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Andrew B. Gibbs

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Don't Bow Down

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English Literature

By

Andrew Boyd Gibbs

B.A. The University of Tennessee, 2011

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Dedication

Mom, Dad

And

Brother Jake

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Abstract

Perpetuating African ancestral customs, Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans avoid the African American identity crises illuminated by the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. The poetry of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Waring Cuney incorporate W.E.B. DuBois' double-consciousness theory to reveal the identity issues and ancestral alienation plaguing African Americans at the turn of the twentieth-century. In comparison, unique political and social circumstances in New Orleans allowed enslaved Africans to practice their ancestral customs weekly. The preservation of this heritage fostered a black community in New Orleans rich in traditions, pride and self-conviction. The development of Mardi Gras Indian culture and the allusions to Africa in Harlem poetry reveal the power of ancestry to establish identity.

Mardi Gras Indians, Harlem Renaissance, Double-Consciousness, Ancestral Identity,
Congo Square, New Orleans

Introduction

Mardi Gras Indian Culture, Double Consciousness in Harlem Poetry, and the Cultural Preservation of Ancestral Identity

When it's Carnival time in New Orleans, Mardi Gras Indians march in the streets, celebrating a unique American cultural tradition. These street parades are community events that honor two distinct cultures of ancestral heritage for African Americans in New Orleans. They pay homage to Native Americans for their protection and support during slavery by masking in elaborate Indian suits, hand sewn with colorful beads and feathers. Also, they dance in a traditional African style, celebrating ancestral rituals that survived the Middle Passage and the oppression of slavery. Gathering in Congo Square and throughout New Orleans, slaves celebrated their weekly "free day" granted by the French *Code Noir* in 1724 (Evans 1). This unique policy toward North American slaves allowed African Americans to salvage their heritage, perpetuate ancestral customs, and eventually develop new traditions like Mardi Gras Indian parades. Today Mardi Gras Indians sing songs in English, incorporating chorus chants in an indefinable language collage influenced by Native American, French, and African dialects. There is nothing quite like it, yet the scene is distinctly American: a true representation of the "melting pot," a spectacle for all to enjoy, an uncensored depiction of America's diversity, a good gumbo, as they say in New Orleans.

While descriptions—as they were during eighteenth-century visits to Congo Square—from spectators of the scene may be varied or elusive, the pride in the heritage and identity of the Mardi Gras Indian community is unmistakable. The commitment to their heritage indicates conviction and pride. Moreover, Mardi Gras Indian traditions

display an affirmation of the self, a certainty of the spirit, an ancestral presence and the power of collective culture. Mardi Gras Indians harness the traditions of their African ancestors and honor their cultural interactions in America to create an identity that is distinctly their own. It is an identity that appropriately reflects America's diversity with the humility to honor others and the pride to celebrate the self. In terms of acculturation—the process of cultural and psychological changes that occur when cultures encounter each other—Mardi Gras Indians represent a successful creation of identity in the African American community in the way they retrieve their cultural heritage to honor the past and celebrate the present.

The stability and conviction of the Mardi Gras Indian community become even more impressive in the context of America's oppressive racial history. The dehumanizing effects of slavery resulted in an identity alienation for blacks so severe its impact continued into the twentieth century, decades after Emancipation. Throughout America, blacks suffered from an identity crisis, as they were unable to recover their ancestral heritage from a history erased by slavery. The uncertain future of the black community amidst this crisis led W. E. B. DuBois to argue that, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (17). Specifically, DuBois aimed his concerns at the prospect of the black community unraveling its condition of "double-consciousness," a term he coins in *The Souls of Black Folk* to describe the psychological state of the African American mind. DuBois explains that "One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" in order to illustrate the psychological discordance blacks encounter as a result of racial inequality (11). The confusion DuBois identifies

stifles the black community and reverberates through the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. Poets Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and William Waring Cuney reflect upon identity questions in the black community attempting to illuminate, if not resolve, the “double-consciousness” conflict.

In addition to echoing the social concerns and pains of the black community in art, many African American scholars during the Harlem Renaissance explore the condition in prose and academic essays. While some of these essays consider the social and psychological consequences with a cerebral tone, other essays appeal directly to the black community in an effort to comfort and to inspire. For example, Hughes calls for African Americans to cherish and to express their identity by promoting cultural practices. His essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” acknowledges the challenges and hesitation the black community encounters when “interpreting the beauty of [its] own people” (964). However, he finds hope in the “low-down folks, the so-called common element, [who] are not afraid of spirituals [and] still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization” (965). The encouragement Hughes finds in the potential of “these common people to give the world its truly great Negro artist, one who is not afraid to be himself” (965) reflects the results of the cultural practices of Mardi Gras Indians.

Like Hughes, legendary New Orleans jazz artist Ellis Marsalis locates the essence of cultural identity in common people. “In other places,” he says, “culture comes down from on high. In New Orleans, it bubbles up from the street” (Smith 5). Community events in New Orleans, such as Mardi Gras Indian marches, second-line parades, and musical gatherings exemplify the social commitment Hughes hoped African Americans

would display in celebrating and preserving their heritage. While African Americans in New Orleans were subject to persecution and segregation with their rituals often pushed to the backstreets of town, the celebrations continued. Practicing self-expression nurtured identity and preserved tradition, qualities that ensured the retention of African heritage. This display of African culture is a feature of the black self that some poems of the Harlem Renaissance seem to suggest is lost. Thus, examining the cultures of Harlem and New Orleans reveals how these environments affected identity and art in the African American community. For example, the rituals at Congo Square, a place Hughes refers to in his poem “Drums,” fulfill the hopes Hughes has for African Americans to celebrate “the expressions of their own soul-world” (966). Also, Hughes’ hope that African Americans will hold “their own individuality in the face of American standardizations” is realized in New Orleans culture (965).

Thus, the vitality and strength of the Mardi Gras Indians represent an ideal black community according to Hughes’ vision and an appropriate counter reaction to the DuBois double-conscious conundrum. Many poems from the Harlem Renaissance respond to DuBois’ theory and examine African ancestry to convey the alienation African Americans experience in regards to their heritage and identity. Meanwhile, the cultural preservation performed by Mardi Gras Indians fulfills Hughes’ prophecy that great Negro artists will embrace and celebrate their African ancestry. New Orleans’ eclectic history and present culture explain why and how Mardi Gras Indians were able to develop an identity that appropriately reflects their heritage. The formation of Mardi Gras Indian culture effectively combats assimilation into white American norms. In addition, the preservation of ancestral rituals exemplifies the cultural integration Harlem poets

promote and practice. Thus, Harlem Renaissance poets and Mardi Gras Indians share an artistic ambition to preserve heritage and ancestral identity.

Chapter 1

African Ancestry, Celebrating Identity, and the History of Congo Square

In his autobiography *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes explains that “something took hold of [him] inside” when he first saw Africa from the deck of the trade freighter the S.S. *Malone* (10). “My Africa,” he writes, “Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book” (10). At twenty-one, Hughes took a job on the *Malone* to escape the world of books that had begun to torment him. The night before the voyage began, Hughes stepped to the ship’s rail and threw his books into the harbor. “It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart,” he explains, “for it wasn’t only the books that I wanted to throw away, but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past: the stupidities of color-prejudice, black in a white world, the fear of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others” (98). Hughes’ emotional contemplation on his past and the alienation he feels in America reflect the confused and frightful condition of African Americans at the turn of the twentieth-century. His extensive list of the hopeless social conditions for blacks in America underscores the community’s desire for autonomy, understanding and something tangible to believe in. Moreover, the frustration evident in his tone explains the unbridled joy in his reaction to the sight of Africa on the ocean’s horizon. “My Africa,” he exclaims, as if for the first time he has something that is truly his own.

Hughes’ reaction is not evidence of interest in Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa Movement but rather exemplifies the freedom he finds in rediscovering his racial heritage by his own means. He takes ownership of this identity because it is unmediated; his

agency in the travel experience and his personal observations outweigh the knowledge offered in books—written and edited from a white, imperial perspective—resulting in a more meaningful encounter for him. Though Hughes is met with a different source of alienation in Africa—trying to convince natives that his light brown skin does not mark him as a white man—his genuine pleasure to see Africa reveals the significance of ancestry in the alleviation of the woes of modernity (fear, bewilderment, alienation) upon blacks in America. However, Hughes’ peace seem to be transient—after all, he would return to America and begin a long career writing about African American consciousness— and his poem “African Fog” seems to recognize and envy native African experience. “Singing black boatmen,” the poem begins, “You do not know the fog / We strange so-civilized ones / Sail in always” (107). It seems the uncertainty of the African American condition remains on Hughes’ mind even thousands of miles away on the African coast. Though the cheerful boatmen themselves are “in the thick white fog,” the conviction of self and certainty of heritage for natives allows them to avoid the confusion that pervades and haunts the African American consciousness.

Similar to the boatmen, Mardi Gras Indians convey a confident, jovial spirit. In his introduction to *Mardi Gras Indians*, Michael P. Smith, who was one of the first researchers to document Mardi Gras Indian culture and history, explains that his interactions with Indian parades “invoke a heightened, otherworldly consciousness and an alternative experience of power” (17). Though his description is visceral and abstract, it provides an interesting comparison to DuBois’ depiction of African American consciousness. Smith’s description of an “otherworldly consciousness” and an “experience of power” dramatically contradicts DuBois’ suggestion of “double

consciousness, wrenching pain, doubt and bewilderment” (DuBois 146). Of course, Smith is writing over 100 years after DuBois, so his views reflect the changes in perspective and problems from one century to the next for African Americans.

Nonetheless, Smith’s descriptions originate from the records of witnesses reacting to the rituals at Congo Square in the nineteenth-century. In 1817 a German traveler remarked on the “genteel address” of the dancers he perceived to be “formerly Kings or chiefs of the Congo” (Smith 80). Two years later in 1819, Henry Knight visited New Orleans and described Africans that “rock the city with their Congo dances” (Evans 1). That same year, American architect Benjamin Latrobe witnessed “5 or 600 hundred persons assembled in an open space or public square [producing] extraordinary noise” (Smith 80). His report concluded that “allowed amusements of Sunday, have, it seems, perpetuated here, those of Africa among its inhabitants,” verifying “the perpetuation of African cultural traditions” (Evans 1). Another anonymous visitor in 1835 offered the following enthusiastic and thoughtful observation, “A Sabbath in New Orleans! Here is the noisiest day of the week [...] It is not the Sabbath of New England [...] Here all is unsettled, chaotic; the elements of society, as parti-coloured as the rainbow, but awaiting the passage of years to blend them into one harmonious whole” (Smith 90). This visitor’s sagacious foresight of the eclectic culture to be formed in New Orleans touches on the coherence evident in the Mardi Gras Indian community compared to the discordance experienced and expressed by Harlem Renaissance poets. Indications of the contrast between the environments can be seen again in Smith’s description of himself “merging with the energy and spirit of an amazing urban underworld” compared to Hughes’ depiction of an overwhelming “Racial Mountain” (17). However, as African Americans

begin to overcome that “mountain,” embrace their ancestral identity and celebrate their culture, the Harlem scene becomes as inviting as Smith’s Mardi Gras Indian parade, encouraging all races to merge and heed Hughes’ call to “Play awhile! Sing awhile! O let’s Dance!” (965). Yet, to understand why African Americans in New Orleans would not be afflicted with a similar identity crisis, one must examine the political and historical context that influenced New Orleans culture and its treatment of slaves.

Extensive research conducted by Freddi Williams Evans and Ned Sublette details the political circumstances in New Orleans that were unique to North America. The tolerant treatment of slaves under Spanish and French rule resulted in a black community that would evade alienation by preserving ancestral customs. The protection of ancestral ties would lead to the creation of new cultural traditions that reflect African roots such as Mardi Gras Indian rituals. The origin of these rituals in New Orleans can be traced to Congo Square, located presently at the edge of Louis Armstrong Park on Rampart Street. As mentioned before, slaves would gather here on Sunday to celebrate their free day by singing in native languages, dancing in traditional African styles and practicing their own religion. Evans suggests that the “conscious and willful continuation of African culture in Congo Square conveys the agency of the gatherers in celebrating and preserving their heritage” (2). Indeed, it is an agency that was foreign to most slaves in North America. While the Spanish and French granted slaves a free day, the British “prohibited African languages, religions, and drums, along with the liberty of enslaved people to gather en masse publicly” (Sublette 74). As a result, African traditions did not flourish in Georgia, Virginia and the Carolinas as they did in New Orleans because the conditions under British colonial rule suppressed native language and culture. Meanwhile, records suggest

that the perpetuation of African traditions through social gatherings and dances was widespread in New Orleans. According to Sublette, “In the Spanish years, there would have been no reason for black dancing to have been restricted to one spot” (121). It’s considered that slaves gathered on their free day in various open markets and squares including present day Jackson Square, Washington Square, and Lafayette Square (Evans 26).

Of course, slaves in New Orleans were not immune to persecution. After all, one free day a week hardly qualifies as liberty. Evans notes that the “phenomenon of Congo Square should not serve to romanticize the location nor the urban system of slavery that existed in New Orleans” (20). Among the atrocities inflicted on slaves in Congo Square were whippings, brandings, executions and auctioning. Also, the formation of Congo Square itself resulted from an 1817 city ordinance restricting the gathering of slaves to the back of town. This ordinance and one that preceded it in 1808 occurred under American rule, after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Ultimately, the aim to “restrict the cultural practices of the Africans to Congo Square, where they could be more easily observed” backfired as the controlled location made “observation by outsiders much more convenient” popularizing Congo Square internationally as New Orleans became a main port for Europeans visiting America in the early nineteenth-century (Smith 79).

Despite adjusting laws and attitudes under American rule, which would only intensify as anxiety rose when the Civil War and potential emancipation seemed imminent, African Americans would continue to celebrate their ancestral customs privately in their own neighborhoods and homes. According to Joseph Logsdon and Karyn Bell, “Most black creoles escaped much of the renewed severity by living within

the virtually autonomous creole municipal districts of New Orleans that were created in 1836, where enforcement of almost all laws was notoriously lax” (Logsdon 207). Again the unique development of New Orleans contributed to the perpetuation of African cultural traditions, an exercise essential to the development of Mardi Gras Indian customs. Moreover, Evans acknowledges the influence African descendants had upon modern musical traditions in New Orleans. She explains that the development of jazz and Mardi Gras Indian chants can be attributed to “those who perpetuated traditional performance styles in Congo Square and those who continued those styles after the gatherings ended” (46). Thus, the relative tolerance of Spanish and French rule afforded slaves in New Orleans the opportunity to retain their cultural identity. African descendants seized this opportunity with remarkable success as they salvaged the rituals of their ancestors to honor and create new traditions with distinct African roots. Consequently, the heritage of African Americans in New Orleans remained unquestioned as it was prominently displayed and celebrated through a variety of cultural practices.

Chapter 2

Double-Consciousness, Africa, and the Role of Music in the Poems of Hughes, McKay, and Cuney

Unlike the rich influence of ancestral culture on Mardi Gras Indian culture, the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance seems to lament the loss or depreciation of the role of African heritage in shaping modern African American identity. While some poems do not refer to Africa directly, many reflect the sense of alienation or abandonment that characterizes an uncertain place in the world. On the other hand, some poems directly address the relationship between African American identity and ancestral ties to Africa. For example, poems by Hughes, McKay and Cuney demonstrate the connection (or disconnection) African Americans experience with their heritage and identity.

One of the more striking examples is Hughes' poem "Afro-American Fragment." As the title suggests, Hughes speaks as an African American lamenting a loss that has left his identity incomplete. "So long, / So far away / Is Africa," begins the poem emphasizing the distance between the African American's modern condition and its heritage (Hughes 129). Identifying "Afro-American Fragment" as the "unique black embodiment of American modernism," Jeff Westover suggests "the syntax of the poem reflects the disjunction the speaker feels between himself, his cultural origins and his heritage" (1209). Hughes underscores the separation between speaker and heritage with both content and deliberate dashes as the poem continues:

Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue— (129).

While the dashes emphasize the physical distance between the African American speaker and his ancestral African origins, the identification of history books and songs underscores the scarcity and unreliability of resources available for the black community to establish a meaningful connection with its heritage. As the speaker explains that books “create” history, he hints at the fabrications present in history books written and edited from a prejudiced white perspective. These inaccuracies eliminate them as a valid source of ancestral identity. Hughes’ acknowledgement that the black community must rely on the “constructedness of history,” which fails to “transparently report memories” explains the detachment African Americans experience toward their heritage and in turn themselves (Westover 1210). The lack of a genuine connection results in the estranged tone Hughes portrays in the poem.

In addition, while songs may escape mediation, they, too, seem to offer Hughes more frustration than comfort. The word “beat” in this poem is not the constant, promising beat of the tom-tom drum, but rather representative of a forced, unauthentic performance. These “sad-sung” songs “in strange un-Negro tongue” refer to the Sorrow Songs sung by slaves as they worked in the field. The speaker’s relationship to these songs contradicts DuBois’ suggestion that the songs provide an avenue for ancestral identity retention. Writing from an academic perspective, DuBois’ concerns regard the historic cultural value of Sorrow Songs. He identifies them as “not simply the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas” (*Souls* 180). This description reveals DuBois’ goal to present black art as a contributing influence upon American culture rather than an inferior production to be disregarded or ignored. Elevating black art to its rightful status shows DuBois’ attempt

to validate black culture and develop black identity. Suggesting that the “Negro-folk song still lives in the hearts” of African Americans reveals DuBois’ belief that art plays a significant role in perpetuating ancestral identity (181). As he explains that African Americans who hear Sorrow Songs may “know little what its words mean, but know well the meaning of its music,” he verifies the power of memory in black consciousness (182). Though ancestral language may be lost, the beat of the music and the tone of the lyrics deliver an identity confirmation to modern African Americans.

Yet, the Sorrow Songs offer little relief from the alienation the speaker expresses in “Afro-American Fragment.” The forthright explanation Hughes employs in the poem, “I do not understand / This song of atavistic land,” emphasizes how common this identity crisis is in the black community (Hughes 129). While DuBois finds value in the Sorrow Songs as cultural property for the black community, Hughes’ poem captures an Everyman’s response to the Songs. Contrary to DuBois’ suggestion that the Songs stimulate ancestral consciousness, the “strange un-Negro tongue” impedes the speaker’s ability to decipher the meaning of the songs or to reconnect with his heritage (129). His classification of ancestral language as “un-Negro” reveals the distance between self and heritage in modern black consciousness. Viewing his ancestors as “other” emphasizes the severity of the losses sustained during enslavement and the annihilation of ancestry as an identification concept. “So long, / So far away / Is Africa’s / Dark face,” leaving only a fragment of self to exist in America (129).

However, the ancestral language that confuses and alienates the speaker in “Afro-American Fragment” does not encumber Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans. In fact, the chants in strange tongues seem to propel the participants toward a unified self that

embraces the past and the present. Smith suggests the practice of Mardi Gras Indian culture “instills a deep-seated African ethnic pride in the black community serving to strengthen individual spirits against the ill effects of modern urbanization” (17). This distinction between the pride of Mardi Gras Indians and the confusion represented in a number of Harlem Renaissance poems suggests that the unique and tolerant conditions slaves experienced in New Orleans were instrumental to the retention of ancestral identity. The ancestral alienation that Hughes examines does not encroach upon the ability of Mardi Gras Indians to find purpose and identity in the meaning of their cryptic chants and songs. Rather, the continuation of African rituals in New Orleans protects the community from the identity burdens present in Harlem Renaissance poetry.

In fact, Hughes recognizes the origins of Mardi Gras Indian culture in his poem “Drums.” From its opening lines, “I dream of the drums / And remember / Nights without stars in Africa,” the tone dramatically shifts from the estrangement and separation expressed in “Afro-American Fragment” to a voice confident in its identity (Hughes 543). Westover views the conflicting tones and voices of the speakers as evidence that Hughes’ “double-tongued reflections on his country and its history exemplify the double consciousness DuBois regarded as constitutive of African American experience” (1208). Gone is the mournful tone in “Fragment,” whose loneliness not even memories can soothe. Replacing it is an encouraging, hopeful speaker, a speaker who dreams and remembers, a speaker whose “I” courageously claims agency from the opening syllable. Hughes identifies the catalyst of this reinvigoration of his speaker in the first line of the first stanza: drums. The drums return the speaker to an Africa “without stars,” representative of complete darkness, a time before whiteness or lightness came to Africa

and distorted the vision blacks have of themselves and their culture. Though this white influence returns with the speaker's memory of "Slave ships, billowing sails" in the fourth stanza, the speaker's urge to "Remember, remember, remember!" in the fifth leads to a sudden recollection of Congo Square in the sixth stanza:

I dream of drums
And recall, like a picture,
Congo Square in New Orleans—
Sunday—the slaves' one day of "freedom"—
The juba-dance in Congo Square (Hughes 544).

The speaker's recollection of Congo Square reveals the significance of the place in the African American consciousness. In the poem, Hughes appropriately places the Congo Square stanza in the middle, allowing it to be a bridge between Africa and America. The structure of Hughes' poem acknowledges the role Congo Square plays to salvage African culture and its influence in fostering new African American art forms, such as jazz and blues. Additionally, placing the line "Congo Square in New Orleans—" in the center of the middle stanza honors Congo Square as a sacred creator of African American identity. Remembering Congo Square, vivid and clear "like a picture," the speaker suggests it is a place where distortion and uncertainty vanish. It's as if the varying identity perceptions and concerns of the black community disappear in Congo Square. Just as it is the middle ground of the poem, Congo Square is the middle ground of black identity. It connects the American self with its African heritage and produces a unified consciousness.

Moreover, the speaker's cohesive identity rather than the alienation presented by the speaker in "Afro-American Fragment" confirms Congo Square's influence on identity formation. The tone in "Fragment" acknowledges the identity concerns African Americans experience in modern America, while "Drums," as Westover notes,

“celebrates the exuberance and beauty of black culture in order to overcome fragmentation and anxiety” (1217). Even though the speaker in “Drums” one-word exclamations (“Remember” “Jazz” “Africa”) suggest his clarity is sudden and transitory, the epiphany amidst the chaos of the modern black condition reveals the effect Congo Square had on black consciousness in New Orleans (Hughes 544). The perpetuation of ancestral customs prevented alienation from plaguing the black community while instead encouraging cultural development in the black community. Yet, the poem ensures the audience the protective power of Congo Square is not exclusive but rather available to anyone who commits to searching for their ancestral identity. The final stanza, “Remember! / I Remember! / Remember!” validates the power of the self to retain cultural identity and ensures the community this retention is possible if they remember too (544).

Also, Hughes’ use of the drums to demonstrate a cohesive black self that recovers ancestral identity reveals the significance of music in cultural memory. After all, it is music that has survived and been recreated by black New Orleans artists including the Mardi Gras Indians. Gwendolyn Midlo-Hall’s suggestion that “music has power to convert a destructive, disorderly world into a powerful, transcending, spiritual order” properly validates Hughes’ incorporation of the drum to inspire memory in “Drums” (50). The drums seem to reverberate through the speaker’s memory relieving him from the confusion present in “Afro-American Fragment.” To reinforce the recuperative capability of drums for African American consciousness, George Lipsitz’s *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* turns to New Orleans native percussionist Cyril Neville for insight. A member of The Neville Brothers, Cyril

has played congas with various New Orleans artists including The Meters and The Wild Tchoupitoulas, one of the Mardi Gras Indian tribes that perform and record their chants to distinct New Orleans beats. Explaining his relationship to music, Cyril says, “The drum comes to me as a symbol of what I, or we, used to be. I can’t speak on the drums, but I try to convey my feelings [...] I think about Africa when I play. To me, my Africa is the drums” (Lipsitz 251). Cyril’s quote reiterates DuBois’ theory that music replaces language as an avenue to articulate and understand ancestral heritage. Also, his message supports Hughes’ use of the drum to spark the recovery of ancestral identity. Neville’s depiction of the drum as a symbol of Africa correlates to Hughes’ incorporation of drums or drum beats in his poetry to foster a tangible relationship between self and heritage.

Similar representations of music as a vehicle for ancestral reclamation can be seen in Hughes’ “Danse Africaine,” Claude McKay’s “The Harlem Dancer,” and William Waring Cuney’s “Play a Blues for Louise.” In “Danse Africaine” Hughes utilizes the drums again to demonstrate music’s impact on black consciousness. In order to emphasize the effect, Hughes employs a physical presentation imitating the drumbeat:

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
 Low...slow
 Slow...low—
 Stirs your blood
 Dance! (28).

The deliberate pace of the poem results in a meditative experience allowing the reader to hear and feel the beat Hughes describes. In his own words, Hughes uses the tom-tom as a symbol “of revolt against weariness in a white world” (Miyakawa 273). The symbol comes to life with an intimate interaction that “stirs blood” and transplants the reader to an imagined space where the beat inspires dancing and participation in the ceremony.

Thus, “Danse Africaine” evokes ancestral memories that allow African Americans to escape modern conditions and return to the soothing comforts of African rituals, where “a night-veiled girl / Whirls softly...slowly / Like a wisp of smoke around the fire” (Hughes 28). Recreating this ritual with poetry displays the power of art to channel experience and alleviate social woes. J. H. Kwabena Nketia notes in the Foreword to Evans’ *Congo Square*, “what seems important in African American culture is not just reproducing tradition but making something fresh or new out of it” (xi). “Danse Africaine” fits Nketia’s observation as Hughes harnesses the musical tradition of his ancestors and recreates its power in poetry. The poem’s representation of heritage demonstrates an acute understanding of custom and ritual, suggesting music and art have the potential to recover ancestral identity that may be lost or disoriented.

Both “The Harlem Dancer” and “Play a Blues for Louise” address how modern conditions have affected the identity of African Americans. The women in these poems reveal the stress, alienation and unhappiness afflicting African Americans. McKay and Cuney rely upon dance and music to provide outlets for their subjects to escape the adversity of their condition. Describing a “perfect, half-clothed,” dancer, McKay’s fourteen-line, one stanza poem can be divided into two parts (501). The first six lines describe the dancer from the perspective of the “applauding youth” audience until McKay interrupts the description, as his “To me,” provides an alternative perspective. During the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke’s “The Message of the Negro Poets” identifies the poem as “recognition that the Negro experience has bred something mystical and strangely different in the Negro soul” (74). Indeed, the double vision in “Harlem Dancer” exemplifies the double-consciousness haunting the modern African American

mind. On one hand, McKay's lines, "tossing coins in praise / The wine flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls, / Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze" describes the objectifying source that distorts African American identity. The scene exemplifies the agency the white boys in the audience have to define African American identity. Locke's essay "Negro Art: Past and Present," confirms "that the Negro's own conception of himself has been warped by prejudice and stereotypes" (159). McKay's poem illuminates this aspect of double-consciousness, then offers the counter perspective. The speaker describes her "voice like the sound of blended flutes, black shiny curls" representing her beauty while also acknowledging her African roots with a comparison to "a proudly-swaying palm / Crown lovelier for passing through a storm" (McKay 501). McKay's poem not only illuminates the perspectives that may influence her consciousness, but also provides a hopeful conclusion to this condition: "But looking at her falsely-smiling face, / I knew her self was not in that strange place" (501). Thus, McKay suggests dancing and music allow the girl to escape the stage and the arena of alienation that persists there. As Locke suggests, music allows the speaker to gain a "wider range and deeper penetration, one that aims to tell the whole truth" ("Art" 159). The speaker recognizes that music allows the girl to unite with her African heritage, salvage her pride, and recover ancestral identity.

Additionally, Cuney's "Play a Blues for Louise" represents music as an African American elixir to alienation and pain. The speaker calls for "a moanin' sobbin' song, a song of pain," to match the sadness and pain Louise feels as she prepares to leave town for Chicago after her "man done her wrong" (Cuney 51). Cuney's line, "Play a heart-broken song / For a heart-broken gal," emphasizes the need for the music's mood to

correlate with Louise's mood. The synthesis between self and music reveals the potential strength of ancestral connections to comfort and support individuals. In this case, blues—an art created in New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta—provides the empathy necessary to overshadow depression. However, these poems illustrate the ancestral connections, and reconnections, music nurtures for the African American consciousness, themes of uncertainty and alienation dominate Harlem's poetry during this era. Hughes' "Consider Me," "Cross," and "To the Black Beloved," along with Cuney's "No Images," demonstrate the prevalence of identity questions in Harlem Renaissance poetry.

An appeal for recognition, "Consider Me" humanizes the black experience for the audience. The story of a "Colored boy, / Downtown at eight, Sometimes working late" and his "Sugar / Who works, too— / Has to" and their plight to "make enough / For all the stuff / It takes to live" playfully characterizes the plight of African Americans with clever rhymes and sympathetic images (Hughes 386). However, Hughes braces this relatable urban working class narrative with serious identity concerns. The speaker's opening stanza, "Consider me / A colored boy, / Once sixteen, / Once five, once three / Once nobody, / Now me" traces his age through an unnatural regression. While this ironic self-deconstruction "To original / Pa," attempts to illustrate humanity's common heritage, Hughes' parenthetical anecdote, "(A capital letter there, / *He* / Being Mystery)" in the second stanza reveals the speaker's identity uncertainty (385). Despite his carefully crafted argument for equality, the parenthetical inclusion reveals his latent, yet real, doubts. As the identity or existence of God remains a mystery, so does the identity of the speaker.

Compounding this concern is a sense of entrapment in the fourth stanza: “Forgive me / What I lack, / Black, / Caught in a crack / That splits the world in two” (386). This image leads Westover to conclude “the position of black Americans is such that they are simultaneously in American society yet not of it” (1217). As Westover points out, the line not only illustrates African American social and economic immobility, but also demonstrates the psychological division blacks experience. In the modern era, the black community does not only “lack” opportunity, power or money, but also identity. While the fifth stanza appeals for sympathy alluding to “Stormy Monday”—a blues standard describing the depression of the weekly routine—the poem’s final stanza, “Consider me, / Descended also / From the / Mystery” accentuates the speaker’s uncertainty toward his identity. While humanity shares the bond of an uncertain, mysterious origin, the speaker’s word “descended” suggests unknown ancestral ties cause his identity confusion. Thus, “Consider Me” laments not just the mystery of human creation but also specifically the loss of African American heritage.

Similarly, “Cross” illuminates the unnatural frustrations African Americans endure during the identity crises of the modern era. While “Consider Me” contemplates how African Americans fit into the human genesis narrative, “Cross” centers the question on immediate ancestry: mother and father. As the speaker introduces his parents, “My old man’s a white old man / And my old mother’s black,” their color difference suggests an immediate division in the speaker’s identity (Hughes 58). However, the majority of the poem’s tone does not reflect animosity or uncertainty. Rather, the speaker reflects upon past anger or “curses” he regretfully may have wished upon his parents as if he’s asking for forgiveness. This solemn tone suggests a mature reconciliation in the

speaker's mind. Yet, the final stanza reveals that identity continues to concern the speaker:

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black? (59).

As a mulatto, the speaker feels lost and forgotten, unsure where he belongs in the world. Questions about the place he will die reveal an uncertainty about how his race will dictate the socio-economic conditions of his life. Even as an older man, the speaker has not answered these questions. He does not know if he should be white or black, rich or poor. Lillie P. Howard finds the speaker's lingering questions as evidence that racial heritage for African Americans will "automatically be a burden" (232). Though the perpetuation of African culture in New Orleans alleviates that burden, Hughes' family theme in "Cross" and his contemplation of humanity's origin in "Consider Me" demonstrate the ubiquity of ancestral questions for African Americans.

Hughes also illuminates the double consciousness burden in "To the Black Beloved." However, while "Cross" and "Consider Me" end with uncertain conclusions, the speaker in "Beloved" counters perceptions of inferiority with comforting words to inspire blacks to embrace their identity and realize the beauty in themselves and their culture. Each of the three stanzas begins with an intimate address, either "Ah, / My black one" or "Oh, / My black one," as if the speaker is explaining the harsh realities of life to a child (Hughes 58). Yet, for every adverse condition, the speaker encourages the black beloved to believe his/her beauty or morality "surpasses" the standards constructed by white society. The first two stanzas set up this pattern.

Ah,
My black one,
Thou art not beautiful
Yet thou hast
A loveliness
Surpassing beauty.

Oh,
My black one,
Thou are not good
Yet thou hast
A purity
Surpassing goodness (58).

The poem's description of what blacks are not acknowledges the distorted perception of self that blacks experience in a white world. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" Hughes suggests the invasion of black consciousness by white values results in the "word white to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues" (964). He adds that under these circumstances, "One sees immediately how difficult it would be for [an African American] to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people" (965). "Black Beloved" addresses these concerns hoping to end the influence of white consciousness in black society. The poem acknowledges the perception of inferiority ironically and offers an alternative perspective that elevates and glorifies black identity. In addition, the final stanza alludes to African heritage, suggesting "thy darkness" and "thy nightness" are more "luminous" than the "shimmering" white world (58). This affirmation of black identity deconstructs the perception that blacks should strive to meet white standards and adopt white culture. It frees black consciousness from the impulse to assimilate within white standards, encouraging it rather to embrace and to celebrate its own heritage.

However, William Waring Cuney's "No Images" reinforces the lost sense of self in modern black consciousness. Similar to Hughes' "Beloved," "No Images" addresses African American concerns of beauty and self-worth. The opening stanza, "She does not know / Her beauty, / She thinks her brown body / Has no glory" illuminates the doubt and insecurity present in African American consciousness (Cuney 51). Specifically, Cuney's poem suggests the loss of ancestral knowledge produces a timid conception of self. In *The World and Africa* DuBois explains how imperialism and slavery led to the destruction of African culture and its subsequent effect on black identity:

The authority of the family was broken up; the authority and tradition of the clan disappeared; the power of the chief was transmuted to the rule of the white district commissioner. The old religion was held up to ridicule, the old culture and ethical standards were degraded or disappeared, and gradually all over Africa spread the inferiority complex, the fear of color, the worship of white skin (78).

The inferiority complex identified by Dubois emerges in Cuney's "No Images." The poem's nameless subject—whose anonymity accentuates the identity crises—does not know or realize the truth about her heritage. The glory of her ancestral history has been erased and the beauty of her ancestral culture has been replaced by an insistence that white culture is superior. These violations leave Cuney's subject without any tangible or personal constructs to authenticate her identity, let alone celebrate it. Cuney's second stanza suggests the return of her ancestral traditions would relieve her from this inferiority complex:

If she could dance
Naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know (51).

Again, the cultural tradition of dance emerges as the Harlem poet's elixir for double-consciousness. Poets frequently rely upon this performance art to reconnect individuals with their heritage not only for its romantic appeal, but also, and more importantly, because there is proof in places such as Congo Square that dance was an integral part of African culture and an irreplaceable mode of self-expression. The second stanza of "No Images" harnesses this power of expression, revealing her true identity. Cuney's "Naked" dance returns African Americans to an innocent time before whites imposed their cultural values and distorted black identity. The dance under comforting, familiar "palm trees" eliminates that distortion and allows the subject to see the reflection of herself and her ancestry. The river's reflection is pure, natural and void of white social mediation, offering a rare unmediated glance at African identity. While Cuney's use of pastoral images reveals the power of an ancestral environment to shape character or perception of self, his third stanza reinforces the effects of modernism. The sudden return to a setting where "there are no palm trees / On the street, / And dish water gives back no images" reveals the harsh reality of the double-consciousness in modern America (51). The condition is seemingly inescapable for blacks as the poem's allusion to Africa is transitory and meaningless for its female subject. The clear reflective glimpse of self and heritage in an African river disappears while murky dish water reveals an uncertain future and reflects an ambiguous identity. Cuney's dish water metaphor is an appropriate summation of the representation of African American double-consciousness in Harlem Renaissance poetry. Themes of ancestral alienation and double-consciousness in these poems give voice to an identity crisis that left African Americans lost, dejected, insecure, uncertain, and unaware of the vitality present in their culture and in themselves.

Chapter 3

Mardi Gras Indians and the Autonomous Spirit of Their Music

In contrast to the condition of double-consciousness in Harlem poetry, the cultural preservation and perpetuation that occurred in New Orleans during slave gatherings at Congo Square led to a proud, stable African American community. Mardi Gras Indian traditions display this conviction and appropriately reflect the rich ancestral heritage of Africans in New Orleans. Research conducted and collected by Michael P. Smith, Freddi Williams, and Ned Sublette along with interviews from Mardi Gras Indians illuminate the strength and conviction present in the New Orleans African American community. Mardi Gras Indian customs reveal clear ties to African culture and their music reveals an affirmation of self. All of these conclusions show the significance of heritage in the confirmation of self-identity and pride in the community. These results contrast the double-consciousness and alienated environment most African Americans experience at the turn of the twentieth-century. The presence of unique African American traditions and the strength of their African ties in New Orleans set the city and its people apart from the rest of the country.

For the purposes of transparency, it should be acknowledged that only Mardi Gras Indians themselves can properly explain the meaning of their tradition and its cultural impact. I am not an Indian, nor should I be considered an insider. I am merely an intrigued observer whose interest was born from many trips to New Orleans and has grown as a recent migrant to the city. I will rely upon my genuine curiosity and research to faithfully describe an accurate portrayal of Mardi Gras Indian culture and its impact on black consciousness in New Orleans.

Though the lack of public documentation makes a precise identification impossible, Mardi Gras Indian traditions began roughly 130 years ago. Considering the oppressive conditions of the Jim Crow South, the foundation of this culture is a remarkable achievement by the black New Orleans community. It is also an unparalleled and unprecedented achievement for African Americans in North America. While African Americans in New Orleans were organizing dances and parades, DuBois summarized the post-Emancipation experience for most African Americans this way: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun: then moved back again toward slavery” (*Black Reconstruction* 30). The regression DuBois recognizes marks the beginning of a century of racial oppression and the origins of double-consciousness. However, the perpetuation of African traditions in Congo Square prevented a similar crisis from occurring in the New Orleans black community. Instead, the cultural cohesion provided by these social gatherings and the prompt development of Mardi Gras Indian traditions following the Civil War led to strength and stability in the black community.

Moreover, the purpose of Mardi Gras Indian demonstrations should be considered within the racially oppressive context of their origin’s era. The resilience of Mardi Gras Indians to commit to African heritage—despite the desecration and admonishment administered by those of non-African descent—delivers them from the identity crises other blacks experienced across the United States. Celebrating their ancestral traditions instilled their identities with purpose and conviction. Describing the 1885 Mardi Gras as “extraordinary,” Smith explains, “For Africans, Mardi Gras translated nicely into a freedom celebration, a day to commemorate their own history and spirit, to be arrogant, to circumvent the hostile authorities, to overturn the established order and now and then

to seek revenge” (97). His observation reveals the unique opportunity for African Americans in New Orleans to celebrate their own ancestry and identity. Just as the Sunday “free days” at Congo Square were an unparalleled platform for North American slaves to practice their native customs, Carnival in New Orleans is a unique avenue for self-expression and identity reformation in the black community. Moreover, the culture and history of New Orleans that separates it from the rest of America and has generated an alternative experience for African Americans, one that nourishes identity rather than demolishes it.

Of course, New Orleans—like all Southern cities—has a long history of racial discrimination and prejudice. But its relative tolerance for diverse cultures—initiated by Spanish and French slave policies—encouraged African Americans to perpetuate their traditions despite oppressive attempts to deny their right to celebrate their ancestral heritage. For example, following Jim Crow segregation laws banning blacks from public parks in 1906, blacks “Still, on Mardi Gras Day, took to the streets in large numbers to celebrate their spirit of individualism, to dream of freedom and to remind the established society of the transience of their control” (Smith 106). Evident in these public parades is an irrepressible conviction of self and heritage. The refusal to relinquish individual freedom or ancestral heritage recalls Hughes’ message in “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain:” “[The] truly great Negro artist, [is] the one who is not afraid to be himself” (965). Mardi Gras Indians dancing, parading, singing, and proudly displaying their hand-sewn suits, their feathers, and themselves follow Hughes’ goal to “penetrate the closed ears of the near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (967). For Hughes and his Harlem contemporaries, poetry provides the means to illuminate the

beauty of African culture. Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans—as the custom has been since the days of Congo Square—rely upon song, dance and art to celebrate their culture.

From the earliest accounts in the 1700s, witnesses reported hearing music from African descendants throughout New Orleans that resembled nothing they had heard before in North America. The beating drums and native chants were unique not only because of the rare condition New Orleans provided for slaves to practice native customs, but also because the frequent changes of imperial rule in New Orleans created different eras and sources of slave importation resulting in a distinct African population in New Orleans. As one would expect, the musical customs were equally distinct. Sublette summarizes this phenomenon and its present day implications:

Everything we know about the unique, multilayered making of Afro-Louisiana—the Senegambian-majority French years, the Kongo-heavy Spanish period, the African American Protestants shipped from Upper to Lower South, the Dominican diaspora, and the pirate-trafficked Africans delivered en route to Cuba—suggests that from early on, there was a local style, peculiar to New Orleans, that sounded different from the style of music from anywhere else. Perhaps that is why today nothing else sounds quite like the still-evolving music of the groups of African American men known as Mardi Gras Indians (287).

The beating of drums, the shaking of tambourines, and the cryptic language of their chants distinguish Mardi Gras Indian music from other genres while providing the community with a lasting link to their ancestors. Like the performances in Congo Square and throughout New Orleans, “call and response singing as well as the unification of the song, drum and dance are standard features of the Mardi Gras Indian [music],” reinforcing the link between the past and the present and “lending evidence to the impact of cultural memory and African dancing on the city’s culture” (Evans 86,89). In addition, the present day Mardi Gras Indian practices resemble the Congo Square rituals

in regards to celebrating individualism and honoring ancestral heritage. Specifically, Mardi Gras Indian lyrics are often characterized by a proud, self-celebratory ethos that unquestionably conveys the strength and purpose of the individual as they sing. While spelling variations vary from tribe to tribe, the following lyrics from the Mardi Gras Indian spiritual “Indian Red” exemplify the pride present in their songs:

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 (Wild Tchoupitoulas).

An allusion to Mardi Gras Indians’ refusal to kneel and in turn dirty their precious, elaborate hand sewn suit reveals the self-respect Mardi Gras Indians have for themselves, for their work, and for their heritage. To bow down would concede autonomy, and to desecrate the suits honoring their heritage would be sacrilegious. Though one can imagine how these lyrics influence the black community’s resistance to racial prejudice, they actually refer to the meetings of different tribes—or gangs, a word that has lost its violent connotations in recent years in reference to Mardi Gras Indians—as they parade in the street. Tribe members may challenge each other to dances or argue over whose suit is the prettiest. As Sublette notes, “Though they might appear to be celebrating disunity by challenging each other as rivals, in the aggregate their tradition has come to mean the opposite: a statement of black unity” (297). These challenges, though intense, are playful in spirit and conclude with an embrace and a mutual display of respect. In this light, the lyrics reveal the influence Mardi Gras Indian culture has upon strengthening individual participants and the black community as a whole.

While not all African Americans in New Orleans participate—or to use the local word “mask”— in Mardi Gras Indian traditions, the prevalence of the culture and the variety of tribes across New Orleans provide each neighborhood with a symbol of black pride and reassurance. When interviewed, Big Chief Monk Boudreaux of the Golden Eagles illustrated the value of multiple tribes and gatherings across town. When asked about Congo Square, he said, “I wasn’t into that part because my neighborhood was where I was.” Just as the gatherings and dances have been widespread throughout New Orleans history, the events continue to be extensive today. This variety results in an accessible localized social network strengthening black communities throughout town. Smith acknowledges the effect Mardi Gras Indians have upon their community, characterizing Mardi Gras Indians as “Potentially the most solid members of the community, mainly because their lives are anchored in traditional culture. This heritage, giving them both identity and pride, is lovingly passed down to the children” (138). Smith’s twofold observation appropriately identifies the link between ancestry and self-pride. The circumstances in New Orleans that allowed Africans to perpetuate ancestral traditions were unique to North America. As a result, the African American community in New Orleans exhibits a strong, defined identity that reflects a proud heritage. In addition, the process of passing down cultural traditions from generation to generation has allowed black New Orleanians to retain the structure of their heritage. Learning these traditional customs from family members or community friends protects the culture from dilution or destruction by a prejudiced majority. Big Chief Monk Boudreaux stressed the value of teaching the next generation about Mardi Gras Indian traditions: “It’s important to me because you know the more of us do it, the longer it’s gonna last. A lot of tribes

bring out their kids. I bring all my kids, grandkids. So when I'm gone they know what to do." Involving the youth not only ensures that these traditions will continue, but also it ties generations together. This ancestral link reminds present generations of African Americans that their heritage matters. Masking as Mardi Gras Indians gives the black community identity and purpose. In an interview for New Orleans radio station WWOZ's series *Takin' It to the Streets*, Big Chief Demond Melancon of the Young Seminole Hunters reinforces the reason Indians mask: "I stress education with my Indians. They [our predecessors] live on through the beadwork. Without that, to me Mardi Gras gone." The homage Mardi Gras Indians pay to their ancestors is not only meant to honor them but also to protect the culture and ensure its survival. These acts of preservation demonstrate the prevalence of ancestral memory in Mardi Gras Indian consciousness. They feel a responsibility to preserve their heritage, help the community and develop the tradition. The evolution of African customs from Congo Square to Mardi Gras Indians displays the irrepressible commitment to heritage. Expectedly, this vigor shows itself in song.

Just as Harlem Renaissance poetry reflected the psychology of contemporary black consciousness, Mardi Gras Indian chants capture the spirit and conviction of black New Orleanians. Written by New Orleans guitarist Earl King and popularized by Professor Longhair, a legendary New Orleans pianist, "Big Chief" has become a staple in the Mardi Gras Indian musical canon. Longhair's lyrics demonstrate how the endurance of ancestral custom elicits autonomy in Mardi Gras Indians:

Me got fire, can't put it out
Heap fire water gonna make me shout
I'm goin' down an-a get my squaw
Me might buy a great big car

I'm gonna do ev'rything I could
Me Big Chief, I'm feeling good

Me Big Chief, I got um tribe
Got my squaw right by my side
My Flagboy, he just went by
My Spyboy, he's full of fire
Me whole tribe is havin' fun
We gonna dance 'til mornin' come.

Speaking from the perspective of a Mardi Gras Indian Big Chief, these lyrics underscore how this culture produces a sense of pride, freedom and community. The predominance of first person subjects and pronouns reveals the autonomy and confidence in the Mardi Gras Indian consciousness. From the opening line, the lyric expresses the power Mardi Gras Indians have to live and “have fun.” The allusion to a ceaseless fire in the first line suggests their culture is perpetual and their ancestral bonds are eternal. Moreover, references to a woman and a car in the lyric suggest this self-conviction permits social and material autonomy. Interestingly, the allusion to a single woman and car rather than multiple ones authenticates social and economic mobility while avoiding the excess associated with hip-hop culture. Thus, the lyric reveals the humility and honor evident in Mardi Gras Indian consciousness. Also, the agency in words like “might” and “could” suggests the options for Indians are limitless and self-defined. As the first verse concludes, it’s apparent all this freedom culminates in happiness.

The second verse captures the unifying nature of Mardi Gras Indian traditions. Involvement in this tradition ensures individuals’ support from each other and the community. Concerns plaguing the double-consciousness of Harlem Renaissance poets are not evident in Mardi Gras Indian lyrics. The lyric “I got um tribe” reveals the comforting support this community provides its members, preventing individual

alienation and erasing questions about heritage or purpose. Instead of social stagnation and a fixed consciousness, these lyrics reinforce mobility and conviction. As the lyric explains, the “whole tribe is havin’ fun;” its conclusion that they’ll be “danc[ing] til morning come” appropriately associates their felicity with their ancestral customs. Just as their ancestors danced to celebrate their free day, the Indians rejoice with the same ritual reinforcing the strength of their ancestral ties.

Epilogue

During my research I began attending Mardi Gras Indian practice sessions in order to witness the perpetuation of these ancestral customs. I was struck by the similarities between the rituals I saw and the descriptions I had read about their origins in the eighteenth century. The connections began with the setting. On Sundays, the same day slaves gathered throughout New Orleans to celebrate their heritage, Mardi Gras Indians hold multiple events in neighborhood bars throughout town to prepare for their parades on Mardi Gras Day. I attended unified practice sessions featuring multiple tribes from various neighborhoods. Approaching the bar, it was clear these sessions were community events. People congregated along the block hanging out, talking, barbecuing, drinking and laughing. I imagine scenes were not so different outside Congo Square as the celebration spilled out into the streets.

Inside the bar, the adaptations of ancestral customs are unmistakable. Like the slaves gathering in a circle, the crowd hugs the wall to either side forming a corridor in the middle. At the end of the passage, there are drums, three congas and one bass, appropriately reflecting the preeminence of this ancestral instrument. Tambourines, which were used in Congo Square though they are not of African origin, added to the beat in the bar (Evans 71). In front of the drums, members took turns holding a microphone leading the group in songs similar to the forms (call and response, solo and chorus, unison) used in Congo Square (75). During the songs, Mardi Gras Indians enter the bar one-by-one dancing through the corridor toward the singers and drums. Often, a member of another tribe challenges the one entering the bar. These confrontations result in dance competitions that may grow to a threatening level of intensity but end in

peaceful acknowledgments of respect. This uniquely New Orleans spectacle continued for hours offering tangible proof of the perpetuation of African ancestral customs and the pride and purpose it instills in the Mardi Gras Indian community.

Ironically, given the nature of my research, I found myself slipping into double-consciousness when I attended these events. Anxiously, I anticipated my first practice session wondering what I should wear and how I would be perceived. At the event, I wondered if I should participate with the crowd in song and dance. When I began to consider if it would be appropriate to buy a beer, I knew I had a problem. These were not questions I usually asked myself. I had succumbed to the same condition plaguing the speakers of the poems I studied, the same condition the Indians around me escaped. This experience allowed me to understand the psychology and tone of Harlem Renaissance poet speakers as I hadn't been able to before. Like them, my ancestry, though not erased, was certainly meaningless in my current environment, useless to alleviate my anxiety. However, I received one thing most African Americans did not at the turn of the twentieth-century: compassion. The hospitality and kindness bestowed upon me at these events eased my concerns and left me eternally grateful to the Mardi Gras Indian community.

In summary, the similarities I perceived between Mardi Gras Indian practices and Congo Square gatherings link the present with the past in an amazing extension of ancestral tradition. Remarking on this evolution, Sublette notes that "Mardi Gras Indians provide a unique window into how a culture that is African in form but local in content grows, adapts and serves the needs of its community" (295). My research confirms his observation. From the beginning, this culture has preserved native customs, protected the

community from racial oppression and perpetuated ancestral identity. The result is a culture unique to North America, a community built on the strength of tradition with individuals full of pride and self-conviction. While the tone and psychology of Mardi Gras Indian lyrics and Harlem Renaissance poetry differ, the similar themes, like the power of music to unite or the use of art to express individuality, reveal a common trend to rely upon ancestry for identity formation. The tolerant political climate in New Orleans made this natural inclination not only possible for slaves but also relatively accessible. Slaves in New Orleans maximized the opportunity to preserve their ancestral traditions and the spirit of their celebrations continues today through the Mardi Gras Indian community.

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Vita

Andrew Boyd Gibbs was born on a farm in Fairview, Tennessee in 1989. Following in the footsteps of his forefathers, Gibbs became the fourth generation of his family to study at Montgomery Bell Academy, an all-boys preparatory school in Nashville. After earning his bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of Tennessee in 2011, he moved to New Orleans and worked on a demolition crew for two years. He began pursuing a Masters of Art in English Literature in 2012 at the University of New Orleans. As of 2014, he has attended 24 Jazz & Heritage Festivals