizations and culture with such deep historical roots. In "Walking the Post-Disaster City: Race, Space and the Politics of Tradition in African-American Parading Practices of Post-Katrina New Orleans" Zada Johnson (2010: 5) describes the role of benevolence societies and the activities they produce, "African-American residents of New

Orleans have utilized street parades and carnival celebrations as expressions of heritage and identity as well as a way to contest the segregationist practices of the city.” The NOFA organizations that incorporate African diasporic identity as a part of their social identity are connected to certain historical elements, what Zada Johnson (2010: 5) calls an expression of “racial identity” and “historical consciousness.” When practitioners like Amor Amenkum, Higgins and Johnson connect NOFA to the historical site and time period represented in Congo Square, it gives the practitioners a foothold in the New Orleans cultural landscape. As Higgins notes in the quote above, “our culture as it was not voted in, not legislated in, but as it was practiced (historically) here in New Orleans”. Connecting present day NOFA traditions anchors their performance behaviors to Congo Square’s cultural legacy of resilience, resistance and cultural preservation (Regis 2001, Evans 2011, Walker 2004).

On December 17, 2015, New Orleans City council voted 6-1 to remove four monuments related to the Confederacy from prominent areas around the city. Statues of General Robert E. Lee, General P.G.T. Beauregard, Confederate president Jefferson Davis and an obelisk dedicated to the Battle of Liberty Place are the four designated monuments to be removed in the near future. This controversial decision was the result of many months of protest and debates fueled by New Orleans residents. A large part of the movement to have these monuments removed was supported by New Orleans’ Afrocentric community. Just a few months before this historical vote, Ashe Culture Center held it’s 2015 Annual Maafa Commemorative Parade. The parade was also created as a “healing ceremony; an ancestral ceremony”. Maafa was created as a community ritual using visual art, music, dance and spoken word and parading to memorialize the legacy of slavery in New Orleans and it’s shared legacy for present day residents. The 2015

parade placed emphasis on the painful reminders represented in the monuments and statues littered throughout the French Quarters. The choice to begin the Maafa at Congo Square was a deliberate act of reclaiming a geographic location. Participants left Congo Square accompanied by traditional African drum music. The participants walked the route through the Historical Treme neighborhood and into the French Quarters chanting, “We’re going to the crime scene.” The chants, accompanied by the music became a song of redemption. As more people joined the procession, the emotion behind “going to the crime scene” was seen and felt. There was a stark difference between the Maafa participants and the tourists and French Quarter attendees. Maafa participants were predominately African-American, and all were wearing white clothes while singing and dancing to the drums. The procession walked down the middle of the street. The Maafa participants wore “natural” hairstyles, dreadlocks, braids, natural haircuts and headwraps. The observers on the French Quarter sidewalks were predominately White and bewildered. Many of them asked what we were doing, to which the reply was, “This is Maafa. We are honoring our ancestors.”

In 2016, in addition to commemoration, Maafa participants used the route to express their anger and frustration with the imagery chosen by New Orleans officials to represent the spirit of the people. When the procession reached the Supreme Court located in the French Quarters, one of the participants danced around the statue of Edward Douglas White carrying a red, black and green flag. The procession participants stopped and clapped to the beat of the African drums and other instruments, singing “We’re going to the crime scene.” The red, black and green flag is a symbol of the Pan-African movement created in the 1920’s by the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). When the music stopped, the dancer stood in front of

the statue, as Mr. Leon Waters spoke through a bullhorn, informing the participants of Edward White's history as an opponent of desegregation and a product of a family who owned slaves. He ended his speech by asking the crowd, "Is this the kind of people we want to build monuments to represent New Orleans?" To which the crowd unanimously yelled, "NO!!!!"

The Maafa commemorative parade is an example of how art, be it visual art, performance art, spoken word or music, can have "agency"-- the potential to influence those who are watching as well as those who create it. Creating a song from the phrase, "Going to the crime scene", dancing, drumming and singing in the French Quarters are all examples of how art has agency—it produces effects on people. Participating in the Maafa transforms the individual into a social agent, who can express his or her feelings in an effective way. Dancing on the Supreme Court steps while waving the UNIA red, black and green flag is a way of erasing the imagery of a statue that represents White oppression. Mr. Water's declarations into the bullhorn served both as symbolic language, and also as a practical means of disseminating information regarding the ongoing movement to remove the statues of former slave owners. It cannot be directly stated that Maafa was responsible for the city counsel's vote to remove the four statues mentioned earlier, but it did serve to create a sense of empowerment and solidarity while distributing information to the participants and the parade's observers.

Examining Maafa allows us to see different forms of art and how it has effects on people as the secondary agents of those who have created and performed it. We can connect the social agent with the message relayed through his art and gain a better understanding of the agent's beliefs and intentions. We can also identify how the art affects the agent's environment and how it is used as a tool to create change.

## **Chapter Nine: Active and Passive Agency in New Orleans Festival Arts**

The art and symbolic language created by African-Centered practitioners of New Orleans Festival Arts is used as a space of intentional action that expresses the Afrocentric community's cultural systems. Artists use the many artistic indexes that exist within the NOFA tradition to express this identity and to inform the greater community of their values and beliefs. New Orleans African-centered NOFA artists are the product of many interactions throughout the 1960's through to the present. The art they create represents a response to the social, political, spiritual and economic realities of this time period. Artists use NOFA to display a commitment to a specific socio-cultural ideology. Unfortunately, in New Orleans, the political, economic and educational inequalities African Americans face force them to create and recreate tools to help them to counter the effects on them personally and as a community. NOFA is an established part of New Orleans' African American community tradition, so it is only fitting that those who have developed these tools would use this artistic array to inform themselves and those around them.

New Orleans Festival artists are able to actively express their identity and communicate through their creations, however as Gell asserts, their art also exhibits agency by influencing the viewer through memory, emotion and interaction. In the case of the BMOL aestheticizing their clubhouse, they choose very specific iconography to portray their understanding of Africa, New Orleans second line culture, and their commitment to traditional New Orleans Jazz. But once the clubhouse is done, the art is "set free" to influence the audience according to their individual experiences and understanding of what they see. Amor Amenkum's Black Indians suits have an effect on her as she wears the suit, but also has an effect on the community she travels through. The Oya suit, like Fi Yi Yi's

suit was infused with spiritual energy that empowered the suit to lift the spirits of those who dance and sing with the procession—the suit and the performer are both secondary agents for of such spirits. The song “We’re going to the crime scene”, expressed the disapproval participants felt over the placement of former slave owners as monuments in the city. The song also energized participants and gave them a sense of unity as they completed the miles long parade route. Art is created to carry a message, but the art itself changes it’s environment by just existing as a part of the ritual.

By analyzing how organizations like the BMOL, Ausetua Amor Amenkum and events like Maafa change the face of the traditional NOFA to reflect their social, political and economic values, we can understand how NOFA has been and can continue to be used as a tool for effecting change in the community. Part of understanding how the African-Centered NOFA artists effects change is to understand that art is more than just a means of providing an emotional reaction in those who participate in the given artistic display. The anthropology of art as developed by Alfred Gell allows us to understand the power of art through it’s ability to effect change. An analysis of NOFA that includes the consideration of art as a “thing” with agency reveals more accurately some of the deeper processes involved with creating and performing NOFA from an African-Centered point of view. The first step to making this kind of analysis is to understand the historical context in which the changes in NOFA have taken place. The Afrocentric NOFA artists are a product of several socio-political, artistic and spiritual movements that occurred during the late 1960’s and are still going on today. These movements, (CORE, Tambourine and Fan, Auser Auset, The African Dance Movement), all inform the choices that New Orleans artists such as Todd Higgins, Auset Amor Amenkum, Bruce Sunpie Barnes, and Shaka Zulu display in their art.

In an article entitled “Performing Africa in New Orleans” authors Cynthia Becker, Rachel Breunlin and Helen A. Regis (2013), discuss the African influences in NOFA. The authors mention “the struggle around their own [Black New Orleanians] representation... how people of African descent are forced to see themselves through the distorted lens of racism” (Ibid: 16). The authors describe a shift in New Orleanians’ relationship with Africa, where “Africa signals cultural performance, preservation, creativity, and resistance” (Ibid: 19). By analyzing how African-Centered artist actively engage in the NOFA process through art and symbolic language, this study serves to better understand how that shift is occurring.

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## Appendices

Appendix A

**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – MILWAUKEE  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH  
STUDENT CONSENT**

THIS CONSENT FORM HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE IRB FOR A ONE YEAR PERIOD

**1. General Information**

**Study title:**

Embodied Culture: New Orleans Artists Use of Festival Arts as a Platform to Express  
Afrocentric Identity

**Person in Charge of Study (Principal Investigator):**

Shukrani Gray  
Masters Candidate Anthropology

**2. Study Description**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to.

**Study description:**

I have asked you to come and share with me is so that I can learn about your experience as a New Orleans artist/member of (organization). I want to understand the historical context in which you became active in participating in New Orleans Festival Arts. I also want to understand how you make decisions concerning how you present the visual representation, music, art and ritual connected to your personal identity within a larger community. Our interview will help me learn more about the way you experience and present your art and how

it reflects your views about who you are. I especially want to understand how your art relates or does not relate to your views about an Afrocentric Identity, and the rest of your life. This research will help me to examine how a group of African Americans define and live their African Diasporic Identity within New Orleans performance arts. I also seek to understand how an African Diasporic Identity is created and passed on through the arts. I will take the information I gather and study it to discover how African Americans in New Orleans express their identity and views through the process of creating and reinforcing a tradition.

This study will be conducted in New Orleans, Louisiana. There will be 5 participants identified for interview. Each subject will need to commit 1-2 hours for interview and up to 5 hours of observation in the community.

### 3. Study Procedures

#### **What will I be asked to do if I participate in the study?**

If you agree to participate you will be asked to participate in 1-2 1 hour interviews. You have the option to allow the following forms of documentation that will be video and audiotaped, and possibly photographed. This is done to insure accuracy and a better understanding of participants' responses to interview questions. The audio/video – taping is an optional portion of the study. If you opt out of being recorded by audio/video taping, the interview will still take place, and the interviewer may take notes for accuracy. The interviews will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location (artist's residence, coffee shop, community bookstore, etc.). You will also be asked to allow me to observe you practicing, teaching, and preparing your art as it is used in the community. Participants can refuse to answer specific questions, or refuse participation in the study with no consequences. If participant decides to terminate participation during the study, data collected up to that point would be used, with permission. If participant refuses permission, data collected will be destroyed. In addition to the interview, I will be observing some of your activities as they relate to your interview questions. These observations may also be recorded using audio/video recording. As stated above, you can opt out of having these observations recorded, at which time, I will take notes. When doing observations in public locations I am seeking a waiver of consent, but I will make an announcement so that those who do not wish to be recorded can remove themselves. Also, when I'm observing in a private location, like a house or a non-profit organization, I will obtain consent from those who are I am observing.

During the interview I will ask you a series of questions regarding your experiences as a New Orleans Arts performer. These questions will include how you started in this art form, your experiences as an artist, and how you incorporate Afrocentricity in your art. I may ask you to look at a video clip or a photograph to identify something you have described or to have you explain an event or object. I may also ask you to draw a simple diagram to illustrate networks of people, similar to a family tree. This kind of detail will help me to have a better understanding of your experience. Our interview will help me to understand how New Orleans' artists define and live their Afrocentric Identity within New Orleans performance arts. I also seek to

understand how an Afrocentric Identity is created and passed on through the arts. I will take the information I gather and examine it to discover how African Americans in New Orleans express their identity and views through the process of creating and reinforcing a tradition.

#### **4. Risks and Minimizing Risks**

##### **What risks will I face by participating in this study?**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research study. There is a possible risk that breach of confidentiality can occur due to the nature of some questions. (Where you attended school and what year, etc). It is less likely answering some questions may cause temporary discomfort, such as minor emotional distress from answering the interview questions. In order to minimize any temporary discomfort or breach of confidentiality, the interviewee has the option to refuse to answer any questions that makes him/her feel uncomfortable. The interviewee also can inform the researcher if he/she needs a break from questioning.

Measures are being taken to minimize participant discomfort including:

- Data will be stored on a password protected laptop or in a locked file cabinet.
- Pseudonyms will be used unless participant states a preference to using his/her name.

#### **5. Benefits**

##### **Will I receive any benefit from my participation in this study?**

There are no benefits to you other than to further research.

#### **6. Study Costs and Compensation**

##### **Will I be charged anything for participating in this study?**

You will not be responsible for any of the costs from taking part in this research study.

##### **Are subjects paid or given anything for being in the study?**

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research study.

#### **7. Confidentiality**



**What happens to the information collected?**

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. We may decide to present what we find to others, or publish our results in scientific journals or at scientific conferences. Direct quotes may be used in publications and presentations. However, Audio/video recordings and photographs will not be presented publicly. Information that identifies you personally will not be released without your written permission. Only the PI will have access to the information. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study's records.

Interviews will be conducted in private locations and pseudonyms will be assigned unless participating subjects state a preference to use their real names. Data will be stored in the private home office of the student PI, on a non-networked laptop with password-protection, and in a locked file cabinet. All the information collected for this study will be destroyed with the study is complete.

**8. Alternatives****Are there alternatives to participating in the study?**

There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study.

**9. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal****What happens if I decide not to be in this study?**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the research, the documentation and recordings will be destroyed." Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

**10. Questions****Who do I contact for questions about this study?**

For more information about the study or the study procedures or treatments, or to withdraw from the study, contact:

Dr. Cheryl Ajitotutu and Ms. Shukrani Gray  
University Of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Anthropology Department

290 Sabin Hall, P.O. Box 413  
3413 N. Downer Ave.  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(504) 339-6853

**Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject?**

The Institutional Review Board may ask your name, but all complaints are kept in confidence.

Institutional Review Board  
Human Research Protection Program  
Department of University Safety and Assurances  
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee  
P.O. Box 413  
Milwaukee, WI 53201  
(414) 229-3173

**11. Signatures**

**Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

*To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered, and that you are 18 years of age or older.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject/ Legally Authorized Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject/Legally Authorized Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Research Subject's Consent to Audio/Video/Photo Recording:**

It is okay to audiotape/videotape/photograph me while I am in this study and use my audiotaped/videotaped/photographed] data in the research.

Please initial: \_\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_No

**Principal Investigator (or Designee)**

*I have given this research subject information on the study that is accurate and sufficient for the subject to fully understand the nature, risks and benefits of the study.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Study Role

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

Shukrani Gray  
Anthropology Masters Thesis  
Interview Questions

My interview questions model the four types of interview questions as laid out in J.P. Spradley's work in The Ethnographic Interview (1979). He suggests interview questions be categorized as follows:

- Grand Tour Questions: Asking the cultural informant to generalize
- Details Through Questions: Asking follow up questions about an act, event, or category.
- Experience Questions: Asking about experience
- Native-like Questions: Asking the cultural informant to use his/her own words and expressions.

### **Introduction:**

The reason I have asked you to come and share with me is so that I can learn about your experience as a New Orleans artist/member of (organization). I want to understand the historical context in which you became active in participating in New Orleans Festival Arts. I also want to understand how you make decisions concerning how you present the visual representation, music, art and ritual connected to your personal identity within a larger community. Our interview will help me learn more about the way you experience and present your art and how it reflects your views about who you are. I especially want to understand how your art relates or does not relate to your views about an African Diasporic Identity, and the rest of your life.

### **Project explanation:**

This research will help me to examine how a group of African Americans define and live their African Diasporic Identity within NOFA. I also seek to understand how an African Diasporic Identity is created and passed on through the arts. I will take the information I gather and study it to discover how African Americans in New Orleans express their identity and views through the process of creating and reinforcing a tradition.

**Recording explanation:**

If I may have your permission, I would like to tape this interview so I can go over it later and not be tied to pen and paper as we talk. If that is ok, please sign the consent form I have provided.

**Interview explanation:**

During the interview I will ask you a series of questions. I may ask you to look at a video clip or a photograph to identify something you have described or to have you explain an event or object. I may also ask you to draw a simple diagram to illustrate networks of people, similar to a family tree. This kind of detail will help me to have a better understanding of your experience.

**Interview Questions:**

1. What is your name and what year were you born?
2. What city were you born?
  - a. If you were not born in New Orleans –how old were you when you came to New Orleans?
  - b. In what areas of New Orleans have you lived?
3. What schools did you attend?
  - a. Where are/were they located in New Orleans?
4. Did you attend college/university?
  - a. Name of institution post high school that you attended?
    - i. Where was it located?
    - ii. How many years
    - iii. Did you complete a degree?
      1. In what year?
5. In what community organizations do you participate and what do you do?
6. When you think back on your life, what was your first experience with these kinds of organizations?
7. How did you begin participating in the first activity, and how did the others (if there are others) come into your life?
8. Please look at this photo and describe:
  - a. Where are you ? Why?
  - b. What you are wearing in the photo
  - c. Who are the players in the photo
  - d. What is happening in the photo
  - e. Any imagery/symbols you see in the photo
9. People describe New Orleans as “the most African city in the U.S.” . What does that statement mean to you?
10. Describe what you teach others about your art/tradition?
  - a. How do you teach others about this tradition? Describe your teaching method

11. What are the most important points you cover when telling someone about your art/traditions.
12. What are the roots of your arts practice?
  - a. Where does it come from?
  - b. How did you learn your art practice?
  - c. It has been said that New Orleans festival arts have African roots. Can you explain what this statement means to you?
13. One reason I chose to interview you is because I have observed that you incorporate African imagery in your presentation of New Orleans festival arts.
  - a. Why do you do that?
  - b. Do you always incorporate African images in all of your work?
  - c. Do you recall when you began to incorporate African imagery and why?
14. Are you familiar with Tambourine and Fan?
  - a. Who are they?
15. Did Tambourine Fan contribute to New Orleans festival arts as we see it today?
  - a. If so what? If not, who did?
16. Please describe yourself?
17. When you think of yourself, how do you see yourself in relation to Afrocentric thought?
18. Please describe your understanding of the relationship(s) between Blacks in the U.S and Africa?
19. Please describe your understanding of the relationship(s) between Black in the U.S. and Blacks in other countries?
20. Please list all of the NOFA organizations that have impacted your artistic development and your expression of NOFA.
21. Who are the major influences in how you express your NOFA?
22. Have you ever participated in/done any of the following?
  - a. Worn African print American styled clothing
  - b. Worn traditional African clothing
  - c. Visited or lived in an African country
  - d. Learned an African language
  - e. Eaten African food
  - f. Learned/performed African dance or instruments
  - g. Do you have friends who are from an African country
  - h. Do you do business with people from an African country
  - i. Visited or lived in a Caribbean country
  - j. Have African art in your house
  - k. Participated in Kwanzaa
  - l. Participated in African Liberation Day celebrations
  - m. Participated in Maafa
  - n. Participated in Marcus Garvey Day
23. Are you familiar with the term “African Diaspora” ?
  - a. What does it mean to you?
24. Is there a connection between the African Diaspora and New Orleans festival arts?
  - a. If so, what is the connection?

25. What are the major considerations when you design a suit for parading? (All participants design some type of "suit" for parading, be they social aid and pleasure club members, Mardi Gras Indians, Musicians etc)
26. Is there a spiritual component to the art you practice?
- a. Describe it and your practice
27. When someone connected to your organization/art passes away what special rituals does your group perform?
- a. Are there any special ceremonies?
  - b. Describe the kind of funeral an individual might have or one that you either participate in and/or observed.
  - c. When do these rituals occur?
    - i. Is there any special timing or anything done in during the parade? If so, when does this happen?
28. Do you participate in any form of annual parading? If yes,
- a. Can you describe from start to finish how a suit is created for your annual parade?