

# Tourism from Above and Below: Globalization, Localization and New Orleans's Mardi Gras

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## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the growth of a vast and expanding scholarly literature concerning the interaction of the 'global' and the 'local'. The popularity of such phrases as the 'global-local nexus' (Teo and Li, 2003: 290), 'glocalization' (Bauman, 1998; Robertson, 2001; Beck, 2003: 45–50), 'global meets the local' (Thorns, 1997), 'grobalization' (Ritzer, 2004), and 'indigenization' (Appadurai, 1996) reflect scholarly interest in understanding how global-level developments affect cities and how cities shape and mediate global influences. Central to many of these analyses is the concept 'globalization' which implies the intensification of social and geographical interconnectedness and an accelerated circulation of people, capital, information and cultural symbols on a worldwide scale (for overviews, see Held *et al.*, 1999; Beck, 2003). The notion of globalization involves several issues, including whether changing connections between the global and the local entail increasing cultural homogeneity or increasing heterogeneity or a mixture of both. Harvey (1989; 1993) and Lash and Urry (1994) suggest that the more global interrelations become, the more the world's population increasingly clings to place and neighborhood, to region and ethnicity, to tradition and heritage. Eade (1997) and Scott (2000) note that global-level transformations do not annihilate local differences or produce cultural homogeneity but generate the social conditions that allow for localized cultural innovation (see also Cox, 1997; Hudson, 2001). These different analyses of 'localization' imply that local actors and organizations can harness the 'local' to produce unique products, establish locally-specific social ties and networks, and build and enhance place distinctiveness by using different themes, symbols and motifs.

This article uses a case study of the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans to examine how global forces interconnect with local actions to facilitate the growth of urban tourism. As reflected in literary, film and music sources, New Orleans is probably most often identified with Mardi Gras, a celebration that has come to have a particularly powerful and enduring association with the liminal and carnivalesque. In the last two decades or so, Mardi Gras has become the linchpin of a burgeoning tourism industry, punctuated by the construction of new hotels, convention facilities, a Rouse riverfront, and gambling. A variety of public and private groups now 'market' and 'thematize' Mardi Gras using sophisticated advertising techniques aimed at promoting desire and fantasy, art and design directed to the production of commercial spaces, and other highly refined techniques of image production and distribution. Major corporations such as

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Bacardi rum, Southern Comfort, Coors beer, Kool cigarettes and other companies are increasingly attaching Mardi Gras symbols and motifs to their products to stimulate consumer demand. Entertainment Tonight, MTV, and the Playboy Channel telecast live reports from New Orleans every year, and camera crews from the BBC, Japan, the Travel Channel and other countries showcase the festivities to a worldwide audience. Across the United States, groups use Mardi Gras as a theme for proms, parties and meetings; several Las Vegas casinos feature a Mardi Gras motif; and Disney World and Universal Studios regularly schedule New Orleans-style parades. These diverse examples suggest that Mardi Gras is ubiquitous and multifaceted. While Mardi Gras is a local celebration, it is also a marketing slogan to stimulate consumer demand for corporate products, and an imaging device used by private and public actors to enhance the tourism appeal of the city and its region.

I begin by developing my theoretical orientation. Next, I explore the growth and development of Mardi Gras in New Orleans. I then examine the role of tourism in contributing to the demise of several Mardi Gras traditions and the creation of new traditions. I argue that the globalization and localization of Mardi Gras are occurring simultaneously, the result being a mix of homogenizing and particularizing influences in New Orleans. The globalization of Mardi Gras is evident in changes in institutional relations between public and private tourism institutions that link New Orleans to the global economy and globalized tourism. As I show, local businesses and organizations are attempting to export Mardi Gras products, as well as float building styles and techniques to other regions of the world, thus encouraging the 'globalization of the local'. Localization is evident in efforts by local groups to use tourism to enhance place distinctiveness, maintain old Mardi Gras traditions and create new traditions. Today, Mardi Gras is not only an agent in global place-making for the City of New Orleans, but a product of place-specific conditions that mediate the influence of global homogenizing forces. Analysis of global-local connections in tourism provides an important opportunity for theoretical development and offers a unique perspective for understanding tourism as a process of globalization and localization.<sup>1</sup>

## The global and the local in urban tourism

Reference to the connections between global forces and local particularities abound in the literature on urban tourism (for overviews, see Meethan, 2001; Urry, 2002; Coleman and Crang 2002; Hoffman *et al.*, 2003). On the one hand, tourism is a global industry dominated by transnational hotel firms, entertainment corporations, gaming casinos and professional sports franchises (Gottdiener, 1997; 2000; Hannigan, 1998; Hollands and Chatterton, 2003). Tourism corporations are simultaneously placeless and place-full. They accentuate the place-theme in their products and operations by valorizing the milieu where they are located, using place images and symbols that connect the locale with pleasurable experiences (Desmond, 1999). On the other hand, tourism is a localized business 'with place as its raw material' (Molotch, 2002: 677). Local tourism organizations, local arts and cultural facilities, museums, and historic preservation groups construct place images and help produce tourist sites to attract consumers and investment (Eade, 1997; Judd, 2003; Sheller and Urry, 2004; Zukin, 1995). Unlike other commodities, the tourism commodity and related services are spatially fixed and consumed by tourists at the place of production. Consequently, every local context

1 I employ both primary and secondary data to analyze Mardi Gras. The secondary data come from government documents, planning reports and newspaper articles. The primary data come from more than six years of continuous participant observation, and in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirty six local residents, tourism officials and neighborhood leaders who have had first-hand knowledge and experience with the transformation of the celebration over the decades. I gathered these interviews through a snowball sample. To protect the confidentiality of interviewees I use pseudonyms for nonpublic persons quoted in the article.

involves its own appropriation and reworking of global influences, thus encouraging diversity and variety. Grasping that tourism embodies these contrasting tendencies at once — that it can be a force of homogenization and heterogeneity — is crucial to articulating the contradictions of tourism and avoiding one-sided and reductive conceptions.

Many scholars, by contrast, have argued that one trend of globalized tourism is the replacement of real authenticity with a 'staged' authenticity in which local cultures and traditions become manufactured or simulated for tourist consumption (MacCannell, 1973; 1992; Cohen, 1988). Recent books by Boissevain (1996), Alsayyad (2001) and Meethan (2001) note that tourism and entertainment corporations seek to transfer the logic of commodity production to the production of tourist places, the effect of which is to transform space into a saleable object and therefore destroy authentic cultural spaces. Such an account dovetails with Manuel Castells's (1996) recent argument that we are moving from a world characterized by 'space of places' to one dominated by 'spaces of flows'. The spaces of places are unique settings marked by rich emotional ties, a well-defined culture and history, and longstanding and venerable traditions. In contrast, discontinuity, ephemerality, fluidity and lack of stability define the space of flows. As far as possible, the space of flows seeks to annihilate the space of places, creating an environment without significant places. In his recent book, the *Globalization of Nothing*, George Ritzer (2004: 105) suggests that 'one of the best examples' of the 'globalization of nothing' is in the realm of tourism which involves the global production of non-places (Disneyland), non-things (mass-manufactured souvenirs) and non-people (clerks at souvenir shops). According to Ritzer, tourism is about the production of 'nothing' which refers to a 'social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive content' (*ibid.*: 3). In this conception, flows of people, information, and signs and symbols that characterize tourism disembed or delocalize culture, making it difficult for people to develop meaningful interactions, or individual and communal identities.<sup>2</sup>

The generalized processes of commodification and homogenization that characterize the international tourism industry are not monolithic but are mediated at various spatial and institutional levels, from the macro-level of globalized institutions to the micro-level of people's day-to-day lives. Local forms of knowledge and culture are not necessarily corrupted or undermined by tourism. Rather, local organizations and people are capable of resisting or incorporating tourism images and meanings into local aesthetics and culture. In the process, local people transform and reconfigure tourism and accompanying trends of homogenization, standardization and commodification. Moreover, local residents and tourists are not simply passive recipients of accepted meanings of tourism and places produced by global tourism firms, entertainment corporations and place marketers. They are actively involved in the production of meaning and produce novel meanings, some that are unintended by tourism promoters. All commodities, including places, have symbolic and cultural values, in addition to instrumental exchange-values. While the production of tourist spaces is a globalized process of commodification, the effect and meaning of commodification are expressed at the local level, where particular conflicts and struggles actually occur. Coleman and Crang's (2002) discussion of tourism as 'between place and performance', Burawoy's (2000: 241) concept of 'grounded globalizations', and Eade's (1997) notion of globalization as 'local process' reflect recent theoretical efforts to develop 'middle range' approaches to understanding the interplay of global and local processes (for an overview, see Eade and Mele, 2002). The underlying logic of such approaches examines local events and actions as 'a means to explore the multiple ways individuals and social

2 In its extreme form, this argument describes a world in which particular cultures have been assimilated into a homogenized 'monoculture', driven by a process of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1996; 1998) or Disneyization (Bryman, 1999), one that transforms all places into ageographical theme parks devoid of authenticity (Sorkin, 1992).

groups engage with structural *political economic* forces at play in the city' (Cooper and Mele, 2002: 292, emphasis in original).

In this article, I conceptualize tourism as a conflictual and contradictory process that embodies a mix of both homogenizing forces of sameness and uniformity *and* diversifying forces of difference and hybridity. I advance this conceptualization by distinguishing between 'tourism from above' and 'tourism from below', a distinction that can help us get a better sense of how tourism can help promote as well as undermine local differences, local traditions and local cultures. 'Tourism from above' refers to a multidimensional mix of production and effects of the global economy and capitalism market system. It also involves new technologies and media networks to stimulate travel, and new legal modes of governance and regulation to coordinate different forms of tourism and entertainment. 'Tourism from below' refers to the ways in which local groups and individuals resist the homogenizing effects of tourism and appropriate tourist images and representations to maintain the strength of old traditions and promote the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm, 1983: 1). As sociologists of culture have noted, 'tradition' is not just 'handed down from the past' (Shils, 1981: 12–21) but is socially produced through everyday social activities and practices, taking place amid material needs and social circumstances (Williams 1977; Calhoun, 1983: 894–5; Griswold and Wright, 2004). Eriksen's (2003) and Hannerz's (1992; 1996) work on 'creolization' suggests that the creation of traditions and other forms of cultural innovation are the result of recontextualization, mixing of different identities and mergers of symbols. This processual and hybrid view of culture draws attention to how the production and maintenance of cultures and traditions take place as people interact, create meaning, and produce and reproduce shared understandings of their behavior.

The distinction of tourism from above and below eschews a notion of an 'authentic place' corrupted by tourism and suggests that tourism can be a mechanism for creating and maintaining place character, including articulating local identities and generating place-specific forms of collective action. I argue that the persistence of old Mardi Gras traditions and the creation of new traditions are not simply residual products of global level changes. Instead, they are in large part hybrid and emergent, and reflect local efforts to resist, absorb and transform the global processes of commodification and standardization to produce new and locally-distinctive cultural traditions. In other words, I investigate the role of local actions in mediating and shaping the global, inflecting global forces to diverse ends and producing unique configurations of the local and the global. Put simply, it is the mix that matters, and whether global or local influences are more important depends on the time and place being considered, and the specific actions and decisions we address. Such a perspective adjudicates between a 'top-down' approach that stresses the role of global factors in driving tourism, and a 'bottom up' approach that focuses on the role of local influences and particularizing forces.

## Global-local connections and the transformation of Mardi Gras

The annual number of parades and carnival organizations (called *krewes*), the number of visitors that attend Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the money generated through the annual celebration have increased dramatically over the last three decades. Traditionally, the term 'krewe' applies to groups whose members organize a parade with floats and marching bands, and hold a tableau ball during the annual Mardi Gras celebration ([www.mardigrasdigest.com/html/What\\_is\\_a\\_Krewe.htm](http://www.mardigrasdigest.com/html/What_is_a_Krewe.htm)). The first carnival group organized as a krewe was the Mystic Krewe of Comus in 1857. Other krewes include the Momus, Proteus and Rex, formed in the 1870s and 1880s. From 1857 to the late 1930s, there were approximately 4–6 krewes that paraded each Mardi Gras season in New Orleans. The number of parades doubled from 5 in 1930 to 10 in 1940, increased to 15 annual parades in the late 1940s, reached 21 by 1960, and 25 by 1970. Since the 1970s, the number of parades has increased dramatically, reaching 55 in 1986, and

peaking at 62 in 2004. The establishment of 'super-krewes' in the 1960s and later, such as Bacchus, Endymion and Orpheus, ushered in an era of increased participation by non-locals, larger floats, and greater volume of 'throws' — beads and trinkets that parade riders shower on revelers during festivities. Local leaders have tracked the estimated economic impact of the celebration since the mid-1980s, and in 2000 overall spending from Mardi Gras hit the one billion-dollar mark for the first time. In 2000, the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Tourism Bureau estimated that there were more than 6.1 million total parade viewers, 2.24 million day trippers or visitors staying with friends, and almost one million tourists staying in hotels during Mardi Gras (McClain, 2000). 'Economically, it is by far the single-largest special event', according to Marc Morial, Mayor of New Orleans from 1994–2002. 'It's bigger than Jazzfest, it's bigger than the Sugar Bowl, it's bigger than the Super Bowl' (*New York Times*, 7 February 1999). 'It's the major annual event for this city', according to Michele Moore, spokesperson for the mayor's office, 'We build many of our tourism and marketing strategies around Mardi Gras' (Charles, 1995).

Before the 1970s, Mardi Gras was a discrete tourist attraction that the city celebrated for approximately two weeks. Since the 1970s, however, Mardi Gras has become a year-round 'industry' with hundreds of local residents employed in float building, museums, and the production of souvenirs, books and histories of the celebration. A burgeoning multimillion dollar market has arisen in recent years to produce Mardi Gras books, bracelets, hair ties, surgical scrubs, hats, banners, stuffed toys, women's underwear and beverage containers in the official Mardi Gras colors of purple, green and gold. Accent Annex sells more than \$6 million a year in carnival merchandise and souvenirs. The rise of the internet has accelerated the standardization of production of Mardi Gras products and made it possible to purchase and ship carnival merchandise year-round. Gambinos, one of the larger bakers in the metropolitan area, produces annually up to 165,000 King Cakes — circular green, yellow and purple cakes — that sell to customers not only in the United States but in Europe and Latin America (King, 2003). The production and consumption of cultural signature products such as King Cakes reflect and reinforce the locality as a crucible of creativity while promoting the globalization of the local. Images of Mardi Gras and New Orleans that circulate through the media not only help sell local cultural products, but they help launch 'ensembles of goods that are made to conform to one another to evoke the spirit they supposedly share' (Molotch, 2002: 679). For example, the Mardi Gras colors of purple, green and gold cause the placeness of the cultural product (e.g. the King Cake) to become part of the ensemble of the entire Mardi Gras cultural system. Local actions aim to create a saleable tourism product on the one hand, while celebrating and preserving the importance of the locality as a place of cultural innovation on the other.

Part of the allure of Mardi Gras is the incidences of 'playful deviance' that occur on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter during the annual celebration. Examples of playful deviance include flashing breasts or genitals; masturbating, mooning, oral sex and penetrative sex in public. These entertaining and transgressive leisure activities occupy a space between the global and the local. On the one hand, studies by Forsyth (1992), Shrum and Kilburn (1996), and Wilkie (1998) suggest that exhibitionism and nudity are frequent, spontaneous and localized. On the other hand, these behaviors, especially the practice of 'baring breasts for beads', are increasingly assuming a commodified character and marketed to a global audience. Redmon (2003) maintains that performing acts of playful deviance have taken on the character of a 'themed leisure event' in which sundry 'video entrepreneurs' record young women baring breasts and appropriate these images to sell videos such as *Girls Gone Wild*. According to Redmon (*ibid.*: 48), visual technology combined with the growth of international media coverage of Mardi Gras 'discloses secret deviance kept hidden from public viewing and displays it as a public spectacle for entertainment'. Interestingly, while some people contend that the practice of 'baring breasts for beads' has 'always existed' in New Orleans, there is little evidence to suggest that it was a widespread practice before the mid-1970s. Signs and displays

such as 'show your tits' and 'show your penis' and other sexual slogans have become commercialized on t-shirts, buttons and a variety of Mardi Gras paraphernalia. The increasing ubiquity and commercialization of nudity and exhibitionism at Mardi Gras mirror the telecasting of the celebration worldwide.

The production and consumption of Mardi Gras 'beads' support the 'playful deviance' that distinguishes New Orleans's Mardi Gras. In New Orleans, an individual's possession of beads expresses what Georg Simmel (1904) called the 'double function' of fashion: the desire to imitate the behaviors and actions of other carnival revelers as well as deviate and differentiate oneself from others. As a force of adaptation, beads are a sign of one's union with others who have 'experienced' Mardi Gras. As a force of social distinction, beads signify the accumulation of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) through displays of provocative clothing, physical attractiveness, exotic costumes and performances for the veneration of the parades and crowds (Shrum and Kilburn, 1996: 435). Today, a handful of factories in China produce most of the Mardi Gras beads imported to the United States. While no official statistics are available, estimates suggest that the bead industry sells US \$500 million of beads each year worldwide, an indicator of economic globalization. Workers in China sew the plastic beads for \$4.25 a day, or about \$85 a month (LaFrance, 2001; Warren and Fowler, 2004). Local krewes contract with US bead distributors to order customized beads to sell to individual members who toss the beads from the parade floats. In short, Mardi Gras beads illustrate the nexus of the global and the local. Beads produced in China are transported to New Orleans where disrobement and gifts of beads are components of a ceremonial exchange where 'doing deviance' becomes a tourist site of entertainment (Redmon, 2003).

A final example of the interplay of global and local forces in Mardi Gras is in the float building market. Today, the New Orleans-based Kern Company is the largest float builder for Mardi Gras and Carnival celebrations throughout the world, netting \$20 million in annual revenues from building and maintaining more than 300 floats for forty parades. Once a seasonal business, Kern Studios is now busy year-round not only for designing floats but for renting its facilities for Mardi Gras-theme parties. Kern Studios creates sculptures, themed environments and visual signage for such clients as Paramount Park, Harrah's Casino, MGM Casino and Circus Casino, among others. Other projects include parades for Disney World in Orlando, Florida, Euro Disney in Paris, Warner Bros' Movie World theme park in Madrid, Universal Studios in Barcelona, Samsung Corp.'s Everland Theme Park in Seoul, Par Que Espana outside Osaka, and Disneyland, Tokyo. In the United States, Kern Studios has signed deals to produce parades at the Gasparilla Pirate Fest in Tampa, Florida, Fiesta San Antonio and Mardi Gras in Galveston, Texas (Bolnar, 2003). In 1989, New Orleans float builder Blaine Kern opened Mardi Gras World, which allows people to view costumes, shop for gifts, dress up in carnival costumes and 'experience Mardi Gras year round'. Together, the Kern Companies — Kern Studios, Mardi Gras World and Blaine Kern Artists — earn about half their annual revenue outside New Orleans. Float building, sculpture and other art production facilities are now found in Orlando, Florida, Valencia in Spain and Las Vegas, Nevada. 'Mardi Gras has opened up all these doors to us all over the world', according to Barry Kern. 'It's our calling card. It's allowed our company to keep getting better people, allowing us to build better facilities, and therefore making Mardi Gras better at home' ([www.kernstudios.com/news/.htm](http://www.kernstudios.com/news/.htm)).

Float building and other businesses work to export Mardi Gras images and New Orleans cultural resources to other areas of the world, creating demand for Mardi Gras products and stimulating travel to New Orleans to experience the city and its signature celebration. Because the Kern family produces so many parades, it has shaped the way local people and tourists perceive modern Mardi Gras. Paraphrasing Chang (2000), a key strategy for the Kern Company and other New Orleans tourism businesses is to 'go global' and 'stay local' at the same time. Such a strategy involves exporting images of local distinctiveness and other products that retain the local in their mode of global expression, a process shot through with contradictions. On the one hand, as a global

industry, tourism unfolds through a process of bureaucratic rationalization and standardization in which different cities court the same transnational tourism firms (e.g. international hotel chains, casinos, car rental agencies, etc.) and embrace similar marketing strategies, thereby creating identicalness and homogeneity. On the other hand, in an era of major socio-economic restructuring, places vie to differentiate themselves, playing up their cultural distinctiveness and advertising themselves as places to visit (for overviews, see Boissevain, 1996; Judd and Fainstein, 1999; Meethan, 2001; Coleman and Crang, 2002; see also Nevarez, 2002). The challenge for local tourism institutions and businesses is to employ local culture for global ends such as attracting tourists and capital investment while maintaining local character and tradition. This global-local nexus, however, is difficult to achieve and always subject to contestation.

## Commodification and the erosion of Mardi Gras traditions

A constitutive component of the interplay of 'tourism from above' and 'tourism from below' is the process of commodification whereby groups of entrepreneurs and other political-economic institutions transform cultural products and activities into saleable items or exchange relationships. Commodification facilitates the standardization of the tourist product and allows for its mass production (Fainstein and Judd, 1999: 16). In this section and the next, I investigate how local struggles over commodification (or commercialism) connect to the erosion of several Mardi Gras traditions and the creation of new traditions. Many changes have occurred in Mardi Gras in recent decades. Fewer parades feature fewer flambeaux, torchlight processions that lead the parades. Marching clubs are fewer and those that remain are smaller in size. Public masking is also on the decline and local media now publicize the names of some krewe captains, a practice that was unheard of decades ago. In this section, I focus specifically on the decline of neighborhood parade parties and the attempts to preserve the private and exclusive nature of parading organizations in the face of increasing corporate involvement in Mardi Gras.

One unique feature of Mardi Gras in New Orleans is the prevalence of longstanding cultural traditions that discourage corporate sponsorship and advertising within parades. The City of New Orleans bans advertising on Mardi Gras floats and the city code stipulates: 'No parade shall be of a commercial nature or convey or contain a commercial message, corporate or commercial sign logo, or symbol . . . No advertising of any kind shall be displayed or used in any parade'. The ordinance also prohibits the throwing of beads that have corporate logos (Article III, Sec. 34-7, MCS, Ord. 19, 314, 1, 7-15-99). Despite New Orleans's ban on advertising, more subtle forms of commercialism have emerged in recent years. In 2003, Mayor Ray Nagin announced his intention to pursue a licensing and sponsorship program that could result in the creation of 'official' Mardi Gras products. The city has retained four advertisement agencies (two from out-of-state) to create an overall licensing and sponsorship strategy for the city (Hardy, 2004). Local residents and Mardi Gras enthusiasts defeated a similar effort by the city government to designate 'official' status to Mardi Gras products in the early 1990s (Ruth, 1993; *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 2 February 1994; Cheakalos, 1994; Eggler, 1994). The recent attempt to commercialize Mardi Gras portends a future of increasing protest and opposition from Carnival enthusiasts and others who view the celebration as a local celebration that belongs to everyone.

Another subtle form of commercialism that has emerged in the 1990s and later is in the business of selling 'corporate' memberships and riderships to businesses on floats. Local companies have for many years extended invitations to business associates to join their executives riding in a parade at the company's expense. Yet in recent years, non-local businesses have begun organizing special Carnival travel packages for employees, customers and business prospects that culminate with riding in a parade. The idea is that Mardi Gras can be a site for corporate entertaining that can foment or strengthen business relationships, establish networks and cultivate profit opportunities with other

executives. In the Orpheus parade, for example, American Express typically has at least one float, though they do not advertise it. The Sheraton New Orleans Hotel pays all the expenses for an entire float of meeting planners and the Hotel Inter-Continental owns four slots in Orpheus for corporate entertaining. The leaders of the Krewe of Zulu have rewarded companies that sponsor the bands and children's entertainment at the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club Lundi Gras Festival with spots in their parade. Zulu's website lists the Audubon Institute, Anheuser-Busch, Frito Lay, Captain Morgan and Offbeat Publication as sponsors of Lundi Gras. The rise of the internet has established a new means of advertising and soliciting corporate riders. The internet site MardiGrasUnmasked.com, for example, lists eight parading organizations — Mid-City, Morpheus, Okeanos, Pegasus, Pontchartrain, Pygmalion, Tucks and Zulu — and the cost to ride in each parade. One advertisement on MardiGrasNewOrleans.com is for a \$2,100 package to ride in Orpheus ([www.mardigrasunmaksed.com/maps/howtoride.htm](http://www.mardigrasunmaksed.com/maps/howtoride.htm); Mowbray, 2003).

The practice of selling float positions has caused much local controversy in recent years as critics contend that it is an indicator of 'creeping commercialism' that prefigures a gradual corporate takeover of the Mardi Gras celebration. Some charge that the practice is a threat to carnival tradition and that krewes are starting to look more like businesses than social clubs. In the interview excerpt below, a long-time Mardi Gras enthusiast and historian laments the marketing and selling of memberships and riderships. As this person told me:

The term 'krewe' has been traditionally applied to social and cultural organizations, clubs in which people were members, and they met frequently throughout the year. But to me some krewes are not really krewes, they are more like businesses and less like social organizations, which is an affront to everything that Mardi Gras stands for. Some of these krewes are really just profit centers that exist to make money, they are not real krewes which were created and maintained not for profit but for solidarity, camaraderie and cheer. You should not have to advertise for riders if you are a real krewe. Krewes that advertise are culturally backward (interview with Liam Elmer).

Others contend that while some krewes may allow 'tourists' to ride on floats, this is not a regular feature, and these 'outsiders' typically do not become full-fledged members of the krewes. So, for example, while the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club's parade on Mardi Gras morning includes some 2,000 riders, the Club itself has fewer than 200 members. Still others contend that the appearance of corporate riders in parades is a financial necessity due to the high cost of planning and organizing a parade. The cost of riding on a float varies enormously by parade. For some smaller krewes, riders might spend \$300 on annual dues and \$200 to \$500 on throws. In the largest parades, riders might spend \$700 to \$850 in dues, plus a large one-time initiation fee, and anywhere from \$200 to \$2,500 on throws. In all the krewes, people typically spend additional money on balls, formal attire for parties, cabs, hotel rooms for parade or ball night, costumes, food and alcohol. For the krewes, the advantage of selling riderships to companies is not to find a sponsor to subsidize local riders but to fill all the positions on the floats. Beyond that, companies spend lavishly on beads and buy more tables at a ball. In the excerpt below, one Mardi Gras historian feels that it is not corporate involvement per se that is a problem but explicit corporate advertising in the parades. As this person put it:

I don't see corporate involvement in Mardi Gras as an evil as long as that is not the purpose of the krewe. It should not be a money making venture. Selling riderships helps to underwrite a spectacular parade. But it has to be done in balance and in good taste. I don't think anyone on the street knows or really cares if the person behind the mask on the float is from New York representing American Express or if they live right down the street. Corporate sponsorship and corporate advertising on floats is an affront to all that is special about Mardi Gras. Corporations have been involved in Mardi Gras for a long time and it has never been a problem, as long as it is discreet (interview with Harold Anderson).

In short, the practice of corporate riders in parades is a sign that Mardi Gras is changing. In the past, krewes such as Carrollton or Mid-City were largely neighborhood civic clubs or social organizations with monthly meetings and frequent social gatherings. However, now, many members live in the suburbs and members have little contact with one another except during the parade. Larger krewes contend that they need corporate riders to fill their positions because the population of New Orleans is not growing and there are not enough people living in the city who are willing to pay the high costs of riding in a parade. According to Mardi Gras historian Errol LaBorde: 'For the big krewes, I think to some extent they have to do it because there aren't enough people in the population that have that kind of money. But, I would hate it if it became just that'. As Henri Schindler, a float designer for the Krewe of Rex, put it: 'If we're not careful, Mardi Gras is going to end up becoming just a corporate perk. It shouldn't just become a corporate junket that could happen anywhere at any time. If it doesn't stop pretty soon, the tourists will be coming here to watch other tourists come to throw beads to the locals' (Mowbray, 2003). While it is unlikely that corporate groups will take over the parades, the practice of corporate riders and influence suggests that the organization of krewes is changing and the tradition of krewes as locally-based social clubs is eroding.

Another tradition that has been eroding in recent years is the decades-old tradition of neighborhood parade parties. The decline of this tradition is due to two tourism-related developments. First, the legalization of gambling in Louisiana during the 1990s and the opening of several casinos has siphoned off money that once went to charity bingo games for the krewes. As a result, gaming has reduced the money to fund parades and led to a decrease in the number of smaller parading organizations, especially neighborhood-based krewes. Traditionally, carnival krewes have existed as nonprofit organizations whose finances come from membership dues, the sale of krewe-emblemated merchandise to the members, and fund-raising projects such as bingo games. However, the last two decades have witnessed dramatic changes in krewe size and funding. While the ten largest krewes have maintained size or grown larger, average krewe size has dropped significantly, especially in the 1990s. In the 1950s and the 1960s, eleven parades were established and seven were discontinued per decade. The 1970s witnessed a vast increase in parade turnover, with eighteen new parades and eighteen parades that ceased parading. The 1980s also represented a major increase in parade turnover, with twenty-seven new parades and nineteen that folded, a total increase in eight parades during the decade. The 1990s represented the first decade in which the metropolitan area saw a decline in the ratio of new parades to discontinued parades. Fourteen parades folded while six were created. In Orleans Parish alone, 60% of the krewes that paraded in 1997 were established after 1970. During that period, fifty-one new krewes have debuted and fifty-two have folded. Among the more significant krewes to fold have been the Krewe of Venus (established in 1941), St Bernard Parish's Krewe of Arabi (1934), and the Uptown neighborhood's Krewe of Freret (1952). Some krewes such as Mid-City, Carrollton and King Arthur have moved to the Uptown neighborhood to consolidate routes and guarantee larger crowds. Three of the four children's krewes have also disbanded (Hardy, 1998).

A second reason for the decline of neighborhood parades has been the standardization and reduction of parade routes in older suburbs and older city neighborhoods. For example, in 1977, some 52 parades used more than two dozen separate parade routes. In 2001, however, some 50 parades used only six parade routes. These changes have made it easier for law enforcement to regulate and control the parade crowds and enhanced the efficiency and predictability of traveling to see a parade. Video surveillance of parades has gained popularity as many local governments in the metropolitan area have adopted CCTV cameras to patrol parades and parade goers, offering reassurance to residents and tourists that law enforcement can identify criminal activity, but also resulting in continual surveillance of law-abiding behavior along the parade routes. Moreover, the city government now lines

many parades with barricades that have changed the dynamics of crowd interaction with the float riders, transforming Mardi Gras from an active crowd participation event into a passive spectator sport (Donze, 2001; Hardy, 2001: 46). In sum, the combination of standardization and reduction of parade routes combined with changes in krewe funding and size have led to a decline in the number of neighborhood parade parties. In the past, neighborhood parades provided a cultural anchor and opportunity for community interaction and solidarity building. Today, this tradition is eroding, thus making parades less a focus of neighborhood identification and a source of cultural meaning for residents.

## Localization and the invention of Mardi Gras traditions

Over the last few decades, as tourism has come to dominate more areas of social life within New Orleans, Mardi Gras has become a 'contested terrain' where various residents, elite groups and city leaders claim to represent the 'spirit' and 'culture' of the city and duel over competing and contradictory meanings of the city's signature celebration. Some local residents view tourism as a harbinger of social instability, a threat to local culture and a mechanism for commercializing Mardi Gras. Others view tourism as a potential resource for preserving local culture and heritage by showcasing the city and Mardi Gras to an international audience. Still others maintain that the problem is not tourism per se but the management, regulation and control of tourism. For these people, the city government needs to protect the tourist appeal of New Orleans by curbing the spread of commercialism in Mardi Gras. This sentiment has become more poignant in recent years with the legalization of corporate sponsorship and advertising on floats in suburban Jefferson Parish. According to one Mardi Gras historian:

Mardi Gras in Orleans Parish goes back 150 years but the suburban parishes have only existed over the last 30 years. There is a completely different mind set. Jefferson Parish argues that without advertising then some parades would not be able to roll. They say that there is a great need to fund parades through corporate advertising. In New Orleans, we have long had a view, understanding and philosophy that Mardi Gras is not a corporate affair, it is not about advertising, and it should not be a corporate opportunity. The citizens are the shareholders in Mardi Gras. And it is a party we pay for and give to ourselves and our guests. There is too much resistance and opposition to the commercialization of Mardi Gras in New Orleans. This resistance is based more on tradition than law (interview with Harold Anderson).

Another Mardi Gras enthusiast and author of several books on carnival shared similar feelings. As this person put it:

I think that when most people think of the commercialization of Mardi Gras they think of parades that have corporate signs and explicit advertising on them. In New Orleans, this is illegal and, to the city's credit, this is fairly well enforced. There have been a lot of groups that have tried to get around it. There was one year where Zulu had cups with a beer logo. There was one year when the krewe of Ponchartrain had tractors with advertisements from Casino Magic. Jefferson Parish, on the other hand, has just rolled over in the face of commercialization. The suburban parades are just total corporate buy outs. Some of these parades claim they need to have corporate advertisements on the floats to survive. I say this is the subversion of Mardi Gras. I hate to see what people from out of town think when they see the suburban parades. I say any parade that needs to resort to commercialism to survive should die (interview with Liam Elmer).

A local artist and float designer views New Orleans culture and tradition as a bulwark against commercialism and reflects on the problems some cities have had with hosting Mardi Gras celebrations. As this person sees it:

A couple of years ago a couple of cities tried to stage a Mardi Gras and they had all kinds of trouble, violence and rioting and looting. And a reporter from the *New York Times* called me and he asked, "Why do you think these cities had these troubles?", and I said, "Well, that's easy, because it's not part of their culture". I said, "you cannot just graft on a Mardi Gras". Many of these cities hosted a Mardi Gras to just make money. It was staged and not about the culture of the city. And what they don't understand, especially beer sellers who organized this in different cities, is that Mardi Gras is the culminating day of an entire season that lasts up to two months. It has a momentum of its own. It has a cultural context. I mean we have Ash Wednesday in the city. Mardi Gras is part of our tradition, part of our culture, and not just a money making operation (interview with Samuel Henderson).

The above quotations express a powerful message of anti-commercialism and resistance to corporate advertising and sponsorship within Mardi Gras. Respondents contrast the anti-commercial tradition of New Orleans's Mardi Gras with the pro-commercial sentiment of suburban parades and Mardi Gras celebrations in other US cities. While corporate influence has been a part of Mardi Gras for many years, corporate sponsorship and advertising on floats has not. According to the people I interviewed, extra-local or corporate control and outside interference into Mardi Gras are the main threats to the culture and tradition of carnival. The anti-commercial tradition within Mardi Gras is an important component of New Orleans's 'place character'. Paulsen (2004: 245) suggests that we find 'place character' in the ways that local culture, politics, organization and culture 'combine and endure' to shape the 'tone of local life, encouraging or discouraging particular patterns of action'. In Mardi Gras in New Orleans, arguments for and against commercialization 'influence local patterns in meaning and action' (*ibid.*: 243) and reflect the duality of structure and agency (Giddens, 1995). To discourage corporate influence in Mardi Gras, for example, in 2000, the all-female Krewe of Muses formed with an explicitly local agenda to hold a competition in New Orleans high schools for the design of their annual cups. The persistence and strength of anti-commercialism were also evident in the vehement opposition to the Krewe of America, which openly advertised a \$5,500 travel package to New Orleans to ride in a parade in 1998. The parade rolled in 1998 but ceased parading the following year because of public opposition and inability to attract corporate sponsors and riders (*New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 17, 20 and 22 August 1997; *The Economist*, 21 February 1998). These actions suggest that the process of commodification is neither uniform nor homogenous, but contested and always subject to debate.

We can view local opposition to commercialization as an outcome of grassroots efforts to combat the homogenization and standardization of 'tourism from above'. Such efforts aim to reinforce and accentuate the cultural uniqueness of New Orleans and distinguish New Orleans' Mardi Gras from other carnival celebrations. Indeed, what distinguishes New Orleans' Mardi Gras is that it is generally indigenously conceived, substantively unique and rich in cultural content, though subtle forms of commercialization are emerging. Suburban parades and Mardi Gras celebrations in other US cities are generic, centrally planned to raise revenue, controlled to maximize corporate profits and lack distinctive content. Reflecting Theodor Adorno's (1967: 129–3) critique of the culture industry, Mardi Gras celebrations outside of New Orleans exhibit 'incessantly repeated formulae' that suppress active cultural creativity, and accelerate the trends toward commodification, standardization and bureaucratic rationalization. On the one hand, powerful actors and organized interests work hard to transform local celebrations into saleable items and exchange relationships as expedients to profit-making and inward investment. On the other hand, grassroots opposition to commercialization reflects local efforts to maintain local ties and preserve distinctive cultural forms. Understanding tourism as a cultural practice suggests that local people can appropriate different tourism symbols, motifs and images to reinforce old traditions, create new traditions, and build and enhance place distinctiveness. Many local traditions remain central to New Orleans's Mardi Gras, including the tableaux balls and the Mardi

Gras Indians, groups of working-class, black males that dress as Indians and parade through neighborhoods displaying their costumes and flags, singing and chanting in a specialized patois (Lipsitz, 1990). Other longstanding traditions include the walking or marching clubs that parade on foot through the city. These clubs include the Jefferson City Buzzards (founded in 1890), Pete Fountain's Half-Fast Walking Club, Lyons Carnival Club, Corner Carnival Club, Mondo Kayo Social and Marching Club, and the Westbank Social and Marching Club.

Recent decades have witnessed the growth of several new Mardi Gras traditions. In 1981, several dozen residents formed the Phunny Phorty Phellows to march with the satirical parade, the Krewe of Clones. The next year, the Phellows began the tradition of riding the St Charles Avenue Street car to announce the beginning of the Mardi Gras season on the twelfth night after Christmas (the feast of the Epiphany), masked members and followers carrying signs with humorous slogans and cryptic messages. In 1993, a local television broadcaster formed the Krewe of Barkus canine parade with several dozen dogs. Over the last decade, the Krewe of Barkus has grown to 1,500 'members' and thousands of human 'escorts'. Barkus parades in the French Quarter and displays costumes, marching bands, themed 'floats' and appoints royalty. In 1987, several hundred members of different krewes formed the satirical Krewe du Vieux. According to the Krewe du Vieux website, the parade organization is 'dedicated to the historical and traditional concept of a Mardi Gras parade as a venue for individual creative expression and satirical comment'. The Krewe du Vieux claims that it 'is unique among all Mardi Gras parades in the city because it alone carries on the old traditions of Carnival celebrations, using decorated, hand or mule-drawn floats with satirical themes, accompanied by costumed revelers dancing in the streets to the sounds of jazzy street musicians' ([www.kreweduvieux.org/history.html](http://www.kreweduvieux.org/history.html)).

Another tradition that has (re)emerged in recent decades is the tradition of Lundi Gras (Fat Monday). For most of the twentieth century, only one parade (Proteus) rolled on the day before Mardi Gras. In 1987, the City of New Orleans formed a three-way partnership with the Krewe of Rex and the Riverwalk Shopping Mall, created by the Rouse Corporation, to stage a Monday river arrival for the Rex parade. From 1874 to 1917, the leader of Rex arrived by boat to the city on the Mississippi River. Local residents and the city government revived this tradition in 1987 and in 1993, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club joined in the tradition with its own celebration in a local park. In the 1990s, the Krewe of Orpheus augmented the Lundi Gras tradition by being the first super-krewe to include women, feature local musical talent combined with national celebrities, and have a dance open to the public. In the interview excerpt below, one local resident claims credit for helping to establish Lundi Gras while noting the role of local people in using tourism to build new traditions.

In 1987, I helped start a new tradition, Lundi Gras, to complement and benefit tourism in the city. Lundi Gras is where the leaders of the Rex parade arrive on the Mississippi River and there are fireworks and celebration. In 1984, we have the World's Fair and we create this infrastructure for future tourism development, including the building where the Rouse company created the Riverwalk, which was the international pavilion of the World's Fair. So I went to the Rouse company and I said, if I can get the Rex people to start arriving again will you stage the event? They saw the opportunity to advertise with music and fireworks, and they said OK. And then I went to Rex and I said look, Rouse is going to do all these things, and they agreed to the idea of creating a new Mardi Gras tradition. I said we're going to call it Lundi Gras, which means Fat Monday. This was a new tradition that was added to the tourist package (interview with Liam Elmer).

The above comment draws attention to the importance of understanding tourism as a force of localization, as a mechanism to create new traditions. Reflecting Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 78–87), tourism is not just a global force but a set of local cultural activities that help frame the 'habitus' of social life — the 'ensemble of dispositions' and internalized schemes through which people perceive, understand and evaluate the

social world. As a product of individual and collective practices, the habitus is the source of regulated cultural improvisation. The invented traditions of the Phunny Phorthy Phellows, the Krewe of Barkus, the Krewe du Vieux and Lundi Gras are not arbitrary, capricious or spontaneous creations. Nor are these cultural traditions planned, strategic and intentional acts of organized resistance against tourism. To paraphrase Karl Marx (1852: 595), people create their own traditions but not under circumstances chosen by themselves. Grassroots cultural production and tourism development have an elective affinity with each other, and reflect what Anthony Giddens (1995: 455) calls the 'recursive nature of social practices'. The powerful forces of standardization and homogenization that characterize global tourism do not incapacitate local people and organizations. As active agents, people construct realities in a shifting and perplexing social world, which both constrains their actions and creates new opportunities for them to confront their circumstances.

New carnival traditions are collective interpretations and representations that reflect a symbolic world of meanings about tourism and its positive features and negative consequences. On the level of the capacities of local actors, the homogenizing and standardizing forces of 'tourism from above' are embedded in the practical consciousness of residents and provide the stocks of knowledge they draw upon to produce new cultural forms. Yet, like all cultural creations in capitalist society, new carnival traditions operate in a social context of capitalist production and accumulation where the process of commodification structures and subsumes social life. Thus, Mardi Gras traditions always face the threat of being labeled as themed and commodified. Local ordinances that ban corporate advertising on parade floats and long-standing traditions that discourage commercialization are not static and unchanging, but have become a source of intense debate, especially as tourism has grown in New Orleans. At the same time, local groups struggle mightily to preserve the uniqueness of the local celebration and resist corporate and government efforts to hollow out the distinctive content of cultural creations and transform them into manufactured and standardized performances. Thus, the creation and maintenance of Mardi Gras traditions do not reflect the past so much as they represent present-day urban conflicts. This socially constructed conception of tradition breaks with the view that traditions are static conceptions or abstract ideologies that venerate the past, as the 'crust of ceremonial lore' (Calhoun, 1983: 896; Eriksen, 2003). Traditions are a mode of organizing action in terms of contemporary problems and shared collective understandings of social circumstances. Traditions are thus dramaturgical, situational, changeable and emergent.

In sum, the anti-commercial tradition of Mardi Gras has shaped and constrained the development of tourism in New Orleans. At the same time, the growth of tourism has pressured local actors and groups to improvise on past traditions and create new ones to fit the constraints and opportunities of the present. Rather than viewing cultures as corrupted by tourism, or a residual of global change, we should view cultures and traditions as embracing what sociologist Ulrich Beck calls an 'outward looking sense of place' or what geographer Doreen Massey calls a 'global sense of place' (quoted in Beck, 2003: 66–7). Thus, the specificity of place derives from the fact that each locale is an amalgam of both global forces and local relations whose interconnects are always changing, a point also highlighted by Cox (1997) and Eade (1997). Cooper and Mele's (2002) case study of Berlin suggests that locales can harness different elements of the global — images, themes, symbols and so on — to reinforce local sentiments, create identities and shape the process of urban redevelopment. For Molotch *et al.* (2000), local cultures and traditions give local character durability and significance. The heuristic 'tourism from below' suggests that diverse groups can engage in different repertoires of action to commandeer tourist images and symbols to enhance local culture and oppose corporate and government attempts to commodify traditions. The implication is that cities are not merely passive receivers of global forces but are actively involved in transforming themselves.

## Conclusion

The findings of this article are a challenge to accounts that emphasize tourism as a monolithic force of standardization and homogeneity. Tourism is an uneven and contested process that involves a set of global forces imposed from above in conjunction with localized actions and organizations attempting to preserve place difference, local traditions and indigenous cultures. Despite the globalized nature of tourism, it is important to remember that entertainment firms, tourism institutions, and social processes are embedded in specific locations, plugged into locally-constituted social relationships, networks and cultural ties. This local embeddedness of global tourism suggests that global corporations are not free agents to impose their modes of operation on passively accepting cities. In most cases, they are forced to confront local idiosyncracies, cultures and long-standing traditions that resist the homogenization and standardization processes of 'tourism from above'. Anthony Giddens's (2000: 30) explanation of globalization as an 'in here' and 'out there' phenomenon suggests we all remain indissolubly linked to both the local and the global through different networks even as major transformations alter old forms of action and constitute new forms of identity and self-expression. To paraphrase Escobar (1996), the global sits in places, even as the former becomes more distant and impersonal and the latter becomes more fleeting and ephemeral. In New Orleans, for example, the development of tourism has generated new conflicts and struggles over meanings and definitions of Mardi Gras, over who owns and controls Mardi Gras, and how people should advertise and promote Mardi Gras. Conflict and negotiation between residents and community groups who express local concerns, on the one hand, and tourism officials and corporations who accede to global forces, on the other, define the fault lines of power and control over tourism within contemporary New Orleans.

The account I have offered here suggests that local conflicts over tourism can provide important insight into the nature and etiology of place imitation and place uniqueness (Paulsen, 2004). Today, the production of local uniqueness via festivals and celebrations is no longer the purview of local actors and organizations but is increasingly becoming a global industry defined by the precepts of bureaucratic rationalization. Critics contend that the globalization of festival creation and promotion results in the commodification of local traditions, a process that invariably promotes a simulated and sanitized culture that is delocalized from the actual social, political and cultural contexts of cities (for overviews, see Sorkin 1992; Kearns and Philo 1993; Alsayyad 2001). Local traditions arise through interaction and active participation of people within indigenous organizations over time, something that is difficult to produce all at once. Despite the skills of planners and the resources of sponsors, people can read Mardi Gras celebrations in many US cities as instantaneous creations that do not have a rich history or set of traditions. Indeed, in Austin, Fresno, Philadelphia, Seattle, and other US cities, Mardi Gras celebrations are hermetically sealed from the actual locality and connected to a vast network of corporate entertainment firms and marketing agencies ruled by the dictates of advertising and commodified media culture. To quote Molotch *et al.* (2000: 818): 'Especially when other places try to imitate other locales (which is most often the nature of the case), it is *not the same thing* that is being done because the *context is different*' (emphasis in original). We can add that it is also the history, the forms and types of community associations, and the intensity and extensiveness of local networks that are different in each city. These are the social units through which people make contact, appropriate signs and create cultural meanings, and convey information — including flows of information and symbols embedded in tourism discourses — to reinforce place differences, maintain local character and construct new forms of local uniqueness.

Finally, much of the discussion of tourism and Mardi Gras that I have addressed is specific to the New Orleans case. We need more comparative research on how different urban governments, public-private ventures, cultural institutions and regulatory

mechanisms affect the production and consumption of tourism. Cohen's (1980; 1993) and Alleyne-Dettmers' (1997: 164–5) studies of the Notting Hill carnival in London suggest that local celebrations can be a 'driving force behind an evolving, transnational socio-cultural system in which there is a constant interplay between the compressed globe and the continual need to define and redefine *localness*' (emphasis in original). Wonders and Michalowski's (2001: 565) comparative work on tourism suggests that local institutions mediate the impact of global forces at the same time that locales are increasingly 'over-determined' by global economic forces 'in ways that cannot be anticipated'. To go beyond the opposition of the 'space of flows' versus the 'space of places' (Castells, 1997), we must develop our understanding of how places and extra-local flows constitute each other, rather than seeing them as opposing principles. Such an approach would focus attention on the agency of local actors and their place-making activities as forces shaping global flows themselves. Investigating how different places deal with comparable external forces can provide a corrective to theoretical approaches that overemphasize the globalized nature of tourism, and its homogenizing and negative consequences.

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