

### NEW ORLEANS

It's 5 a.m. Mardi Gras day, and the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club is having breakfast at the Hilton Hotel, near the French Quarter. Zulu is the first carnival club, or "krewe," to parade on Fat Tuesday. Its 27 floats roll at 8:30.

Several hundred people sit at cloth-covered tables eating sausages and grits. Many have already put on Zulu's traditional costume: grass skirts, nappy polyester Afro wigs, and blackface, with white circles around the mouth and eyes. An African American man, his face painted, his hair a fake 'fro, takes a bite of a corn muffin and turns to a white man, who is wearing the same blackface and hairdo.

"I'm sorry to say this, brother, but you look better *black* than you do *white*."

"Yeah, you right."  
To judge from their getup—a vaudevilian's racist idea of tribal warriors—and to listen to the wisecracks in the room, there are two purposes of the Social Aid and Pleasure Club: (1) To have fun, and (2) To make havoc with race.

When breakfast adjourns, Zulu and its "king," elected to reign for the day, will climb aboard their floats and ride through the black neighborhoods along Jackson Avenue, then turn down moss-shrouded St. Charles Avenue to rumble through the precincts of the old white elite. They will toss plastic spears, rubber alligators, and gold-painted coconuts to swarming crowds, who will scream and trample each other for these and other dubious favors.

Johnny Jackson, District E councilman on the New Orleans City Council, walks into the room. Jackson is a man much on the minds of New Orleanians. In December 1991, with Councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor, Jackson coauthored MCS 14984, better known as the Mardi Gras Anti-Discrimination Law. The ordinance prohibits race and sex discrimination in Mardi Gras by refusing a parade permit to krewes with exclusive admissions policies.

There are just under 60 Mardi Gras krewes. With few exceptions—one of them being Zulu—the clubs that sponsor Mardi Gras have been race and gender segregated ever since the oldest one, the Mystic Krewe of Comus, was founded in 1856, by a fraternity of rich whites who liked to deck themselves out as King Henry VIII.

When the ordinance came down, a few weeks before last year's Carnival, it raised hell in this moldering old corner of the Deep South, where segregation is a tradition as firmly in place as the slave quarters still appended to the backs of some of the older mansions.

Jackson takes a seat. A member of Zulu for five years, he is here to be made-up and don his grass skirt. A woman in a red blouse comes over and begins to apply blackface to Jackson's cheeks.

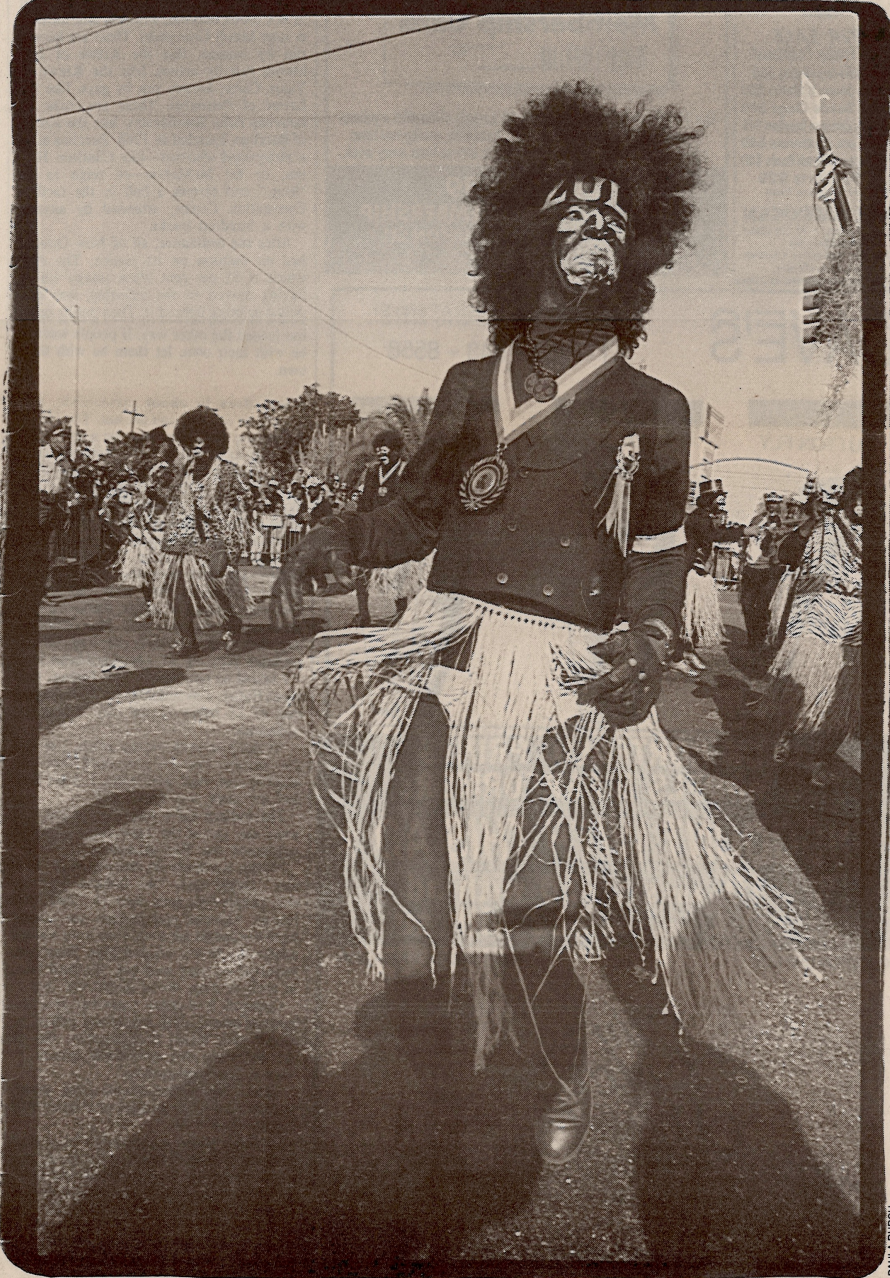
"Our float today is truly the rainbow float," he brags. "We have women, we have men. We have whites, blacks, and Asian Americans."

Zulu, founded in 1909, is the most permeable of the krewes. It has 375 members; about one in 20 are white. There are no women, but members say they will be admitted next year. Anyone can ride in the parade and mask after paying a membership fee.

"Most of the opposition to the ordinance comes from the old-line krewes," Jackson adds. "If I could sit in on their lunch meetings, I would tell them what I told them at the Council hearings: 'Gentlemen, and this too will pass. Let's move on.'" The make-up warrior presses a wig down on Jackson's head. He's ready to ride.

**The oldest Carnival** krewes are living archaisms: Comus, the Krewe of Proteus, the Knights of Momus, and the Rex Organization, all date from the 19th century. They were created by the former slave-owning class and its post-Civil War epigones. The krewes' function was to link private, dyspeptic "society" affairs—the presentation

# A MARDI GRAS OF ONE'S OWN



## BY EDWARD BALL

of debutantes at masked Carnival balls—to ludicrous public display, a debauched street parade. Out of them grew Mardi Gras in its modern form.

Following MCS 14984, three of the krewes withdrew their parades from Carnival rather than admit blacks and women. The 122-year-old Rex Organization capitulated, and announced that it had accepted "a number of persons from many walks of life and different backgrounds." Translation: They inducted two black men. When the three white krewes again dropped out of Mardi Gras this year, they issued a joint proclamation explaining themselves. It was written in fake-classical rhetoric and began: "We, cousins, God of the Sea, God of Laughter and Ridicule, the son of the Goddess Night, and the Sorcerer, born of Bacchus and Circe, greet you this Shrovetide. By this Proclamation we command the Krewe of Proteus, the Knights of Momus and the Mystik Krewe of Comus to stay this year their Street Pageants." Though they didn't parade, each held its glittery, gruesome society ball.

It's not as though thousands of the supplicating masses have been clamoring to get in to Comus, Momus, Proteus, and the other tony Mardi Gras clubs. There are krewes run by women, like the Krewe of Isis; krewes run by artists, like the Krewe of Vieux Carre; krewes run by gays, like the Krewe of Petronius. There are clubs for nouveau riche Southerners, like the Krewe of Bacchus, founded in 1968. Bacchus hires a Hollywood also-ran—like Charlton Heston, or Ed McMahon—to reign as its "king," and throws a ball in the tactless Convention Center, attended by anyone with a hundred bucks.

After the ordinance, all of New Orleans had an opinion on its justice. The city, which is 55 per cent black (many whites having moved to the suburbs), was first polled as being behind it. Then public opinion turned the other way: If people want to be with their own, let them be with their own.

**Mardi Gras is about masquerade,** pretending to be what you are not. The idea is to become the other, just for a day. Zulu pretends to be jungle tribesmen; old white money makes believe it is European royalty. Denizens of the post-civil rights era, like the glitzy revelers of Bacchus, pretend to be a Deep South colony of Hollywood.

Furthest out on the scale of otherness are the Mardi Gras Indians. The Mardi Gras Indians are black men who masquerade as Native Americans. They wear huge feather costumes in green or yellow, decorated with rhinestones, sequins, and lace. Carnival day, they parade on foot, chanting call and response raps out of Afro-Caribbean lore.

I talked to one Mardi Gras Indian, Bertrand Butler, a member of the Black Eagles, one of 17 tribes in the city, about the ordinance.

"It don't concern me too much. I'm into the Indians. I'm not concerned with Rex and the rest. And personally, I think they feel the same way about us."

The Indians came into Mardi Gras 130 years ago, out of the unpaved ghettos of a misnamed era, Reconstruction.

"When the slaves ran away from the masters," Butler said, "the Indians were the only people who took them in. That's one reason. Africans and Indians are almost identical people anyway. They have a witch doctor, we have a voodoo man. They were warriors, we were warriors. We both lived in tents or huts. We're almost the same."

Carnival is a mass crossover into the space of ethnic, class, and sexual difference. That's what makes it redemptive. But on the following day, everybody returns to normal social quarantine.

Three days before Mardi Gras, Butler invited me to the rehearsal of a tribe called Creole Wild West.

At Pop's Place, a corner bar in a black and poor neighborhood, the floor was poured concrete, the walls red, the tables dirty Formica. Today, the floor had been cordoned off for the Indians to dance. Creole Wild West, without their feathers, climbed the stage and started in with con-

gas and tambourines. One by one, the Indians took the floor and strutted, yelling, bar-reling, careening. Somebody let go a lyric, and suddenly 25 men were shouting.

*Han-no han-no han-no  
Oh, my Indian face  
Oh, my Indian race  
Because I love-you love-you love-you  
My Indian race.*

The chant ended and blended into another.

*Hey-an dan dalu wild mamboula!  
Handa wanda o mambo.  
Said uptown rulers and downtown too!  
Handa wanda o mama.*

In an hour the music was over, everybody sweating and panting. I went outside. Earl Lawless, dressed in a crisp blue suit, stood on the sidewalk. He announced that he was 80 years old, then recollected his days as an Indian, 60 years ago. Lawless had once belonged to the Wild Squatoules.

"That was 1929 to 1931. My mama wanted me to be a Zulu, but I didn't want to wear blackface and have white lips. Hell no."

Most Mardi Gras Indians are poorer than Lawless, a retired undertaker whose stock in a busy mortuary keeps him comfortable.

"I wanted to be an Indian, and my mama didn't like it from Dump Street. But it was fine. We would smoke that gage, drink some wine, then march the streets all day. It was fine. Back in those days, white folks like you used to run from us. 'Here come them crazy Indians. Let's get the hell out of here!' Now you run to see us!"

**When I was a teenager** growing up in Metairie, a white suburb of New Orleans, there was a Ku Klux Klan bookstore a few blocks from my house. It was run by a skinny man named David Duke. Duke mainly sold neo-fascist pamphlets, but he also found time to run an organization called the National Association for the Advancement of White People. Later, Duke won a seat in the Louisiana state legislature, where he represented my old neighborhood. Then he ran for governor, and lost. He ran for president and, for the moment, disappeared.

David Duke would not stand a chance circulating in white New Orleans high society. Despite his nostalgia for the days when racial supremacy didn't need to be defended, Duke is too déclassé for all that. He would be regarded by the elites as "white trash." With no family pedigree, a politician who has had a chin implant and an eye-lift, Duke would be ostracized.

Duke's views, however, would not preclude participation in the ballroom circuit. There are no blacks, and no Jews, in the all-male Comus organization. At least, that's what they say; no one outside the krewe, save a few hundred sycophants, is privy to the secret membership rolls. It is "known" the Protestant-only group, at one point, began admitting Catholics, possibly as insurance against degenerative inbreeding in the upper caste. Since the Civil War, there's been progress down here.

One balmy night, I sat in the drawing room of a Victorian house off St. Charles Avenue, with two other white men. Outside, the honeysuckle trees were fragrant in the evening air. The adjacent houses with their porticoes looked like posters in a travel agency. We talked about Carnival, race, and the ordinance. All of us, it turned out, had ancestors who owned plantations and enslaved Africans.

The host brought out a photograph of three young boys, two of them black and in rags, the other white, wearing knee pants. "This is my father, with two of the sharecroppers' boys on the old family estate, near Houma," he said. Houma, Louisiana, was once a center of sugar cane production. The picture was taken in the 1930s. It could have been a hundred years earlier.

As the host put the picture away, he observed, "We're sort of like Germany. We haven't dealt with our demons." I wondered if the word we contained multitudes,

or just the descendants of planters.

The room in which we sat seemed to nurture the history contained in the photograph. Along the walls were shelves of leather-bound books, and original prints by John J. Audubon, of local wildlife. There was a raccoon, two pictures of rabbits, and a skunk. It occurred to me that *coon*, in racist idiom, is a word for black folks, *skunk* a word for their imagined smell.

We talked about our forebears and the men and women they owned. We talked about the money they made, some of which survived as equity in the floorboards beneath us and roof overhead.

Pacing below the chandelier, the man with the picture searched for words, trying to decide whether he had permission to say what he was about to say.

"The real question is, Who are the niggers?" he went ahead. "There are black folks and there are niggers. A true nigger wants to be white. Take Michael Jackson. He bleaches his skin. That's what makes him a nigger."

At this, the walls closed in. The drawing room broke off from its foundations and floated into a twilight world where the clocks were running in reverse. Soon it was 1890, and a moment after that, 1830. But finally it was the 1990s, when the other provokes envy, fear, and resentment. It was clear, slavery is our parent, and we are still in adolescence.

**Louisiana's is a complex racism,** a multidimensional racism as layered as the superabundant silts of the Mississippi Delta. Its colors are not only black and white, they're more like a photographer's gray scale. Think of the "quadroons." Until the late 19th century, an elaborate, legislated code of color gradations ruled the lives of Africans brought here. One of the most perverse pre-Civil War Mardi Gras traditions, regulated by the city, were the "quadroon balls."

At the balls, the men were white and masked. The unmasked women, the quadroons, were the daughters of "freed persons of color." Their fathers and grandfathers were white. In antebellum eugenics, quadroons, raised to be concubines, were said to be "one-quarter black."

A separate class of light-skinned blacks, "creoles," grew out of the quadroon balls and the offspring that issued from them. (The word "creole" also refers to some whites, those descended from early French settlers.) After the Civil War, creoles of color began to imitate white high rituals, with debutantes, masked balls, and courtly dances.

A self-segregating African American society survives from this period. They are light-skinned, well-off, and for the most part, oppose the Anti-Discrimination Law. They have their own culture, they say, and it works just fine.

J. Harold Boucree is a longtime member of the Original Illinois Club. The Illinois Club appeared in 1894 as a creole answer to white rituals. I spoke to Boucree about the activities of his club, with a mere 41 men.

"The purpose of the Original Illinois Club is the presentation of debutantes, which takes place at our annual ball. This year we hosted some 800 guests.

"We appoint monarchs, who are attired in gowns, high collars, and other raiment, and who carry scepters. There is an entertainment at the ball that carries out a theme chosen for the year. This season the theme was 'Carnival in Rio.' A dance group did samba dances to entertain the court of the monarch, after which the orchestra struck up the strains of the Chicago Glide, which is a dance unique to our club. It was performed by the debutantes and their escorts."

The Original Illinois Club is a deep New Orleans subculture, hard to imagine anywhere else. It was also the originator of the "paper bag test." The paper bag test once gauged one's suitability for creole society. It worked like this. You held a paper bag up to your skin. If you were the same color or lighter, you passed. If you were darker than the bag, you didn't belong, and your Mardi

Gras would have to be found elsewhere.

**Last week a federal court** in New York upheld the right of the Ancient Order of Hibernians to dictate who will march in the St. Patrick's Day parade, an event the Hibernians have controlled for 140 years. The Irish club has been trying to ban gay marchers since 1991. The Hibernians claim that because they are a private, nonprofit organization, they are exempt from regulation, based on the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of assembly. The state's case was tied to the Fourteenth Amendment, which bars discrimination based on "race, creed, and color."

But there is another, higher ruling already on the books.

In June 1988, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a 1984 New York City law prohibiting discrimination in private clubs where business is conducted. A test was established. Any club with more than 400 members, that served regular meals, had to comply. Following the decision, the New York Racquet Club, the Knickerbocker Club, and the Brook Club banned briefcases and business cards under their roofs. Their membership remains as homogenous as ever. But the old Century Club on West 43rd Street capitulated, admitting 20 women.

MCS 14984 was based on the Supreme Court precedent. But New Orleans attorney Kevin Schoenberger, who has filed suit to overturn the ordinance, sees no parallel.

"The Century Club analogy is no good, because krewes are not business organizations," Schoenberger speculates. "They are formed for the purpose of parading, creating a spectacle."

As one journalist remarked, on the matter of businessmen's fraternity, "If you belong to a krewe, you get on a float, drink a lot, throw some beads, then get off and go to a party. Now, if that's a commercial strategy, then you better apply for Chapter 11 right away, because you won't be in business very long."

"The hypocrisy of this thing is such that they exempted organizations with less than 75 people," Schoenberger says. "That means a lot of small, especially black clubs, don't have to comply. I'm speaking of the Original Illinois Club, and others like it."

**When the Mystik Krewe** of Comus was established in 1856, the secretive Masons' societies were at their peak, and Comus modeled itself after a Masonic lodge. Unlike other krewes, the Mystik Krewe does not announce its debutantes, or the names of its king and queen. An air of paranoia and conspiracy swirls around Comus like bad gas.

The ideological twin of Comus is Rex. Rex's new "openness" is purely token, an appeasement, something like the House of Windsor agreeing to pay taxes on the Royal income.

The Rex charade begins the Monday before Carnival, when the king and his "lieutenants" arrive by boat from the Mississippi to a dock at the edge of the French Quarter. This year, for the first time, the king of Zulu also arrived at the river, a discreet 300 yards and one hour set apart from the Rex disembarkment.

The cultural difference between the two events was pronounced. Zulu arrived with a jazz band, to dancing and shoving. When Rex disembarked, there was a stilted ceremony on a stage. I caught the Mayor of New Orleans, Sidney Barthelemy, at the Rex wharf.

Barthelemy is a creole who could pass the paper bag test. I asked him if Rex and the king of Zulu were going to meet. "No, not this year," he said decorously. "Maybe in a few years we can work toward that."

With Zulu in the wings, Rex's supremacy is fading. I imagined the two tribes meeting, and the idea seemed ludicrous.

Rex stepped up onto his stage, wearing white and gold courtly attire, a cape, and a long blond wig. He greeted his subjects in the stilted manner to which they've become accustomed.

"We have traveled a great distance, but it is always worth it to come back to our

domain. We declare that tomorrow will be a holiday. We require that all citizens mass, and we encourage the wearing of costumes to the maximum extent possible."

**It's Mardi Gras morning**, and the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of assembly and freedom from discrimination seem impossibly recon-dite. Carnival is about over-assembly and the inability to make discriminations.

A city bus full of police rides by on a downtown street; the destination sign over the windshield reads, "It's Carnival Time!" A block away, at the Saenger Theatre on Canal Street, the marquee announces a new play, "God Took Time Out to Color Me."

The French Quarter is white Mardi Gras, tourist Mardi Gras, and gay Mardi Gras. Here are people decked out as Scarlett O'Hara, Batman, cheerleaders, washing machines, paramours, butterflies, Vegas showgirls, leather cowboys, Vikings, dominatrices, Elvis stamps, cave men, Carmen Miranda, and other fixtures of the white imagination. Drag queens are everywhere. In the river of masked bodies, the race issue disappears, replaced by gender confusion. Two fat men in shimmering gowns are chatting up a couple of boys in shorts. "Okay," says one in sequins, "show us your beads." The boys drop their pants. "Oh, teeth marks. That's worth at least one bead," says the drag queen. She gives the boy a necklace.

Down another street, a black man is selling beads from a card table. The ordinance is on his mind.

"The older krewes think they're bullet-proof," says the bead-seller, Jalil. "They are not willing to recognize that it's a new day, that things have to change. You see what happened in South Africa, you see what happened in the USSR. It could happen here too, unless changes are made."

I buy some long white beads. "The old game of black folks and white folks each doing their thing doesn't work in a public event," says Jalil. "People come from the other side of the world for Mardi Gras. Even if you are a private club, this is a public event. When the whole world is coming to your city for entertainment, then you shouldn't say, 'You can't help me entertain them, because you're not about what I'm about.'"

In principle, Jalil is right. But in practice, Carnival means different things to different folks.

In a town called Mamou, three hours from here, there's a Cajun Mardi Gras ritual reminiscent of some medieval rite. In the morning, the Mamou menfolk start drinking, then set out on their horses to collect chickens. They ride from house to house in the countryside, looking for chicken coops. At each stop, the men do a dance. If the owner of the coop likes it, the riders are given the opportunity to run after chickens in the yard. They catch one, then wring its neck on the spot.

It goes like that from house to house until the riders have a bag full of birds. Then, the Mamouians return to the town square, where the women have been cooking up a broth in giant pots. The women pluck and clean the chickens, add them to the pot, and make a gumbo for the whole town.

Carnival is different for different folks.

**It's 9:30 at Municipal Auditorium**, scene of the Rex and Comus balls. I remember the question of a friend in New York, "You're going to the racist, anti-Semitic balls?" Yes, those. The two affairs go on simultaneously, mirror images of one another, separated by a wall down the middle of the auditorium. Their mutual presence reinforces palsied traditions.

In the Rex ballroom, the decor is *Ben-Hur* classical. At one end stands a stage flanked by two huge gold shields, the Rex coat of arms, emblazoned with a motto—Pro Bono Publico—For the Public Good. Long drapes descend from the ceiling and flare out, surrounding a throne. Giant gold candelabras stand nearby. Two fountains jut out onto the dance floor amid beds of yellow chrysanthemums.

At their heart, society balls are about the

exhibition of young women to prospective mates. The idea that a black man might enter that circuit of exchange may be only one reason why the white krewes are holding fast to their ceremony, but it's a very big reason.

I look around the room. There are about 800 guests. With some difficulty I locate several black faces. About 15 African Americans stand in a cluster, friends and family of the two new members.

The orchestra strikes up a march, and the king of Rex processes into the room, a 20-foot train of fake ermine dragging behind him, a rhinestone scepter in his hand. The queen processes next. She is about 21 compared to the king's 55 years. Six Rex lieutenants make an entrance to more music and applause. They are wearing knockoffs of 16th-century courtly attire. Over their faces they wear a mask, a satin drape that reaches from the forehead to below the chin, with two eye-holes. It is not unlike those worn by Grand Wizards in the Klan.

At 10:30, a masked lieutenant arrives from Comus carrying a parchment invitation, which he presents to the king. Rex accepts, and departs the ballroom. Within 15 minutes, most of the Rex party follows the king into the *sanctum sanctorum* of whiteness that awaits them next door. When the two monarchs meet, Mardi Gras 1993 will achieve a kind of stultifying climax.

A handwritten invitation is required to pass from the first ball into the second. I feel the anticipation of entering a forbidden place. At Comus, the decor is similarly Roman. The king is wearing gold and white costume, breeches, a long train, and a blond wig. But there's something different. A moribund feeling is in the air. People's manners and movements are more tightly restrained. The pageantry is conducted with desultory accuracy.

What is menacing about secret societies? What is the ether that flows through, say, Yale's Skull and Bones? I look high and low for some sign that this is an unduplicable event. But there is nothing here but a bunch of papier-mâché props, a few polyester drag outfits, and a couple of doormen to shoo people away. The Comus bigots even go to the bathroom.

What is unduplicable is the fact that there is only one African American in the room, a woman operating a spotlight from the balcony; the Rex contingent never made it. If there is any place in the United States where actual slave-period airs live on, 128 years after Emancipation, this is it. I talk to a reveler about the desegregation law.

"Oh, all they want to do is tear things down. Black people have their own society. We have ours. Why destroy this one?"

"Because it reinforces racism."

"It doesn't. This is about ceremony, tradition. It's not about race."

"What's your name?"

"I'd rather not say."

**In 1791, a report** to the Louisiana colonial government warned that a dangerous situation existed during Mardi Gras, because people were mixing:

"People of color, both free and slaves, are taking advantage of carnival, [they are] going about disguised, mingling with the carnival throngs in the streets, seeking entrance to the masquerade balls, and threatening the public peace." The government ordered nonwhites to stop covering their faces, so their identity could be known.

If Carnival happened every day, race would be a mask. It could be put on and taken off at will, until finally it felt no heavier than paint. The masquerade would be an answer to the quarantine. You could leave your own for a time.

Face paint is the only way that anybody has found around here of bringing people together. It's a way of dealing with the other when you don't really want to.

But no single costume would be nuanced enough to show the full palette of this town. Super-whiteness, half-whiteness, liminal blackness, indigo. Everybody is already masked, and the clocks all run in reverse. ■