

Evelyn Annuß

**Dirty Dragging**

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Evelyn Annuß

## **Dirty Dragging**

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Evelyn Annus has written a definitive, detailed, multi-sited, transnational history of drag. This book offers a sinuous history of performance, race, collective-world-making and unmaking and it uses various national archives to resist any simple equation between drag and subversion. Spectacles of cross-dressing and black-face, she shows, intertwine across several racial regimes confounding the usual separation of these practices and demanding a careful investigation into when and how racial and gender crossing and passing are deployed within toxic nationalism and when and how they become a repudiation of purity and a queer and radical embrace of the inauthentic, the barbaric and the other. *Dirty Dragging* offers startlingly new readings of drag performance and is an instant classic!

Jack Halberstam, Columbia University New York City  
*Wild Things* (2020), *Female Masculinity* (2019) and *The Drag King Book* (1999)

*Dirty Dragging* is a must-read: a highly productive and politically important intervention in queer and gender studies, cultural and theatre studies, and above all in performance studies. *Dirty Dragging* has the potential to shape these disciplines in exemplary ways, because it not only breaks open binary and dualistic perspectives. By focusing on processes of creolization, drag, gender, racialization, and class can be understood as interconnected in new ways.

Isabell Lorey, KHM Köln  
*Democracy in the Political Present: A Queer-Feminist Theory* (2022),  
*Die Regierung des Prekären* (2020) and *Immer Ärger mit dem Subjekt* (2017)

Evelyn Annus thinks across history, geography, and forms of political practice to offer a capacious conception of dragging. The non-linear weft of this work complicates notions of genealogy, origins, and indigeneity.

Zimitri Erasmus, Wits University Johannesburg  
*Race Otherwise* (2017)



*... in memory of*  
Oshosheni Hiveluah (1981—2019)



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Texts emerge via detours, take unpredictable turns—often through chance encounters that offer perspectives at odds to one’s own viewpoint, disrupt the design of one’s research, and make one’s work a collective undertaking. In this sense, many people from very different contexts and at various stages of research and writing contributed to *Dirty Dragging*: reading, discussing, providing infrastructure, making contacts, offering impulses, producing leaps of thought ...

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*Dirty Dragging* is not just an academic matter in a room of one's own. The book also incorporates field research from Cape Town, New Orleans, Gastein, and other places: joined by Oshosheni Hiveluah and Adam Czirak in Cape Town, Malik Iasis in New Orleans, and Wolfgang Struck in Gastein; and also by other friends and family—such as my parents Hanne and Bert Annuß—via phone.

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# Introduction

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*If we take to the heart the fact that we make places, things, and selves, but not under conditions of our own choosing, then it is easier to take the risk of conceiving change as something both short of and longer than a single catastrophic event. Indeed, the chronicles of revolutions all show how persistent small changes, and altogether unexpected consolidations, added up to enough weight, over time and space, to cause a break with the old order.*

Ruth Wilson Gilmore<sup>1</sup>

Some say “drag” has no clear origin, that its etymology remains uncertain.<sup>2</sup> One folk narrative, however, traces the term associated with gender bending back to the stages in early modern, precapitalist Europe, where young male actors in female roles would schlepp the drags of their costumes across the floor.<sup>3</sup> Dragging, then, is tied to conflicting narratives of volatile signification and physical gravitation. Correspondingly, *Dirty Dragging* is about moving or dancing bodies tailing stuff whose genealogy is uncertain—stuff that may entangle. My title extends the conventional understanding of drag as “exaggerated gender display”<sup>4</sup> through a continued metaphor, that is, an allegory of unpredictable, nomadic schlepping. In contrast to the lush stage dragging of the Elizabethan era, this book explores the ambivalence of minor, transgressive modes of making a scene situated in contexts of political violence. It addresses the destructive implications of an ambivalent play with referential excess—emphasizing what becomes uncontrollably entangled and may reemerge elsewhere in altered, contradictory forms.<sup>5</sup> *Dirty*, in this sense, refers less to

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1 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 2007: 242.

2 See Baroni, “Drag,” 2012: 191.

3 On the etymology of hearsay, see Förstemann, *Volksetymologie*, 1852; on the etymology of drag McGlotten, *Dragging*, 2021: 7–8; Senelick, *Changing Room*, 2000: 279. On the recent boom in drag research, see Heller, *Queering Drag*, 2020; Khubchandani, *Decolonize Drag*, 2023; Schrödl and Striewski, *Drag*, 2025; Annufß and Weiner, *Facing Drag*, 2025.

4 Lorber, “Preface,” 2004: xv.

5 For a preliminary discussion, see Annufß, “Dirty,” 2022; “Alienating,” 2023. And, with a different emphasis, see Fischer-Lichte, *Interweaving Performance Cultures*, 2014.

what is represented than to transgressive, collectivizing modes of appearing or making a scene (in German: *Auftrittsformen*).<sup>6</sup>

Against the backdrop of current societal developments, I will reformulate the master trope of queer performativity—of “subversive repetition within signifying practices of gender”<sup>7</sup>—and transpose the study of drag as a transgressive performative practice into other contexts. In recent years, trans studies in particular has already critically revised our understanding of drag. By addressing shifting biopolitical conditions of subjectivation, it has redirected the emphasis from undoing fixed categories to liquefying them—with Jack Halberstam, toward a “politics of transitivity.”<sup>8</sup> However, while drag in this context has been associated primarily with gender bending, my book will also consider various invective modes of making an appearance. It will examine the global history of interwoven and opposing mobilizations of performativity from transversal perspectives.<sup>9</sup> Whether on the street, in carnival, in propaganda, on stage, in academia—*Dirty Dragging* explores mimetic “messiness”<sup>10</sup> to better

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6 On *Auftrittsformen* see Menke and Vogel, *Flucht*, 2018; Vogel and Wild, *Auftreten*, 2014; Vogel, *Aus dem Grund*, 2018; see also Matzke et al., *Auftritte*, 2015; see also the special issues I (co)edited: “Choral Figurations” (*Germanic Review* 98.2, 2023), “Kollektive Auftrittsformen” (*Forum Modernes Theater* 28.1, 2013); “Volksfiguren” (*Maske & Kothurn* 2, 2014).

7 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990: 146, referring to Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1979); on a materialist critique back then, see Annus, “Umbruch,” 1996/“The Butler-Boom,” 1998. Butler herself revised her perspective in her 1999 preface: xxiii; see also “Bodies That Still Matter,” 2021: 191. On the queer gesture of drag, see Heller, *Queering Drag*, 2020: 33; for an example of the “collapsing of a border-line,” see Weiner, *Out of Line*, 2019: 52. On the etymology of “queer,” see *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014; on the corresponding paraphrase of transversal perspectives, see Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1999: 31; Lorey, *Demokratie*, 2021; Democracy, 2022. On the US activist history of the term in the 1990s and its international impact, see Bala and Tellis, *Global Trajectories*, 2015; for a summary of global queer theoretical perspectives, see Laufenberg, *Queere Theorien*, 2022: 209—242; for critique, see Hoad, “Mythology,” 2015.

8 On the concept of trans as a “fleshy insistence of transitivity,” see Halberstam, *Trans\**, 2018: 136. On the replacement of drag by pharmacological transing, see Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 2013, “The Drag King Plan of Action”: 364—380; see also Letter, 2018; Apartment, 2020; “Learning,” 2020. On the trans critique of the binary framing of drag concepts, see from different perspectives Heller, *Queering Drag*, 2020; Stokoe, *Reframing Drag*, 2020; on the critique of critique Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 2006.

9 See Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 2016; Osterhammel, *Verwandlung der Welt*, 2020.

10 Balke, *Mimesis zur Einführung*, 2018: 16.

understand how performative mimesis can provoke both resentful and resistant affects within regimes of divide and rule.

Through close readings of key, related sources, *Dirty Dragging* will thus also engage with contemporary catastrophes: the rise of authoritarian-broligarchic postdemocratic politics, where feigned resentment fuels attacks on “genderism” and globalized migration from below; the dismantling of regulatory infrastructures by the economic-libertarian right; and the emergence of new war regimes that signal global fascization under “predatory disaster capitalism.”<sup>11</sup> Today’s identitarianism is increasingly staged as carnivalesque political spectacle within media attention economies.<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this appropriation of transgressive performativity by the right that indicates the necessity to broaden our historical perspectives—exemplified in relation to what has been called “racialized drag.”<sup>13</sup> Blackface, as “racial impersonation,”<sup>14</sup> needs to be understood within the history of physiognomic racism and colonial hyper-exploitation, as well as through its varied receptions in early globalized visual mass culture. As grotesque-clownish defacement, the black mask becomes a sign of excess. In this sense, it is akin to today’s carnivalesque politics of resentment, while also pointing to the possibility of its reappropriation.

The stages—the areas of making a scene—to which *Dirty Dragging* turns are located at the southern tip of Africa, in the middle of Europe, and in the US South. The book explores how people use creolized performative cultural techniques to resist segregation policies in public spaces, how fascization seeks to banish queer and creolized drag, and how carnivalesque manifestations—whether by fraternal vigilantes, new patriarchal elites, or the subaltern—can be

11 Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 2007. On the current reframing of fascism, see Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 2023. “Antigenderism” and the authoritarian turn of neoliberalism may also complicate previous critiques of homonationalism and pinkwashing; Farris, *In the Name*, 2017; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007. See also Raz Weiner’s current research project *The Pink Wash-Out* (mdw) and his article “On Arab-Masquerades and Necropolitics,” 2025. On the current backlash and its carnivalization, see Annuf, “Affekt und Gefolgschaft,” 2023; “Populismus und Kritik,” 2024; “Notes on Facing Drag,” 2025.

12 On carnivalesque practices of transgression that transcend the temporal limits of carnival, see Godet, “Behind the Masks,” 2020: 3. See also Nyong’o’s distinction between carnival and the commodified carnivalesque of minstrel shows; *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 108.

13 See Lott, “Blackface from Time to Time,” 2025; with reference to Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 2009. Chude-Sokei describes Blackface as “racial cross-dressing” in *The Last “Darky”*, 2006: 38. The figure is “metonymic, not metaphoric … a doppelganger, but one which haunted whiteness, not blackness” (33). On the early link between drag and blackface, see Johnson, “Gender Trumps Race?,” 2009.

14 Gubar, *Racechanges*, 1997: 56.

mobilized.<sup>15</sup> Dirty Dragging thus constellates opposing modes of performance, understood as a mimetic dragging along of social entanglements and cultural techniques. It will show how performative transgressions in public can serve as instruments of collective resistance and assertion but also as tools of Othering, devaluation, terror, or displays of power. Examining performances that range from a staged everyday photo of a drag queen during the forced removals of South African apartheid and its connection to Cape Town's subaltern carnival, to Eva Braun in a man's suit with a blackened face, alpine Perchten parades, the terror masks of the early Ku Klux Klan, and New Orleans's Mardi Gras, Dirty Dragging engages both existential drag scenes and the carnivalesque use of masks as transgressive mimesis.<sup>16</sup> Analyzing contradictory forms of drag in a broader sense, I will show how modes of appearing can be hegemonically or complicitly appropriated, yet also remobilized again and again—perhaps even accumulated by those who practice the art of not being governed like that.<sup>17</sup>

What did the link between drag and blackface mean in the South African Cape carnival of the subaltern during colonialism and apartheid? How, in turn, was this link charged with antisemitism in Nazi Germany? How could the Southern carnival in the United States function both as an instrument of governing and a queer refuge? And how do carnivalesque articulations of colonialism and racism relate to a queer understanding of drag? In this study, I offer close readings of exemplary sources to examine different (post)colonial contexts in which regimes ultimately failed or collapsed but nonetheless continue to produce enduring forms of violence and resistance. The etymological narrative of theatrical “dragging” on early modern European stages and its references to mimetic performances predating the representational aesthetics that developed after Shakespearean theater already gestures toward the era of colonial expansion. The subject of Dirty Dragging is practices of exaggerational appearing that can be read as effects of this expansion. I will analyze related but distinct political contexts of divide and rule, each characterized by specific arbitrary exclusions—contexts that have often been too hastily considered “resolved” and that, in historical studies, tend to be examined separately. When placed in constellation, however, these contexts reveal the transoceanic

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15 On *Cultural Techniques*, see Dünne et al., 2020.

16 On the ambivalence of drag, see Schacht and Underwood, *The Drag Queen Anthology*, 2004: 1–17 (“Introduction”). On the reflexive potential of carnival vis-à-vis gender, see Simões de Araújo, “Carnival, Carnival,” 2023: 201.

17 See Foucault, “What Is Critique,” 1996: 384. On complicity, see Lebovic, “Complicity and Dissent,” 2019.

interplay between creolization and decreolization:<sup>18</sup> apartheid, Nazism, and Jim Crow segregation following the Civil War in the United States and the abolition of systematized enslavement.

Why this particular constellation? The South African apartheid regime (1948–1994), paradigmatic of modern social engineering, was shaped by policies of exclusion and segregation to some extent prefigured in Nazi Germany and the United States; and all three drew on historically overlapping colonial strategies aimed at banning creolization. The South African regime corresponded with simultaneous racist gentrification elsewhere and, as a biopolitical model, anticipated contemporary processes of securitization, hyperexploitation, and forced displacement.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, its complex classification system unsettles the notion of an ever-fixed binary racism. A similar point may be made about German National Socialism (1933–1945), in which antisemitic propaganda and colonial exoticization were intertwined with attacks on early creolized popular culture and the global influence of its US manifestations. Thus, the intricate link between antisemitism, colonial racism, and decreolization becomes legible.<sup>20</sup> Segregation in the United States following the collapse of the plantation system in the 1860s continues to shape perceptions of other

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18 On creolization, see Glissant, *Introduction*, 1996; *Poetics of Relation*, 1997, originally 1990; in the South African context: Erasmus, “Creolization,” 2011; in the European context: Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Tate, *Creolizing Europe*, 2011; in the German-speaking context: Müller and Ueckmann, *Creolization Revisited*, 2013; Jour Fixe Initiative Berlin, *Kreolische Konstellationen*, 2023; as “forced transculturation” in the Anglo-French context: Hall in Enwezor 2003; Stam and Shohat, *Race in Translation*, 2012: 299; in the Francophone context: Vergès, “Creolization and Resistance,” 2015. The relationship between creolization, multidirectional adaptation processes, and modern governmentality is addressed by Crichlow and Northover, *Globalization*, 2009, who criticize the one-sided focus on the plantation system and the corresponding romanticization of the premodern.

19 Gilroy states with regard to South Africa: “The appeal of security and the related appearance of gated and secured residential spaces are two components of this larger change. The proliferation of service work and the reappearance of a caste of servile, insecure, and underpaid domestic laborers, carers, cleaners, deliverers, messengers, attendants, and guards are surely others. The segmentation and casualization of employment, health, and dwelling are the foundations on which these aspects of the privatization and destruction of the civic order have come to rest.” *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 2005, 45.

20 On the German colonial history and the sociocidal deployment of the Schutztruppe in the former German Southwest, today’s Namibia, against the local population, i.e., against Herero, Nama, and San, see Zimmerer and Zeller, *Völkermord*, 2003. On military dragging of the Herero, ambivalently mimicking the Schutztruppe, see Henrichsen and Selmici, *Schwarzkommando*, 1995.

historical and geographical contexts. Yet upon closer inspection, these contexts prove far more complex, as the constellation of the following chapters will show.

In exploring the historical entanglements of performative transgressions, I will draw on heterogeneous sources. These show how the metamorphosis of physical repertoires or masks—dragged along from elsewhere—work as *performative transpositions*.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, they suggest a shift in perspective. This revision of drag aligns with the cultural studies turn from the deconstructive, negative reference to identity in early queer theory to today's focus on situated, “environmental” knowledge (*Umgebungswissen*), the socialization of means of production (*Vergesellschaftung*) and concomitant modes of subjectivation, as well as historically entangled performance practices.<sup>22</sup> The tension between genealogically untraceable practices and the reference to hindered conditions of movement—which shapes my reading of dragging—translates into a perspective on both the specific situatedness of these practices and their global *lignes de fuite*, their lines of flight.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the following historical explorations are dedicated to examining the unpredictable potential of future political modes of relating—of *Beziehungsweisen*, to quote Bini Adamczak—in the face of persistent political violence.<sup>24</sup>

21 Braidotti defines transposition as “cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another ... Central to transpositions is the notion of material embodiment”; *Transpositions*, 2006: 5. On repertoire as embodied knowledge transfer through “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge,” thus in contrast to the “supposedly enduring materials” of the archive, see Taylor, *Archive*, 2003, 19–20.

22 Sprenger speaks of *Umgebungswissen*, “environmental knowledge,” in *Epistemologien des Umgebens*, 2019; however, I refer here with Sánchez Cedillo (*This War*, 2023: 15) to Guattari’s understanding of three intertwined ecologies—environment, social/society, and subjectivation: *Les trois écologies*, 1989/*The Three Ecologies*, 2014. For a feminist discussion of epistemological situatedness, see Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 1988. My perspective is also determined by German-language studies of the theatrical chorus as an accompanying environmental figure and its potential to give space; see Haß, *Kraftfeld Chor*, 2020: 10, 16; “Woher kommt der Chor,” 2012; “Without Beginning or End,” 2023; Kirsch, *Chor-Denken*, 2020; van Eikels, *Die Kunst des Kollektiven*, 2013. For a materialist rereading of environmentality, see Altvater, “Kapital und Anthropozän,” 2017; Darian-Smith, *Global Burning*, 2022; Hörl, “The Environmentalitarian Situation,” 2018; Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 2020; Corona, 2022; Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 2015.

23 On deterritorializing lines of flight, in contrast to genealogical family trees, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 9ff; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 1997: 28.

24 On the term “*Beziehungsweisen*,” see Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 2017.

To do justice to the complexity of this constellation, I will link South African creolization theory—referring to Caribbean discourse—with queer theory. Zimitri Erasmus, for example, interrogates the formation of racial categories in relation to colonial history through a praxeological approach.<sup>25</sup> Her work also resonates with debates on the concept of the nomadic.<sup>26</sup> By engaging with the interfaces of critical theorizations, I aim to bring together perspectives often treated as disparate. Simultaneously building on gender and drag research, this allows for an exploration of the lines of flight between debates on colonialism and antisemitism.

Underlying *Dirty Dragging* is the question of the contemporary relevance of the historical case studies brought in constellation. Functioning as “crisis experiments”<sup>27</sup> through the shifts in setting, I hope that my case studies will produce alienation effects in relation to present-day figures of thought. This may become clear with regard to the concept of apartheid. Today, the term denotes a category of international law, a synonym for institutionally racialized separation.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, it is being applied—particularly in South Africa—to analyses of other political contexts and particularly connected to Israel–Palestine. In German-speaking discourse—where I am primarily situated—however, the term’s usage has become a flashpoint in current debates on the systematic violations of international law through territorial politics and crimes against humanity in Gaza after the Hamas massacre of October 7 in 2023. In this context, criticism of war crimes and forced displacement policies has been repeatedly reframed as antisemitism and instrumentalized by Islamophobic rhetoric from the right, whereas South Africa has characterized

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25 See Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 2001; “Contact Theory,” 2010; “Creolization,” 2011; “Nation,” 2015; *Race Otherwise*, 2017; “Race,” 2018; “Who Was Here First?,” 2020; “Caribbean Critical Thought,” 2025.

26 See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987; Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 2011.

27 See Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology*, 1967.

28 “The crime of apartheid’ means inhumane acts … committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime,” according to the Rome Statute, Article 7h, of the International Criminal Court of 2002, [https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99\\_corr/cstatute.htm](https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm), accessed September 11, 2024. This was preceded by a discussion in the field of international law: by law, apartheid is defined as any institutionalized form of a policy of racial segregation for the oppression of one race by another (“Als Apartheid wird jede institutionalisierte Form einer Politik der Rassentrennung zur Unterdrückung einer Rasse durch eine andere bezeichnet.” Triffterer, *Bestandsaufnahme zum Völkerrecht*, 1995: 191). On Southern US segregation as spatial apartheid, see Regis, “Second Lines,” 1999: 475. Posel, by contrast, criticizes the erosion of the term through such transpositions; see “The Apartheid Project,” 2011.

these war crimes as acts of genocide in its lawsuit before the International Court of Justice.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, decolonial discourse often disregards the sociocidal history of antisemitism, namely, the Nazi policy of industrial annihilation and its afterlife. This is not the subject of my book, but the current tensions between studies of colonial racism and antisemitism constitute part of its political-discursive background—a background marked by growing fault lines that seem to obstruct efforts to collectively and internationally counteract the destructive developments of the present. It is in this sense that the following shifts in terrain and historical perspective are motivated.

*Dirty Dragging* engages in detailed analyses of performative practices in public that negotiate various policies of exclusion and corresponding modes of subjectivation.<sup>30</sup> My references cannot be read merely as “autobiographical”,<sup>31</sup> rather, they are due to a specific theoretical-political positionality. I seek to confront and bring together material from historical and geographical contexts of violence in order to reflect on the viability of analytical categorizations and approaches—considering both their differences and their correspondences. My questions are situated—shaped by the conditions in which I live and work. One could say they are symptomatic, reflecting not only specifically embedded shifts and contradictions within and beyond gender studies—that is, in pressing political debates.<sup>32</sup> However, my concern is not simply an expression of where I come from. Instead, my reading aims to mediate between perspectives

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29 See the Gaza Q&A published by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (<https://www.ecchr.eu/fall/keine-deutschen-waffen-nach-israel/>); Frey, “Gegen Antisemitismus und seine Instrumentalisierung,” <https://www.jacobin.de/artikel/antisemitismus-instrumentalisierung-nahostkonflikt-isreal-palastina>; Ullrich et al., *Was ist Antisemitismus?*, 2024.

30 On the difference between identity and subjectivation, see Braidotti: “Whereas identity is a bounded, ego-indexed habit of fixing and capitalizing on one’s selfhood, subjectivity is a socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and with multilayered social structures.” *Nomadic Theory*, 2011, 4. On self-government as subjectivation, see Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 2008; *On the Government of the Living*, 2014; see also the introduction by Bröckling et al., *Gouvernementalität*, 2000.

31 On the critique of retrospective autobiographical projections, see de Man, *Autobiography as Defacement*, 1979.

32 Addressing German discourse, Wiedemann has called for “understanding the pain of others;” see *Den Schmerz der anderen verstehen*, 2022. See also Bruns’s proposal “to associate different forms of racism as closely connected,” “Antisemitism,” 2022, 47; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009.

developed elsewhere in response to the disturbing global processes of fascism. Working with historical material, then, serves as a means to think beyond local exceptionalisms so as to recall the potential for political alliances.<sup>33</sup>

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Dirty Dragging begins with readings of archival images collected during various research trips to Cape Town, Gastein, and New Orleans, among other places. In this sense, the transposition of drag is both the subject of analysis and an integral part of the research design. The images used are visual finds that have captured particular movement repertoires and often play with the hypervisibilization of alleged deviance.<sup>34</sup> Retrospectively curated, their posthumous reading exposes our distance from the past. The rigidity and muteness of these images illustrate not only the medial difference between performance and photography,<sup>35</sup> but also the chasms between historical materials and contemporary readings, between distinct historical and geographical locations—and, crucially, the possibility of subsequent, differently situated practices of relating. The provenance of some of this primarily photographic material can no longer be traced. Some images depict people whose names and voices have not been archived. Through an analysis of repertoire and situatedness, these images provoke reflection on the contexts dragged along and on their transposition into the constellation I have fashioned—contexts whose foregrounding cannot be explained “autobiographically.” At the same time, the images bear witness to how their afterlife escapes the control of the regimes under which they were created.

In contrast to earlier poststructuralist research on the *allegories of reading*, this book is concerned with the visual afterlife of physical, ephemeral performative modes of appearing.<sup>36</sup> It highlights what Carolyn Dinshaw has described

33 On feminist-materialist critique—exemplified in Casale, “Subjekt,” 2014; Fraser, “Progressive Neoliberalism,” 2016; Klinger, “Troubled Times,” 2014—and the question of alliances, see Gago, *Feminist International*, 2020; Gago et al., 8M *Constelación feminista*, 2018; Lorey, “Von den Kämpfen aus,” 2011; Roldán Mendivil and Sarbo, *Diversität*, 2022; Soiland, “Verhältnisse,” 2012.

34 Where they are necessary for the course of argumentation, injective images are shown and discussed; this implies the danger to enforce Othering; see Axster, *Koloniales Spektakel*, 2014; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 1997: 3; Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit*, 2008. Not showing these images, however, would also mean not analyzing their form and fabricatedness, thus attributing to them a potentiated power. On the historical baggage of collecting and archives, see Azoulay, *Potential History*, 2019.

35 On the “muteness of photography,” see Krauss, *Das Photographische*, 1998: 15.

36 On allegorical temporality and the allegories of reading, see de Man, *Allegories*, 1982.

as the desire to touch across time<sup>37</sup>—a desire that requires a queer, entangled, allegorical understanding of temporality, one that counters linear, genealogical thinking, that is, one that implies what Elizabeth Freeman has called *temporal drag*.<sup>38</sup> The constellation of *Dirty Dragging* also translates this desire to touch across into the spatial realm. It stages the paradoxical presence of movement captured within the still image to gesture toward embodied repertoire and its environments elsewhere. Rather than evoking immediate proximity—such as to my own positionality—the book instead seeks to sketch transoceanic lines of flight in its assembly of images.

*Dirty Dragging* is not chronological; nor does it smooth out the heterogeneity of its material—subject it to one single narrative. Rather, through three chapters that increasingly interweave analytical perspectives, it explores specific performative appearances and their overlapping lines of flight. Each chapter is divided into two complementary parts, titled with actions, emphasizing my praxedological approach, while the structure of the book transposes the ambivalence of what I call dragging into my writing. Both its beginning and its fade-out accentuate unheroic modes of appearing that have sometimes been read as complicit, yet provide a sense of societal relations other than those prevailing. They gesture “towards a scene located elsewhere,” as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon writes of “people out of doors” within a transatlantic colonial world.<sup>39</sup> As we will see, it is precisely these gestures that may offer a way to counter the decreolizing trajectories that continue to shape right-wing discourse today.<sup>40</sup>

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37 On “a desire for bodies to touch across time,” Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 1999: 3; see also Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 2007: 178. With regard to dance as “schlepping the traces of the past,” see Foellmer, “What Remains of the Witness?,” 2017.

38 See Freeman, *Time Binds*, 2010; with different emphases also Boudry and Lorenz, *Temporal Drag*, 2011; Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 2007; Edelman, *No Future*, 2004; Ehrentraut, “Transtemporal Making Out,” 2025; Farrier, “Playing with Time,” 2015; Hacker, “Queere Zeitlichkeit,” 2018, Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 2009, as well as the correspondences to Benjamin’s understanding of history (“Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” 1991, I.2) and Glissant’s notion of carnivalesque temporality; *Poetics of Relation*, 1997: 64; see also the chapter on carnivalizing time in Nyong’o, *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 135–165. On “imperial time” as a countermodel, see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 1995: 10. For a translation into questions of spatiality, see Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 2004; “Queer of Color Critique,” 2015.

39 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 50, 13. On the relational definition of “elsewhere,” see Plath, *Hier und anderswo*, 2017: 520.

40 Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 2014: 195; accentuating physical appearance: 175.

Dirty Dragging begins where colonial histories overlap, examining their afterlife in the context of apartheid at the South African Cape (I. Apartheid). The first chapter elaborates on the theoretical potential of a photograph depicting a danced drag scene in the former harbor area of the Cape, intertwining reflections on queering and creolization. It reads dragging as a minor, dirty, mimetic mode of making an appearance—one that resists subjecting the moving body to the individualizing logic of representation.<sup>41</sup> Instead, it draws attention to the—also theoretical—potential of dragging as a practice that remains cognizant of the political and historical context it drags along, thereby challenging the apartheid regime's territorial claims of separation. As the chapter will show, this scene extends from drag in the narrower sense to related scenes elsewhere: it also alludes to a specific “indigenizing” use of blackface.<sup>42</sup> This practice translates global mass culture of the time into carnival and thereby exposes an overlap of differing colonial histories. Accordingly, this chapter expands the concept of drag beyond its dimensions within a politics of gender. Drawing on South African contributions to the current creolization debate—contributions often overlooked in the Global North—it also resists the tendency to merely “apply” queer or decolonial theories especially from the United States to the formerly so-called periphery. Rather, the chapter on South Africa serves as the foundation for the subsequent readings, “creolizing” the perspective on dragging under Nazism and Jim Crow.

The second chapter explores an invective flipside of creolized performative practices discussed so far: the devaluing defacements associated with fascist identitarianism (II. Nazism). I examine images that fabricate and effeminate “the Other” through (dis)figuration—in drag, in blackface—and operate via antisemantically charged equivalential chains of alleged dirtiness. The chapter then highlights the distinction between the Nazis’ attack on globalized mass culture and their exoticizing, colonial-racist spectacles. It finally underscores the contradictory preconditions of the *männerbündian* fiction of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or, national community, as seen in mass stagings and genealogical academic fabulations. My second chapter thus investigates National Socialist constructions of both the alien and the self against the backdrop of

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41 On “minor mimesis” (mindere Mimesis), see Balke, “Ähnlichkeit und Entstellung,” 2015; *Mimesis*, 2018; with Linseisen, *Mimesis Expanded*, 2022. On the excessive dimension of the mimetic, see already Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 2007: 333–336/“Über das mimetische Vermögen,” II.1, 1991: 210–213; see also “Doctrine of the Similar (1933),” 1979: 65–69/“Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” II.1, 1991: 204–210.

42 On the concept of indigenization as local appropriation, referring to Sylvia Wynter, see Erasmus, “Caribbean Critical Thought,” 2025; on critiquing ideologies of indigeneity, “Who Was Here First?,” 2020. See also Geschiere, *Perils of Belonging*, 2009.

an already creolized mass culture.<sup>43</sup> Here, the pitfalls of essentialist claims that persist today, though in different contexts, become apparent—such as invocations of ancestral kinship or rootedness in the soil. At the same time, the chapter points to previously underexamined potentials for alliances and corresponding cultural techniques developed by those confronted with forced migration or marked as uprooted, as having no origin.

Finally, the third chapter interweaves an analysis of terrorist, governmental, and also subaltern modes of appearing that subvert prevailing segregation (III. Jim Crow). The chapter brings together the contrasting mobilizations of the performative that are explored in the first two chapters from opposing perspectives. Examining the relationship between irregular violence, hegemonic politics, and the carnivalesque, it addresses opposing masked Southern mobs in drag and the transoceanic entanglements their appearances entrain.<sup>44</sup> These include marauding vigilantes, high societies spectacularly occupying public space in elite carnivals, and loose crowds dancing through the back streets in the creolized Mardi Gras of New Orleans. As a port city, New Orleans not only connects the US South with the North but also links the United States to the Cape via the Caribbean. Working with diverse historical material, the chapter investigates both transoceanic relations and the contemporary relevance of the carnivalesque, engaging with the political present and its media assemblages.<sup>45</sup> I will increasingly interweave the material discussed in previous chapters, making drag legible in its ambivalence and potentiality and thereby introducing previously unexpected diachronic and synchronic lines of flight.

Decidedly without providing a summarizing closure, the book is dedicated to conflicting forms of dirty dragging within the history of terror and control, calling forth the potential joy of other ways of relating—including those that extend beyond one's local context. This temporary, hydra-like performing (an) otherwise, as Saidiya Hartman puts it elsewhere, continually restages the performative turn against hegemonic societal structures.<sup>46</sup> Demonstrating a

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43 The chapter brings together my previously separate works on Nazism and postcolonial visual politics; see, for example, Annus, *Stagings*, 2009; “Afterlives,” 2011; “Für immer,” 2011; *Volksschule*, 2019.

44 Mob—in German “Meute,” borrowed from the French “meute”—describes a moving, disorderly gathering; on the figure as a form of shared excitement, see Canetti, *Masse und Macht*, 1980: 99, 101/Crowds and Power, 1973. On the rhizomatic nature of mobs and their contagious power, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987.

45 On assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987) as a paraphrase of “dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks”—referring to queer theory—see also Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007: 211.

46 “Waywardness ... is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is the lived experience of enclo-

nonidentitarian, contagious knowledge of all kinds of “oddkinships,”<sup>47</sup> it drags along nongenealogical *Beziehungsweisen* and contributes to the possibility of future, previously unimaginable, multidirectional ways of relating to another—ways of relating that could make societal conditions not of our own choosing dance across time and space.

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sure and segregation, assembling and huddling together.” Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 227–228. On the corresponding metaphor, see Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017. On the lumpenatlantic, many-headed hydra, the constellation of seafarers, see Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000: 353.

47 On oddkinships—meaning irregular kinships—see Haraway, *Staying*, 2016.



Figure 1: Kewpie, District Six, near Invery Place, Cape Town, late 1960s. Kewpie Collection, GALA Queer Archive, Johannesburg, South Africa (AM2886/127).

## I. Apartheid

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### Queering

The undated black-and-white photograph captures a drag queen dancing amid the ruins of a destroyed house. Presumably taken in the late 1960s, this queer street scene in rubble can be read as a visual message in a bottle<sup>48</sup>—an offbeat, queer response to destruction. Seen from the side, with their head turned toward the camera, the dancer merges ballet with a revue-style pose. Clad in a kind of negligee, their face is turned toward the camera, mouth open like a playmate's—perhaps mid-shout. Their gender-bending performance amalgamates different movement repertoires and plays with referential excess.<sup>49</sup> The lower body quotes classical European academic dance. The left leg, stretched into the air, references a grand battement, while the right leg is lifted halfway. Yet the movement is staged in ways that can be read as *dirty*: both legs remain parallel, the upper body breaks the ballet pose, the left arm hangs loosely, and the right arm extends upward beyond the edge of the image. The head is thrown back, bending the vertical axis in another direction. This tension between gestural repertoires and heterogeneous movements renders the citation of European stage dance neither affirmative nor deconstructive. Instead, this gestural drag operates as a performative transposition, recontextualizing the repertoire it employs.<sup>50</sup> Here, the traces of what is quoted are not simply reiterated but recycled in a different context—a street scene in drag, one that is bent, queered, so to speak. Yet what is staged as dirty is less the dancer themselves than the “impure” mode of appearance. The image enacts a queering that extends beyond the staging of a deviant figure, opening up an

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48 See Struck, *Flaschenpost*, 2022.

49 On repertoire as mnemonic embodiment see Taylor, *Archive*, 2003; the following deals with nongenealogical forms of embodiment.

50 On “gestural drag,” see Ruprecht, *Gestural Imaginaries*, 2019.

understanding of performing as related to the body's environment<sup>51</sup>—one that draws attention to transversal lines of flight.

In this shot, scattered stones become apparent, while the dancer's arm and head are cropped. The framing clearly gestures beyond merely representing a person in drag; it can be read as a queer negotiation of a body dragging its surrounding along. This dragging is not solely tied to outfit and repertoire—to the tension between gender legibility, bodily image, clothing, and posture. Rather, the image exposes the relationship between the dancing body and its background. On the right and in the center, the scattered stones possess a depth of field that the dancing drag queen's face, their open mouth, does not. The photograph thus makes the reciprocal conditionality of figure and ground its subject. In its reference to the ruins, the image diffracts central perspective, raising questions about the interrelatedness of presence and absence, uplift and gravitational pull, the dancing figure and the rubble lying around.

This reading is reinforced by the strange, anamorphically distorted shadow cast on the wall behind. While the head is no longer recognizable, the wave-like silhouette of the outstretched leg appears to touch another figure standing on the left, seemingly observing the scene but cropped out of it. The visual composition invites to imagine a scene beyond what is depicted. Hence the bending of the movement repertoire translates into diffraction;<sup>52</sup> in doing so, the photograph resists focus, allowing the surrounding environment to come into view. Rather than treating the background as a negligible flipside, I propose considering it as constitutive—as an invitation to think through the societal, historical, and geographical conditions under which this drag scene was staged: a queer appearance in the midst of rubble. Shot in the 1960s, this dirty dancing in a landscape of ruins recalls the terror of apartheid-era forced removals, preceded by the displacement of the Black population in the 1930s, and the takeover of Cape Town's inner city by the white middle class.<sup>53</sup> Snapped in the context of the criminalization of “sexual offenses” and corresponding laws against “disguises,” the image captures an area near the former port.<sup>54</sup> The

51 My take is not neomaterialist, but a materialist understanding of “environmentality”; I am interested in reflexive modes of mimetic transgression that are aware of the specific political conditionality of public appearing. For a critique of new materialism with regard to questions of political agency, see Malm and Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind?,” 2014.

52 See Deuber-Mankowsky, *Praktiken der Illusion*, 2007: 343; “Diffraktion,” 2011: 89, and Schade, “Widerständigkeiten,” 2020.

53 “Cape Town was arguably the most racially integrated city in South Africa.” See Trotter, *Trauma*, 2013: 51.

54 On the Immorality or Sexual Offences Act (1957) and the Prohibition of Disguises 16, i.e., the ban on drag (1969), see Pacey, *Emergence*, 2014: 112. On South African

drag scene has in tow the violent political history from which its environment emerges.

During the colonial period, which began in the mid-sixteenth century, this area was called the *tavern of the seas* and, after the inner-city evictions, *salted earth*. The drag scene reflects the destructive effects of apartheid and the trauma of forced removals from District Six, a neighborhood established in 1867. These removals displaced approximately 60,000 people, making way for white middle-class families in the inner city while driving out residents who did not fit into the bourgeois-colonial-racist family model with its essentialist notions of belonging.<sup>55</sup> In retrospect, this image evokes a layered history of forced migration and violent racist gentrification, along with the expulsion of queers from the city. The lines of flight staged in the image—the continuum between body, shadow, and background—suggest a particular reading of this drag scene embedded in an uninhabitable space. It is as though what is depicted asserts both the right to remain and the right to move around without restriction.<sup>56</sup>

The forced removals exemplify the transformation of colonial violence into securitization. In this light, the photograph also reveals how colonial policies of divide and rule were modernized through urban planning and public health policies. Armed with security and sanitation ideology—prefiguring today's justifications for gentrification—the ruling National Party systematically “cleansed” District Six of supposed dirtiness into the 1980s, dismantling existing social and political relationships. Apartheid also foreshadowed later modes of governmentality, of environmental modifications, when it declared the inner city white-only through the implementation of the 1950 Group Areas Act.<sup>57</sup>

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gender politics, see Hoad, Martin, and Reid, *Sex and Politics in South Africa*, 2005; Carolin, “Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities,” 2021; Lease and Gevisser, *LGBTQI Rights*, 2017. On the history of Cape Town, see Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride*, 1995; James, *Class*, 2017; Worden et al., *Cape Town*, 1998; for an overview on South African history, see Nattrass, *A Short History*, 2017, Ross, R., *A Concise History*, 2008, Hamilton and Ross et al., *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, 2009, 2011, here especially Legassick and R. Ross, “From Slave Economy,” 2009; on the South African history of enslavement Dooling and Worden, “Slavery,” 2017; on the Cape: van de Geijn-Verhoeven et al., *Domestic Interiors*, 2002: 115–137.

55 With Brah, District Six could be read as a diaspora space; see “Diaspora,” 2003: 615.

56 See von Redecker's reformulation of the concept of freedom in *Bleibefreiheit*, 2023. On the fundamental right to freedom of circulation, see Balibar, “Toward a Diasporic Citizen?,” 2011.

57 On the environmentality of biopolitics, see Sprenger, *Epistemologien des Umgebens*, 2019. On the social engineering of apartheid, see Adhikari, *Burdened*, 2013. On the history of Nazi reception through apartheid, see Kum'a N'Dumbe, *Nationalsozialismus und Apartheid*, 2006.

Largely undeveloped, the area depicted in the photograph still borders Cape Town's inner city like an open wound, serving as a reminder of destroyed social structures. It also highlights the precarious conditions under which many people continue to live in distant townships, even after the official end of apartheid. The arbitrary classifications of the past continue to shape present-day class relations and, as Premesh Lalu argues, obstruct the emergence of alternative relationships beyond the lingering effects of everyday "petty" apartheid in the so-called Rainbow Nation.<sup>58</sup> This "salted earth," still partly left fallow, bears witness to the afterlife of past governmental violence, recalling the devastation of "grand" apartheid—its arbitrary racialized, gendered, and class-specific divisions, where colonial coercion and purity laws regulating the nuclear family were repurposed as tools of modern social engineering.

The drag scene of someone dancing barefoot in the rubble of their bulldozed neighborhood—later referred to as their "gay vicinity"—was photographed at a time when cross-dressing had been officially banned.<sup>59</sup> The image captures someone making a scene despite the forced removals. Here, the rubble is not merely a striking backdrop; rather, it directs the viewer's attention to the legacy of apartheid.<sup>60</sup> Read thus, the photograph challenges identitarian government policies, exposing their inherent violence. The ruins of District Six are not simply juxtaposed with the quotation of a dance culture imbued with colonial history. This dance posture does not call for the decolonization of movement repertoire but rather "indigenizes" what it quotes—in line with Zimitri Erasmus's paraphrasing of creolized appropriations, which references Sylvia Wynter.<sup>61</sup> In front of a camera playing with shadows in the rubble, someone performs a claim to fluidity amid destruction and segregation, asserting the interweaving of different movement techniques.

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58 See Lalu, *Undoing Apartheid*, 2022: 46. For a critique of the afterlife of apartheid classifications, even in their critical usage, see Erasmus, "Apartheid Race Categories," 2012.

59 Corrigall and Marsden 2020 (on the "conjunction of pose and location": 24; on the anchoring of drag in everyday life in 1960s Cape Town: 16).

60 This understanding of violence is situated and goes beyond the metaphorical extension of the term as exemplified in Barad's talk of an "apartheid type of difference." See Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 2020.

61 See Erasmus, "Caribbean Critical Thought," 2025. On the concept of decolonization, see, for example, Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 2021; for a critique of the current metaphorical use of the term, see Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 2012; for a fundamental critique of decolonial discourse, see Táíwò, *Against Decolonization*, 2022.



Figure 2: Mogamat Kafunta Benjamin, indicating “salted earth,” District Six, Cape Town, 2019. Photo: Evelyn Annus.

In this sense, the image also undermines notions of the self-determined representation of one’s standpoint.<sup>62</sup> The camera does not focus on a “spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone”<sup>63</sup>—the paradigmatic scene of queer

62 For a critique of simplified notions of positionality and corresponding standpoint theories, see the thematic issue “Left of Queer,” *Social Text* 3, no. 4, 2005, edited by David Eng and Jasbir Puar.

63 In distinction from “mainstream representations,” see Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1999, 3.

deconstruction that José Esteban Muñoz describes in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. This “dirty dancing” is not primarily about representing oneself differently than the apartheid police would allow at the southern tip of the African continent; rather, it drags along the memory of material destruction, the erasure of already existing collective living conditions of all kinds of people. The photograph interweaves the *gestus* of “this has been” with an embodied gesture of defiance.<sup>64</sup> This danced critique of governmental classification thus moves beyond (counter)representation and (dis)identification.

### **Collecting (Kewpie)**

In *What Is Slavery to Me?*, Pumla Dineo Gqola calls for an approach that does not just subject South Africa to theoretical perspectives developed in the Global North.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, reading this dragging photo is about more than building a bridge “between Western queer theory and South African articulations of gender identity and alternative sexualities.”<sup>66</sup> What if a different episteme could be ascribed to this specifically situated image—one that could also be used elsewhere in the present? What if current demands for queering *drag*, as formulated by Meredith Heller in the context of recent trans studies, could be reperspectivized through this scene’s allegorical relationship to its surroundings?<sup>67</sup> The drag scene outlined here can be read as a practical theory, reflexively bound to its environment—as *Umgebungswissen*—that is useful beyond its specific situatedness. This theory contradicts the violent identitarian thinking which emerged over the course of colonial expansion, lives on in a modernized form in the politics of apartheid, and continues to materialize in contemporary discourse.<sup>68</sup>

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64 On the *gestus* of “this has been,” see Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1981, 79.

65 See Gqola, *Slavery*, 2010: 204.

66 Lease, “Dragging Rights,” 2017: 131.

67 See Heller, *Queering Drag*, 2020.

68 In contrast, see Samir Amin on the “right to be similar” (*Specters of Capitalism*, 1998: 42) and related reflections on transculturalization (Ortiz, 1995). On the replacement of similarity by identity and the hypostasis of differences in bourgeois-European culture, see Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 1966, 64. For a critique of postcolonial assertions of alterity and the pitfalls of reversing discourses, see Koschorke, “Ähnlichkeit,” 2015, in Bhatti and Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit*; Kimmich, *Ins Ungefahre*, 2017. On theory that has become practical, see Sonderegger, *Vom Leben der Kritik*, 2019.

As we will see, this drag scene is a site of anti-identitarian assembly, what Julia Prager has called “ver-sammeln.”<sup>69</sup> And this, in turn, resonates with the history of collecting photographs. Especially under apartheid, both street and studio photography were media for bearing political witness.<sup>70</sup> The drag scene described here is a minor photo in the sense of Katrin Köppert following Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>71</sup> emphasizing the political necessity of engaging directly with everyday life and lived environments. It enacts what Ruth Ramsden-Karelse rightly interprets as a visual politics that is less documentary than performative.<sup>72</sup> The image is part of the Kewpie Collection, which comprises over 700 photographs spanning from the 1950s to the 1980s. In 1998—fourteen years before her passing and just a few years after the collapse of the apartheid regime—Kewpie, read today as the drag icon of District Six, sold her photo collection to the GALA Queer Archive in Johannesburg, which had been founded only a year earlier. In doing so, she contributed to a new historiography from below.<sup>73</sup> Clearly aware of the collection’s historical significance, Kewpie, as Malcolm Corrigall and Jenny Marsden note, created the first “explicitly queer personal photographic collection” in South Africa accessible to a wider public.<sup>74</sup> These images would not be available in this way without the fall of apartheid,

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69 On the German term, see Prager, “ver-sammeln,” 2021; in the context of the DFG network *Versammeln: Mediale, räumliche und politische Konstellationen*. <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/426798101?language=de>; accessed September 12, 2024.

70 On the politicality of South African documentary photography during apartheid, see the works of David Goldblatt, Santu Mokofeng, Jürgen Schadeberg, and Peter Ugabane; for an example of the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, see *Camera Austria* 100, 2007.

71 On minor photography as opposed to stigmatizing representations of the Other, see Köppert, *Queer Pain*, 2021: 13, 317; following Deleuze and Guattari on minor literature (*Kafka*, 1986).

72 “Privileging their creative rather than documentary functions,” Ramsden-Karelse points out how these photos were used as “a medium of ‘fantastic’ performance.” See “Moving,” 2020: 410, 427.

73 See GALA: <https://gala.co.za/kewpie-daughter-of-district-six/>, accessed September 24, 2024. On the Kewpie collection, see Corrigall and Marsden, “District Six,” 2020; GALA and District Six Museum, *Kewpie*, 2019; Ramsden-Karelse, *Moving*, 2020, *A Precarious Archive*, 2023. See also Jack Lewis’s *Kewpie* films *A Normal Daughter: The Life and Times of Kewpie of District Six* (2000) and *Dragging at the Roots: The Life and Times of Kewpie of District Six* (1997); see also Lewis and Loots, “Moffies,” 1995. On Kewpie’s popularity, see the coverage in *Drum Magazine* (October 1976) and the *Golden City Post* of June 18, July 9, and September 24, 1967.

74 Corrigall and Marsden, “District Six,” 2020: 11. See also Chetty, “A Drag,” 1995: 123–124.

the end of the Cold War, and the successful fight against anti-LGBTIQ+ laws.<sup>75</sup> Today, the digitally accessible collection has gained supraregional significance—especially in the face of right-wing populist and neocolonial attempts to link antiqueer rhetoric with supposedly decolonial discourses on African indigenous heteronormativity. It is thus far more than personal.

These images have long since migrated online, expanding their reach beyond what could have been anticipated at the time they were taken.<sup>76</sup> In 2018 and 2019, the exhibition *Kewpie: Daughter of District Six*, curated by Jenny Marsden and Tina Smith, was presented by GALA (Johannesburg) in cooperation with the District Six Museum (Cape Town). It situated Kewpie within local history, intertwining references to forced removals and antiqueer politics. Kewpie's image collection is diverse, ranging from private photographs to various studio shots that circulated locally as early as the 1950s and 1960s. The portraits from the Van Kalker Studio, for example—glamorous images of drag icons of the time—were exchanged among the community. Many of the drag queens depicted took on the names of famous Hollywood actresses, such as Doris Day, using transoceanic mass cultural references to overemphasize white US femininity and perform a queer otherwise against the backdrop of apartheid.<sup>77</sup>

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75 On colonial homophobia, see Carolin, "Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities," 2021: 9. Today's neocolonial efforts to implement antiqueer, petty-bourgeois family images through an alliance of the US religious right and Russian investors, under the umbrella of the World Congress of Families on the African continent, and to frame colonial sodomy laws as "decolonial." See Kalm and Meeuwisse, "Transcalar Activism," 2023; Stoeckl, "Russian Christian Right," 2020; Butler, *Who's Afraid*, 2024 (Chapter 1, "The Global Scene"). For an overview of the increasingly draconian antisodomy laws, especially in Uganda and Nigeria, see the Amnesty International 2024 report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr01/7533/2024/en/>, accessed September 5, 2024.

76 See most recently Ramsden-Karelse, *Salon Kewpie*, 2024; [https://www.instagram.com/kewpie\\_legacy/](https://www.instagram.com/kewpie_legacy/); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOGhOxK9740](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOGhOxK9740); <https://gala.co.za/salon-kewpie/>, accessed September 22, 2024.

77 On the Van Kalker Studio, from 1937 in the Woodstock district, see Corrigall and Marsden, *District Six*, 2020: 19. The Studio Collection can be found in the District Six Museum and brings together a range of staged self-portraits: <https://www.districtsix.co.za/project/chamber-of-dreams-photographs-of-the-van-kalker-studio/>, accessed September 11, 2024. On the diverse history of African studio photography, see Behrend and Wendl, *Snap me one!*, 1998. On the alternative historiography of studio portraits and the "democratization of the portrait"—here in the Caribbean-British context—see Hall, "Reconstruction Work," 2024 (originally published 1984): 242.

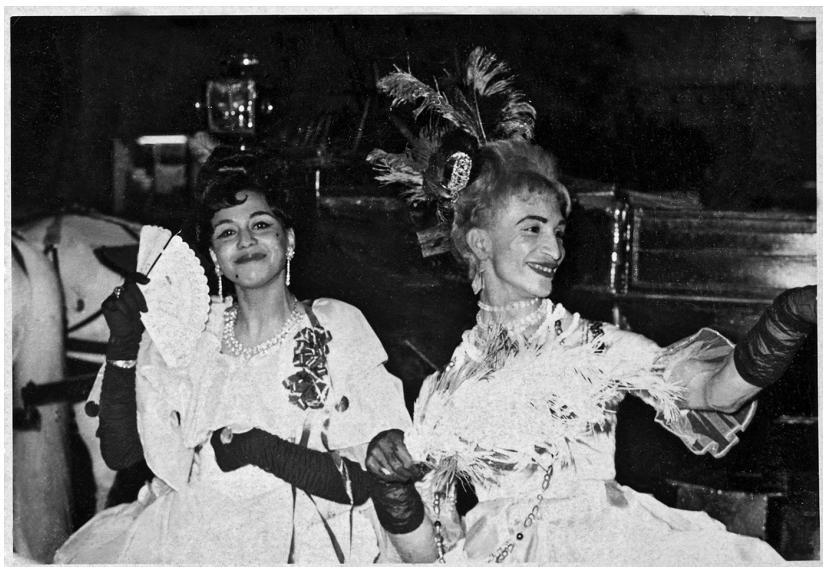


Figure 3: Kewpie and Sodia (l.), Marie Antoinette Ball, Ambassador Club, Cape Town, Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town, 1967. Kewpie Collection, GALA Queer Archive, Johannesburg, South Africa (AM2886/81.3).

Kewpie, born Eugene Fritz in 1941 and performing under the name Capucine in spectacular ballroom and *moffie konsert* appearances, also referenced a brand name: that of a white baby doll with blue eyes and a shock of blonde hair, originally produced in Germany for the global market. The doll had an earlier life as a comic character drawn by Rose O'Neill in the 1910s to illustrate feminist claims and has been used as the logo for an internationally marketed Japanese mayonnaise brand from 1925 to the present day. In Cape Town, the name was presumably associated primarily with contemporary Kewpie Doll songs of US pop music. The overt amalgamation of different contexts in Kewpie's living quotation of a doll paralleled her spectacular appearances, as seen in ballroom photographs such as one showing Kewpie and her friend Sodia in a carriage outside the Ambassador Club. Ramsden-Karelse interprets these images as expressions of survival strategies, as anticipations of freedom of movement beyond the restrictions imposed by precarious living conditions in Kewpie's immediate surroundings.<sup>78</sup> These were "performances of an elsewhere," or rather "of an imagined global,"<sup>79</sup> that were also about collectively redefining one's own use value.

78 See Ramsden-Karelse, "Moving," 2020.

79 Ramsden-Karelse, "Moving," 2020: 412, 414.

However, the street portraits—often taken without permission by the Movie Snaps Studio and sold on demand, later appearing in Kewpie's collection—also bear witness to public opposition to contemporary politics.<sup>80</sup> They show that queers like Kewpie remained part of street life in District Six during apartheid. Moreover, the numerous other images in the collection make it clear that both sexist and racist regulations were not entirely enforceable in parts of Cape Town's inner city, even at the time.<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the redefinition of one's value aimed at the collective negotiation of societal conditions.

Now circulating globally, these images generate new readings, while their provenance become increasingly difficult to trace. Initially collected in albums or displayed as mementos in Kewpie's hairdressing salon in Kensington—a queer refuge—they appear to have been reorganized before being sold. The traces of use suggest their social and (semi)public historiographical function. Corrigall and Marsden, drawing on bell hooks, place them within the context of a collective “non-institutionalized curatorial process,”<sup>82</sup> a countercultural practice of collecting.

In 1998, against the backdrop of apartheid's collapse, Kewpie provided GALA with additional handwritten captions, some of which are contradictory. The collection illustrates the way the supposedly private spills into the public sphere. It also reflects the unconcern of those involved with claims to authorship or a singular narrative. Even in how they were captured, these images were a collective matter. They do not merely state: *just because this has been, it doesn't have to stay this way*; rather, they stage this otherwise as a joint effort—ultimately recalling that apartheid's eventual collapse was collectively enforced locally while also being supported worldwide.

Accordingly, the image taken here as a starting point belongs to a larger series depicting a queer posse posing in a demolished area—a posse that contradicts racist and sexist binaries. One photo in this series shows Kewpie with several others, including her friend Brigitte, who also appears cropped at

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80 See the project *Movie Snaps. Cape Town Remembers Differently* at the Centre for Curating the Archive of the University of Cape Town, <http://www.cca.uct.ac.za/cca/projects/movie-snaps-cape-town-remembers-differently/>. Some of the images have been recolored. On the intermedial play with photography and painting, which Foucault describes as androgynous, see “Photogenic Painting”/“La peinture photogénique,” 1999: 81–108, on 82; also Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie*, 2006: 360.

81 The bikini shots on the segregated beach indicate that public gender bending in Cape Town may have been less sanctioned than crossing the apartheid color line; see Corrigall and Marsden, *District Six*, 2020: 16.

82 hooks, “In Our Glory,” 1995: 59–61; cited in Corrigall and Marsden, “District Six,” 2020: 26.

the edge of the scene described above. A retrospective caption from the late 1990s reads: “The Sea Point girls used to frequent the Queen’s Hotel where we stayed at Invery Place.”<sup>83</sup> Kewpie’s caption explicitly connects the photograph to the destruction of her neighborhood by apartheid’s urban planning policies, addressing future viewers. In the group photo, six people laugh into the camera. Once again, the background exposes the area where Kewpie had lived in her house, the “Queen’s Hotel,” before the removals.



Figure 4: Kewpie and the Seapoint girls, District Six, near Invery Place, Cape Town, late 1960s. Kewpie Collection, GALA Queer Archive, Johannesburg, South Africa (AM2886/116.4).

The cropping and motion blur give this series of images—whose photographer remains unknown—the appearance of private snapshots. Yet they also seem anything but spontaneous. Rather, they are “carefully composed ... stylish,”<sup>84</sup> as Corrigall and Marsden observe. Clearly posed, they resist simplistic notions

83 GALA and District Six Museum, Kewpie, 2019: 74.

84 Corrigall and Marsden, “District Six,” 2020: 22.

of documentary photography.<sup>85</sup> By staging queer relationships in this environment, they assert the right to kinship and sociality beyond standardized norms—even and precisely in the midst of destruction.

If one follows the GALA catalog for the Kewpie exhibition, these images prefigure today's gender fluidity, queering drag:

From what we know, Kewpie's gender identity was fluid, and she did not strictly identify as either male or female. Kewpie and her friends generally used feminine pronouns, and would refer to each other as "sisters" and "girls." Today, some of these people might identify as transgender, although this term was not used at the time. They were sometimes known as "moffies," which can be an offensive term, but in District Six its use was not necessarily derogatory. ... Kewpie herself recalled that "... we were called as moffies then. But it was beautifully said ..."<sup>86</sup>

Kewpie rejects classification. Here, *moffie* is not simply a synonym for the homophobic or transphobic devaluation of those then called fairies; rather, its significance depends on affective charge, the touching potential of intonation, and its situatedness.<sup>87</sup> Making no distinction between trans identity and drag as stage performance,<sup>88</sup> this understanding aligns with the image outlined at the beginning of this chapter—Kewpie dancing in the ruins of District Six with ballet and revue-like moves, interweaving different dancing techniques and exposing the embodiment of opposing repertoires. The environmental gesture of this appearance accentuates assembly. Kewpie's performance amid the rubble allegorizes resistance against essentializing classification. This dirty

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85 On the historicity and assertive character of the documentary, see Solomon-Godeau, "Who Is Speaking Thus?", 1991: 169–170; see also Köppert, *Queer Pain*, 2021: 288n35; on occidentalist perspectives, see Bate, "Photography and the Colonial Vision," 1993. On the documentary, see Balke et al., *Durchbrochene Ordnungen*, 2020.

86 GALA and District Six Museum, *Kewpie*, 2019: 5.

87 On the current shift from deconstruction to touch, see Erwig and Ungelenk, *Berühren Denken*, 2021, here especially Ungelenk, "Was heißt": 39. For trans studies, see Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 2013; *Apartment*, 2020. On the political nature of affects, of circulating energies, see Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 2015; Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory*, 2010; on the stickyness of the affective, see Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2014; see also Sophie Zehetmayer's dissertation project *Rhythmic Relations: Transitions of Musical and Social Rhythm* (mdw).

88 See Bukkakis, "Gender Euphoria," 2020; in contrast to Stokoe's separation of drag as an "onstage performance" from trans as an "identity category" (*Reframing Drag*, 2020: 3).

dragging recalls the ways people danced in defiance of segregation policies, enacting a kind of performing otherwise.<sup>89</sup> The photos of rubble surroundings, in particular, negotiate arbitrary, specifically situated relations and bring their precarious conditions into play.

At the same time, these images drag the memory of others along, expanding the view of dragging in turn. In this sense, Kewpie's collection—especially the series depicting the destruction of District Six—is also intertwined with the memory of other transoceanic histories of forced migration, predating the forced removals and already evoking related cultural techniques of collective resistance. Kewpie's drag scenes thus refer not only to the destructive power of apartheid but also to specific queer survival strategies, which can themselves be read as creolized techniques that overturn rigid classifications through “illicit blendings” and assert convivial, nonidentitarian ways of relating.<sup>90</sup>

In Édouard Glissant's works, situated in the Caribbean, creolization describes unpredictable linguistic reiterations emerging from colonial rule and forced migration. From the “bitter, uncontrollable residue”<sup>91</sup> of what was lost displaced people were forced to invent new forms of relating, bringing forth the previously unimaginable. Through what Glissant calls “an art of the flight [fugue] from one language to another,”<sup>92</sup> those forcibly thrown together subverted the colonial phantasm of maintaining clearly distinguishable groups. Against the identitarian episteme of representation and the universalist ideal of an ordered *Totalité-monde* (World-totality), Glissant proposes the translational potential of a chaotic, creolized *tout-monde*—a multitude. His understanding of creolization reveals the flipside of the colonial project and opens up a counter-hegemonic perspective on our contemporary globalized world.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, Glissant conceives of creolization as a form of practical knowledge—one that demonstrates how, despite traumatizing conditions, hyperexploitation, abduction, and arbitrary classification, collective relating remains possible. It is precisely in this sense that Kewpie's drag scenes can be read.

89 See Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017, on XXVII; with regard to the United States, see Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020. On the definition of the performative “as a kind of action or practice that does not require the proscenium stage,” “an action that involves a number of people,” see Butler, “When Gesture Becomes Event,” 2017: 171, 180.

90 I take the notion of “illicit blendings” from Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 2014: 10.

91 Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 2020: 7; for the French original version see Glissant, *Introduction*, 1996: 18.

92 Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 2020: 27.

93 See Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 2020: 8—9.

In contrast to notions of hybridity, mestizaje, or miscegenation, creolization is understood as a decidedly processual and praxeological phenomenon.<sup>94</sup> Glissant's perspective thus provincializes—to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty's term from subaltern studies<sup>95</sup>—the engagement with drag. It contributes, as Tavia Nyong'o suggests, to “unburden blackness and queerness of their identitarian and representational logics.”<sup>96</sup> Reading Kewpie's photos, I seek to bring queering and creolization closer and to explore the incalculable *survie* of creolized, dirty, minor modes of making an appearance in public—of making a scene.<sup>97</sup>

## Creolizing

“YOU ARE NOW IN FAIRY LAND” was a famous piece of graffiti on one of the houses in District Six, later demolished, whose remains are made visible in Kewpie's dragging rubble series—as if a kind of queer crossing had taken place. Today, many view the area as a memorial site for an almost fairytale-like neighborhood, where fairies—queers—once found refuge. Others, however, warn against the depoliticizing pitfalls of romanticized nostalgia for District Six, arguing that commemorating the displaced community can obscure a history of relative privilege and potential complicity within apartheid's divide-and-rule policies.<sup>98</sup>

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94 See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 1987, Bhabha, *Hybridity*, 2012. In contrast, see C. L. R. James's reading of the complicit role of the “mulattoes” in the context of the Haitian revolution; see *Black Jacobins*, 2022, originally 1938.

95 See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; see also the Comaroffs's call for an “ex-centric” theory from the South, 2012, and, with regard to the United States, Knauft, “Provincializing America,” 2007.

96 Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 2018: 199. See also Mbembe's attempt, situated in South African discourse, to undermine US-ontologizations of Blackness, in *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017.

97 On creolization, see Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 2014; Lionnet and Shih, *Creolization of Theory*, 2011; Brah, *Diaspora*, 2003: 633. With regard to the Paris Commune and in contrast to deconstructive perspectives, Kristin Ross accentuates *survie* as reemergence; speaking of the surplus of the movement, of a life beyond life as an extension of struggle by other means. *Communal Luxury*, 2015: 6–7. See also Freeman's plea for a certain vulgar referentiality, i.e., for taking into account the body-related desire of queer theory. *Time Binds*, 2010: xxi.

98 For a critique of District Six nostalgia, its identity-related pitfalls, and the conservative culturalist mobilization of hybridity in the context of relative privilege, see Adhikari, *Burdened by Race*, 2013, especially Trotter, *Trauma*, 2013; Adhikari, *Predicaments*, 2013; Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 2001; Wicomb, *Shame*, 1998, *You Can't Get Lost*, 2000. On the connection between moffie and gang culture, see Luyt, *Gay Language in Cape Town*, 2014: 23.



Figure 5: District Six before the forced removals, undated paper clip. National Library of South Africa, Cape Town (PHA 3709 Coons).

The majority of District Six's population was classified as "without a tribe," or "Coloured,"<sup>99</sup> during the enforcement of the Group Areas Act between the 1960s and 1980s, as the apartheid regime occupied the inner city and "cleansed" it of traces of creolized life. Authorities arbitrarily sorted people across families and neighborhoods according to skin color and hair texture,<sup>100</sup> often struggling to classify those living near the former port. Unlike the fixed categories of "Asian," "Bantu," and "White," "Coloured" became an intermediate designation, marking ambiguous origins. Visible signs of creolization thus became the basis for imposed racial identities.<sup>101</sup> This classification was also entangled with racist

99 On the distinction between the South African term "Coloured" and the US term "of color," see Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 20–21.

100 On pencil tests and hair politics, see Erasmus, "Hair Politics," 2000.

101 In the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950, "Coloured" is negatively defined as "not a white person or a native"; see Erasmus's introduction to *Coloured by History*, 2001: 13–28, here: 18; *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 35. See also Davids's introduction to the *Safundi* special issue, *Sequins, Self & Struggle*, 2017: 113–114.

sexualization, as “Coloured” was linked to the effects of illegalized relationships and supposed miscegenation.<sup>102</sup>

Kewpie’s drag photos emerged in this political context, bearing witness to the potentially nonidentitarian, creolized cultural techniques of “indigenizing” that developed in District Six.<sup>103</sup> Scholars such as Zimitri Erasmus and Mohamed Adhikari advocate for rehistoricizing “Coloured” to focus on social processes rather than rigid categories.<sup>104</sup> Erasmus, in particular, emphasizes that creolization is shaped by transcultural practices produced through colonial disruption.<sup>105</sup> This perspective highlights the transformation of social asymmetries, complex relations of inequality, and the political possibilities of mimesis. Transposing Glissant’s Antilles-based approach to the South African context, Erasmus points to forms of exclusion and resistance that are both flexible and heterogeneous. From the Cape, she foregrounds the “dirtiness” of historical and social connections and performative practices.

In Iberian colonialism, *creole*—“thick with interrelated and traveling meanings”<sup>106</sup>—was originally a paraphrase of *mestizaje*. Historically, it described those of European descent born in the colonies, but as colonial elites pursued “self-indigenization” and postcolonial independence, the term became associated with the subalterns deemed “racially impure” and lacking a culture of

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102 For a critique of “miscegenation,” see Nyong’o, *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 74; for a critique of corresponding sexualizations of “colouredness” with regard to District Six, see Ramsden-Karelse, “Moving,” 2020: 421.

103 See Erasmus, “Caribbean Critical Thought,” 2025; Stuart Hall reads “creolization as the process of ‘indigenization,’ which prevents any of the constitutive elements—either colonizing or colonized—from preserving their purity or authenticity,” 2015: 18. Gordon calls this “newly indigenous” (*Creolizing Political Theory*, 2014: 170). In contrast to this praxeological perspective, see today’s supposedly decolonial projections on indigeneity as cosmic environmental knowledge, such as in Weber, *Indigenialität*, 2018.

104 See Adhikari, *Burdened by Race*, 2013; Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 2001; “Creolization,” 2011.

105 See Erasmus, “Creolization,” 2011: 640. On the historical sustainability of racializing attributions, preceded by processes of creolization, see Martin, “Jazz,” 2008: 11–116; on creolized modes of performing, with reference to Glissant, see Martin, “Imaginary Ocean,” 2008; *Sounding*, 2013.

106 Erasmus, “Creolization,” 2011: 645; see also *Coloured by History*, 2001: 16; *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 84–87. Biologicist colonial racism was prefigured in the anti-Judaic and anti-Muslim politics of *limpieza de sangre* directed against converts, i.e., the propaganda of blood purity from the fifteenth century onwards—that is, during the Reconquista. This prefiguration is indicated via the Spanish etymology, *creollo*. On Portuguese Iberian colonialism and the introduction of a new mode of production based on enslavement, see Gorender, *Colonial Slavery*, 2022.

their own. Under the apartheid regime, the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 defined Coloured as “not a white person or a native.”<sup>107</sup> As a result, the inner-city population, including Kewpie, was forcibly relocated to townships, where they were further stratified by pigmentation and subjected to varying degrees of precarization.

The urban contact zones of the Cape expose the violent arbitrariness of racial classification with particular clarity.<sup>108</sup> The Cape, at the tip of the African continent, is where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet. In the port area of that time, the contradictory and competing histories of European colonial expansion into Asia intertwined with the transatlantic slave trade and the mass production of “bare labor”—a prerequisite for the increasingly industrialized capitalist *Vergesellschaftung* within a new world system.<sup>109</sup> These histories are marked by fundamental traumas shaped by overexploitation, forced migrations, corresponding forms of life, and necessarily arbitrary connections between all kinds of people subjected to the prevailing conditions. They inevitably gave rise to local performative cultural techniques, which—as seen in Kewpie’s photographs—can be read as forms of nongenealogical, globalized ways of relating.

As Katja Diefenbach discusses with regard to “the so-called triangular trade initiated by Portugal and Spain between Europe, West Africa, and the Americas,” the Dutch trading companies constructed “an enormous ensemble of unequal trade relations, capital ties and power differentials spanning the seas, bringing heterogeneous hemispheres, places and times into violent contact with each other through the slave trade, the plantation economy, mining and seafaring, triggering a process of creolization without precedent in history.”<sup>110</sup> As she continues: this “immanent transformation of the powers

107 Cited in Erasmus, *Coloured by History*, 2001: 18; see Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 87–92; Reddy, “The Politics of Naming,” 2001: 74.

108 On the reciprocal conditionality of contact zones, which calls binaries into question, see Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 2008.

109 On *bare labor*, which reformulates Benjamin’s notion of “bare life” (“Critique of Violence,” 2002: 236–252; “bloßes Leben,” “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” II.1., 1991, 179–203) in the context of colonial hyperexploitation, see Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 133; “the distance between capitalist production and primitive accumulation should be viewed as spatial rather than temporal” (35). From a global historical perspective on bare capital, see Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei*, 2013: 613; Torabully and Carter, “Coolitude,” 2002. On the plantation system, see Wolford, “The Plantationocene,” 2021; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 2014.

110 Diefenbach, *Speculative Materialism*, 2025: 188, Chapter 2, “History and Ontology: Holland’s Historical Untimeliness,” on the historical nonsimultaneity and specificity of the Dutch accumulation regime—with reference to Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System II* (2011: 36–73). On European expansion into the Asian region, see Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung*, 1998.

to act from below is eminently political ... : it transcends the ideational nexus of origin, culture and religion. From a Spinozist perspective, the conversion of the socio-military capabilities of regional slave dealers into forces of opposition to slavery manifests a universal power shared by all humans to break with their own traditions, origins, cultures and religions and build a more rational and freer society from below. It demonstrates humans' capacity to attain an immanent transformation of their powers without transcendental mediation.”<sup>111</sup>

At the South African Cape, creolization processes emerged beyond what Paul Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic,<sup>112</sup> extending particularly into the South Atlantic and Pacific regions. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Western Cape became a stopover for commercial ships of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC) on their way from Europe to Batavia (present-day Jakarta). As this outpost expanded into a colony, many people at the Cape—including political prisoners from Southeast Asia—were systematically enslaved or subjected to indenture.<sup>113</sup> The Cape thus became a site where different performative practices intertwined, recalling the “dirtiness” of early globalization.

Initially, Cape Town served as a refreshment station for European trading ships traveling to and from Southeast Asia.<sup>114</sup> Straddling the trade routes of the two oceans, it occupied a strategically contested position between East and West, fought over by competing European colonial powers. As Nadia Davids notes, this struggle resulted in “one of the most culturally heterogeneous regions on earth between the early 1700s and late 1800s.”<sup>115</sup> The harbor area thus became a contact zone where people from vastly different backgrounds converged: the local Khoikhoi population, abductees and enslaved people,

111 Diefenbach, *Speculative Materialism*, 2025, Chapter 2, “History and Ontology: Holland’s Historical Untimeliness.”

112 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 1993: Gilroy’s concept has since been criticized in several respects—with regard to its Atlantic focus, the lack of reflection on gender, more fluid forms of Othering and hyperexploitation, and indenture. On the necessary systematic reformulation of this concept with regard to the Indian Ocean and the trans-continental network of ports, see Hofmeyr: “the Indian Ocean makes a difference to the question of ‘who is a slave’ ... the Atlantic model has become invisibly normative”; “The Black Atlantic,” 2007, on 14; see also Tinsley, “Queer Atlantic,” 2008, as well as Avery and Richards, *Black Atlantic*, 2023; Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 2–6; Hawley, *India in Africa*, 2008; Ledent et al., *New Perspectives*, 2012.

113 On the gendering of indentured labor, see Hofmeyr, “The Black Atlantic,” 2007; on the gender history of colonial violence and so-called primitive accumulation, see Federici, *Caliban*, 2018; *Re-enchanting the World*, 2019.

114 See van de Geijn-Verhoeven et al., *Domestic Interiors*, 2002: 131–134 (“From Asia to the Cape”).

115 Davids, “It Is Us,” 2013: 90n6.

colonial officials and settlers, travelers, sailors, and refugees. Gilroy conceptualizes the Black Atlantic as a transcultural, international formation with a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure.”<sup>116</sup> However, the Cape’s history is also deeply intertwined with both Europe’s prior colonial expansion into Asia and precolonial trade networks between Asia and Africa. Ultimately, the Cape is a reminder that the reach of the revolting “many-headed hydra,” which Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker describe as the flipside of colonial expansion, extends beyond the Atlantic—resisting emerging racial classifications while roaming the world’s harbor taverns.<sup>117</sup>

By 1808, approximately 63,000 people had been forcibly deported to the Cape Colony. They left lasting traces through their languages and cultural practices, which were reshaped as they were forced to form new relationships under conditions of displacement. The majority came from Indonesia, Ceylon, and India, as well as from the southern Philippines, Persia, Macao, Madagascar, East Africa, and Mozambique. The VOC relied on preexisting forms of enslavement in its Southeast Asian colonies and adapted them at the Cape to suit its economic interests. To develop Cape Town as a port city and ensure local supplies, specific modes of exploitation were transferred and modernized—techniques that had long benefited the VOC in the Indian Ocean and helped drive the capitalization of the world.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, colonial business enterprises recruited labor primarily in Holland and Germany. Alongside sailors and adventurers came people fleeing religious persecution or famine in Europe.<sup>119</sup> Over time, diverse precarious groups formed a new class society shaped by European expansionist policies, often with fluid biographies revealing overlapping histories of colonial exploitation, complicity, and resistance.

The history of the Cape is of exemplary relevance to contemporary debates on critical race theory, as it lays bare the messiness of colonial conditions. By 1800, when the British Empire replaced the VOC’s rule and made Cape Town the capital of the Cape Colony, European settlerism had become increasingly differentiated. Southern Africa was drawn deeper into the immanently contradictory global capitalist economy of the nineteenth century.<sup>120</sup> In this messy context, a new biologistic form of racism emerged, reinforced by segregation

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116 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 1993: 4.

117 On the political potentiality of cooperative port work and governmental difficulties to control port areas in particular, see Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000: 181, 206.

118 See Dooling and Worden, “Slavery in South Africa,” 2017: 121.

119 On the corresponding migration flows, their causes, and joint revolts by enslaved and ship people, see Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town*, 1999.

120 See Adhikari, “Predicaments,” 2013: x.

laws. Class differences became increasingly racialized, with skin color turned into a central marker of distinction.<sup>121</sup>

However, the British colonial division of the population into black and white proved inadequate in accounting for the afterlife of enslavement, which had linked the Indies and the Atlantic.<sup>122</sup> By 1904, the category “Coloured” was introduced as a supplement to this arbitrary binary. In any case, many in Cape Town defied classification—they shared a commonality in their nonconformity to rigid racial attributions:

They are neither English, nor French, nor Dutch. Nor do they form an original class as Africans, but a singular mix of all together which has not yet acquired a conscience, and is therefore almost impossible to be exactly represented.<sup>123</sup>

This is how Robert Semple, a Boston-born traveler raised in England, described the population of Cape Town in his 1803 travelogue. What he perceived as a form of backwardness can, in turn, be understood as a specific prefiguration of today’s globalized modes of subjectivation—an effect of heterogeneous creolization processes that contradict prevailing governmental policies of segregation.

Overlapping colonization and migration movements brought about social and cultural encounters that had the potential to subvert existing power structures and concomitant categorizations. Like a transoceanic tavern, District Six (located near the harbor)—and later, the railroads, fish factories, and other industries—gathered a motley crew.<sup>124</sup> Denis-Constant Martin describes its population before the forced removals as “extremely mixed including poor European migrants and African workers, American sailors and Asian shopkeepers, and of course a large number of colored workers, traders and artisans. The population of District Six was divided according to descent, religion and social

121 See Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town*, 1999: 112; Haron, “Early Cape Muslims,” 2017: 138; on the visual technology of racialized differentiation, see also Erasmus’s chapter “The Look,” *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 49–75.

122 See Adhikari, “Predicaments,” 2013.

123 Robert Semple, *Walks*, 1805: 26; cited in Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town*, 1999: 89.

124 On the tavern of the seas, see Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 53; see also Bickford-Smith, “The Origins,” 1990: 35–38; Corrigall and Marsden, “District Six,” 2020: 13. On the fluid topographies of places of passage such as seaports and pleasure venues see Meynen, *Inseln und Meere*, 2020: 365–366; on transatlantic “motley crews” Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000. On the “motley crew,” einen “buntscheckigen Haufen,” see Marx, *Das Kapital I*, MEW 23, 1968: 268; on wandering fools in the European early modern period, their relatives, see also Amslinger et al., *Lose Leute*, 2019.

status, but there were no racial antagonisms. On the contrary, beyond the divisions, most inhabitants shared the same pleasures and entertainments.”<sup>125</sup> In this “fairy land,” a space characterized by an assemblage of languages, religious affiliations, and cultural practices—and by poverty and violence—people lived jumbled together, defying governmental distinctions based on skin color, faith, and descent. They exposed the hypercomplexities of colonial history that apartheid sought to dominate.<sup>126</sup>

“Apartheid,” Zimitri Erasmus concludes in *Race Otherwise*, “flattened South Africa’s complex entanglement with Indian and South Atlantic Ocean histories into a racial category—Coloured.”<sup>127</sup> Erasmus emphasizes how a more nuanced perspective on South Africa’s colonial histories can challenge pigmentocratic interpretations of “coloniality”<sup>128</sup> and racism:

The Indian Ocean can be thought of as an emergent epistemic space—a domain of lived experience that is configured by interconnected histories; by the exchange and movement of people, things and ideas; and by the circulation of technologies, communities and institutions; it is a space that enables critical inquiry into the normative ways of knowing.<sup>129</sup>

Performative practices, in particular, reveal the heterogeneous centrifugal forces of global-historical lines of flight legible in her description. Inextricable amalgamations of cultural repertoires conflicted with arbitrary binaries<sup>130</sup>—as exemplified in the local creolized carnival. While the focus thus far has been on Kewpie’s existential dragging, I will now discuss a temporary state of exception—a laboratory of an *imagined elsewhere*—that continues to mobilize queer performance.

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125 Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 92.

126 On the gang history of Cape Town, see Pinnock, *Gang Town*, 2016.

127 Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 6.

128 See Quijano, “Coloniality,” 2007.

129 Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 4; with reference to Pearson, *Indian Ocean*, 2003.

130 On nonbinary forms of gendering in Southeast Asia, see Davies, *Gender Diversity*, 2011; “Gender and Sexual Plurality,” 2018, “Islamic Identity,” 2019; see also Ismoyo, “Decolonizing Gender,” 2020, with regard to the issue of the Sulawesi Bugis as “transgender spiritual advisors.” On the Bugis slaves abducted from Batavia and brought to the Cape of Good Hope, see Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei*, 2013: 626. On the diverse criticism of the binarization of “the Other,” see Lugones, “Coloniality of Gender,” 2023; “Decolonial Feminism,” 2010; Manchanda, “Queering the Pashtun,” 2014: 5.

### ***Carnivalizing (Guys, Klopse, Atjas)***

Every year around January 2, during *Tweede Nuwe Jaar*, an inner-city carnival parade takes place between District Six and the predominantly Muslim Bo-Kaap, formerly known as the Malay Quarter, which was also classified as Coloured under apartheid.<sup>131</sup> The parade stops in front of both Christian churches and mosques, reflecting how religious affiliations are interwoven through the families of its participants. It marks the beginning of a two-month season of weekly stadium competitions, followed by street parties in the townships. Unlike the official carnival in March, this event is rarely mentioned online or in tourist advertisements. Today, it serves as a symbolic reclaiming of the streets by descendants of former inhabitants, who now live in the townships and are bussed into the city center by their clubs for this one day. Their act of return and reclaiming resonates with Kewpie's rubble series.

The carnival is believed to have originated in New Year's parades as early as the 1820s. By the 1830s, in the wake of abolition, the transition from slavery to indenture and the emergence of new forms of exploitation, carnival became linked to a new, postcolonial calendar—one in which the memory of emancipation and the scarcely documented revolts of the enslaved took on an afterlife. Traces of these revolts remain embedded in a carnival repertoire that resists genealogical notions, instead emphasizing referential slipperiness. It testifies to a creolized knowledge of the entangled temporality and the political dimension of citation, also closely related to Kewpie's dirty dragging.

“Street Scene—Emancipation Day” is the caption of a drawing by Heinrich Egersdörfer, published in the *South African Illustrated News* in 1885. Amid the proliferation of newspapers in the urban centers of the colonies, illustrated magazines became harbingers of a new image-based mass culture—one that, from the 1880s onward, increasingly shaped representations of carnival. Egersdörfer, who grew up in Germany, can be read as depicting Cape Town as a creolized contact zone. His street scene features two life-size, white-masked dolls—one male, one female. The grotesquely disfigured mask on the left resembles a skull, while the one on the right evokes a clown, together forming a kind of Janus head. The puppeteers and their accompanying band are dressed as firemen. Egersdörfer contrasts their faces, as well as those of the surrounding children, with the stark white puppet masks. In the background, a laughing family, dressed in Muslim garb, appears in a range of differing shades. The image thus presents a kind of diverse acting in concert on the street—an

131 On the history of carnival in the Cape, see Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999; “The Famous,” 2010; Oliphant, *Changing Faces*, 2013; on music, see Gaulier and Martin, *Cape Town Harmonies*, 2017.

assembly shaped by people coming together through the dragging of artificial faces and complementary figures.

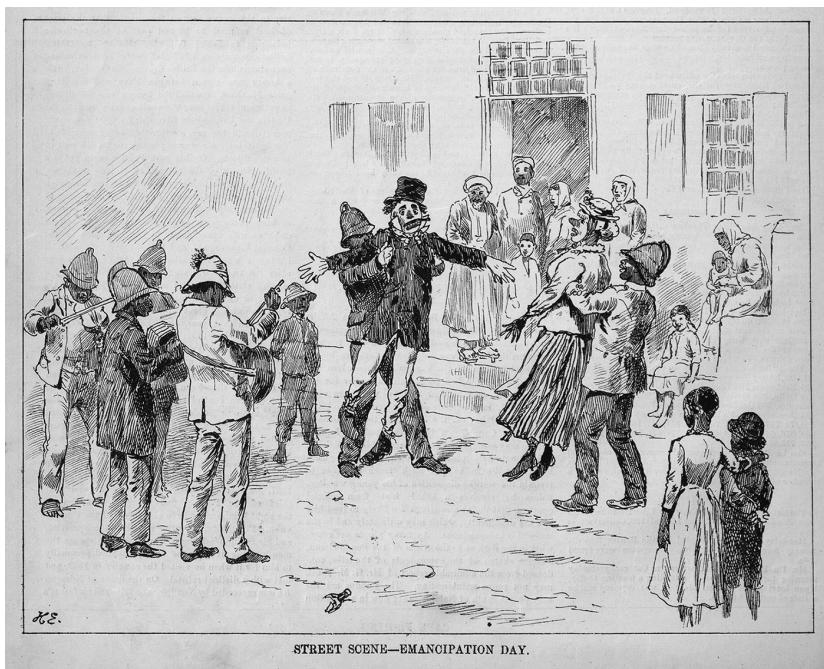


Figure 6: Heinrich Egersdörfer: Street Scene—Emancipation Day. *South African Illustrated News* 1885: 580. National Library of South Africa, Cape Town.

Martin interprets the caption provided by the *South African Illustrated News* as signaling a connection between the carnival season and political revolts.<sup>132</sup> He argues that the procession-like celebrations for Emancipation Day on December 1, 1834—which themselves drew on military and Salvation Army parades—gained a creolized afterlife in carnival. And yet, even though these cultural performances of a globalized crowd amalgamated puppetry, Muslim dance performances, the Kalifa, and masked house visits (similar to European rural winter customs), they did not simply imitate recurring rituals.<sup>133</sup> Instead, locally indigenized, their specific entanglements respond to the political dynamics of their time and place.

Martin associates Egersdörfer's street scene with the traditional start of Cape Town's carnival season on November 5—Guy Fawkes Day. In England and its colonies, the day is marked by doll burnings to commemorate the

132 See Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 33.

133 See Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 31—34, 61—63, 89.

suppression of an assassination attempt against the crown at the onset of British expansion.<sup>134</sup> However, in Egersdörfer's scene, the Guys—as the dolls are called in Cape Town—are transformed into an attraction for all kinds of people. Their historical reference appears secondary; rather than directly invoking Fawkes as a historical figure, the Guys become an allegory of revolt within a playful performance that disregards the dolls' original, local significance. They can be interpreted as both colonial and underdog figures—ambiguous personae through which social conditions are negotiated. The depicted assembly thus appears to engage in a local context with unfulfilled political promises, reworking a prior revolt through an emptied or resignified performative citation.



Figure 7: Carnival, Athlone Stadium, Cape Flats, 2019. Photo: Evelyn Annus.

Riots and police measures against the street carnival were recorded in 1886, the year after Egersdörfer's drawing was published.<sup>135</sup> In the twentieth century, the carnival became increasingly organized. Compared to older carnival photos featuring matadors, gorillas, devils, and other figures, capturing a chaotic

134 On Guy Fawkes Day, the commemoration of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) against the Protestant King James I of England and Ireland and the suppression of this revolt, as well as the specific transposition of the puppets into the so-called Cape Coloured carnival of Cape Town, see Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 31–35.

135 See Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride*, 1995: 112–113.

swarm of masks,<sup>136</sup> the appearance of revelers grew more and more standardized. From 1977 to 1989, as public demonstrations faced tighter regulation, the apartheid regime banned this carnival in the inner city under the Riotous Assembly Act. Today, it is subject to crowd control, with barriers preventing physical interaction between maskers and bystanders. The Kaapse Klopse, as the expanding Cape Carnival clubs are called, now appear in coordinated costumes and carry flags that often hijack national colors—subverting nationalist symbolism by emptying it out.



Figure 8: Atjas, Carnival, Hartleyvale Stadium, Observatory, Cape Town, undated. Kenny Misroll Private Collection (Cape Town).

While the singing, performing, and marching competitions in township stadiums remain a local affair, the inner-city parade has increasingly become a tool of city marketing.<sup>137</sup> However, the memory of loosely organized groups of costumed people roaming the streets persists in the appearances of drag queens and other secondary figures who accompany the Klopse—smaller, peripheral

136 Thanks to Kenny Misroll and Angel Mustafa McCooper for sharing their private collection of photographs of gorillas, Indians, devils and matadors, i.e., of other depictions than that collected in the archives. On the corresponding Bits and Pieces or Odds and Ends, whose names refer to the dragging along of heterogeneity, see Davids, “It Is Us,” 2013; Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 112.

137 See Davids, “It Is Us,” 2013.

groups adorned with feathered headdresses that evoke stereotypical images of “Amerindians,” alongside red devil and white fur figures.<sup>138</sup> Like the Guys, the Atjas<sup>139</sup>—possibly a creolized abbreviation of “Apaches”—recall the potential these parades hold to erupt into revolt, citing figures of indigenous resistance from elsewhere. This act of “playing Indian”<sup>140</sup> appears to be drawn from globalized modern mass culture and, like the colonial reference embedded in the Guys, seems to have little connection to the local context. Yet that displacement is precisely what makes the Atjas a countermodel to colonial settlerism and racist notions of lineage or indigeneity. By invoking fictionalized images of uprisings from elsewhere, the Atjas are akin to the glamorous drag queens like Kewpie, who—through their namesakes drawn from Hollywood actresses—overaffirm and liquefy standardized beauty ideals of white femininity. Their complementary modes of “making a scene” are connected in their use of overtly reinvented elsewhere as a means of resisting local governmental power. As performative transpositions, these practices are also akin to the visual and musical signature of the formerly so-called Coon Carnival—a local form of “dirty-facing” that carnalesquely creolizes dominant stagings of racialized drag.

### ***Dirty Facing (Jim Crow, Zip Coons)***

In Cape Town, T. D. Rice’s song “Jump Jim Crow,” associated with blackface, was reportedly heard in the streets and bars as early as the mid-1840s.<sup>141</sup> As an

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138 The term Amerindian is obviously colonially charged, evoking Columbus’s projections onto the population he encountered at first contact on the American continent, and seems to claim a homogeneous ensemble of different people. However, I have decided to use it to mark this colonial legacy instead of erasing it from terminology by substituting it with another term that is still subject to colonial epistemology—be it First Nation or Native American. These terms refer to genealogical figures of thought, established by European colonialism, and the essentialization of rootedness. This obscures the possibility of thinking in terms of political violence connected to extractivism and hyperexploitation, i.e., modes of production, without substantializing the relation between people, blood relations, and land. For a critique of a respective genealogical thinking and the ideologization of indigeneity, see, e.g., Erasmus, “Who Was Here First?,” 2020.

139 On the Atjas, which began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century, see Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 93–94; “Imaginary Ocean,” 2008: 68–69.

140 With a view to Indianism in the United States, see Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 2022.

141 On Jim Crow, see Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 1998; *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003; on its European folk-theatrical prehistory, see Rehin, “Harlequin Jim Crow,” 1975. Nyong’o calls Jim Crow “darkened but clearly not African featured”; see *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 110. On minstrel shows and blackface, see Bean et al., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 1996;

entr'acte of Americanized yet already creolized European folk theater, Rice's folkloristic song-and-dance solo—featuring the blackened comic figure that he had popularized in the 1830s—preceded the later grotesquely standardized minstrel show genre. It reached Cape Town in the second half of the nineteenth century through transcontinental theatrical trade routes, carried by the expanding globalization of entertainment culture.<sup>142</sup> From the early 1860s, visiting minstrel troupes, including a group of Christy's Minstrels, staged musical-theatrical performances of grotesque blackface.<sup>143</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, performances by Black American artists, such as the Virginia Jubilee Singers led by Orpheus M. McAdoo, followed.<sup>144</sup>

In the context of the United States, blackface first emerged as a rowdy, (lumpen-)proletarian theater form in the industrialized North. Often drawing on plantation nostalgia, it conjured an imagined elsewhere that obscured the brutal hyperexploitation of the enslaved. It was a genuinely urban affair, particularly among the white, male industrial proletariat, though it later became a performance outlet for Black entertainers under segregation. Gradually, blackface spread across the Atlantic. The shrewd, unruly JIM CROW—a creolized comic figuration of a fugitive slave—was celebrated in London as early as the 1830s before gaining popularity at the Cape. Rice's tramp, alongside his urban counterpart ZIP COON—the minstrel stock figure of the Black dandy—was cast as a trickster personifying ungovernability.<sup>145</sup> At the Cape, however, blackface

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Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 2006; Cockrell, *Demons*, 1997; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 1993; Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 2005; Pickering, "The Blackface Clown," 2003; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 1991; Taylor and Austen, *Darkest America*, 2012. On the connection between female impersonation and blackface in the minstrel context, see Garber, *Vested Interests*, 1992: 267–303; Mahar, *Burnt Cork Mask*, 1999: 343; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 1993; Strausbaugh, *Black Like You*, 2006. On the development of aesthetic forms, also Annuš, "Blackface," 2014; "Racisms," 2024. The multisignificant mask (Cockrell, 82; Roediger, 116) stands in contrast to the "other" of bourgeois theater, i.e., popular theater; see Belting, *Faces*, 2013: 63–83. On the critique of the "genre of the human" from the perspective of Black studies focused on the United States, see Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 2020: 23.

142 See Balme and Leonhardt, "Introduction" and the special issue, "Theatrical Trade Routes" in the *Journal of Global Theater History* 1, no. 1, 2016; see also the special issue "Routes of Blackface" edited by Cole and Davis, *The Drama Review* 57, no. 2, and Cole, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, 2001.

143 See Davis, "Christy's Minstrels," 2013.

144 Their repertoire also drew on minstrel genres, but they seem not to have performed in blackface; see Erlmann, "A Feeling of Prejudice," 1988.

145 On ZIP COON and Black dandyism, see Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 2009. Gibbs reads Jim Crow as a "surrogate underdog" (211) prefigured in the mask of the harlequin (198) and "minstrelsy as a transatlantic genre," as well as "part of the performance

from the United States was not only performed for white audiences but also resignified by segments of the population who resisted classification within the racial hierarchy. In this context, blackface also became a mask of revolt.



Figure 9: T. D. Rice as Jim Crow, 1830s. Library of Congress, Washington, DC (2004669584).



Figure 10: Zip Coon, sheet music, 1830s. Library of Congress, Washington, DC (00650780).

Presumably carried to the Cape through sheet music with illustrated covers or by singing sailors, the popular hit “Jump Jim Crow” had already reached the harbor area before increasingly racist minstrel shows began appearing on established stages. While already creolized, Jim Crow and Zip Coon—figures that blend the darkly masked ARLECCHINO of European folk theater and its descendants with transatlantic mimicry—became popular in District Six just a decade after emancipation.<sup>146</sup> By this time, the transition to postslavery was already marked by

of revolutionary utopianism” (179, 180); see *Temple of Liberty*, 2014 (esp. “Spartacus, Jim Crow and the Black Jokes of Revolt”: 181–212). On the early connection between blackface and abolitionist music and the later bourgeoisification of the genre, see Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*, 2005, esp. 25.

146 On the correspondence between Jim Crow and the Caribbean JONKONNU, see Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 218; Wynter, Sambos, 1979: 155); with a view to European folk theater and the ARLECCHINO of the *commedia*, also Rehin, “Harlequin Jim Crow,” 1975: 685. Emphasizing the “flexibility of the form,” he criticizes the lack of comparative perspectives in research fixated on a US perspective: “The blackface make-up ... was

regulations comparable to the later so-called Jim Crow conditions in the United States—a form of segregation that prefigured apartheid. In the 1840s, when “Jump Jim Crow” arrived at the Cape, Emancipation Day gatherings were reportedly intertwined with the carnival of the subalterns. Blackface became its visual signature, accompanying the transatlantic urban music of the New World. “Jump Jim Crow” was thus received as a marker of globalized mass cultural mobility. Under local colonial conditions, this music resonated as the sound of revolt:

The frivolous coloured inhabitants of Cape Town, who take a holiday on the slightest pretext, indulged their peculiar notions in regard thereto by going about in large bodies dressed most fantastically, carrying “guys,” and headed by blowers of wind and players of stringed instruments, who evoked from their horrible monsters the most discordant and blatant noises that ever deafened human ears.<sup>147</sup>

In 1886, the year of the carnival riots, the *Cape Times* reported on roving bands in various disguises, carrying dolls and noisily terrorizing their surroundings. In this context, minstrel quotations and carnivalesque appearances began to resonate. And creolized repertoire from elsewhere—as references to *JIM CROW* and *ZIP COON*—became indigenized. The heterogeneous, medley-like music, whose rhythmic changes structure the choral and dance interludes of the local carnival, make the interweaving of different sounds and movements associated with the carnival all the more apparent.<sup>148</sup> Marching, accelerated polyrhythmic steps, bent knees, hips shifted backward, and isolated hand positions combine movement styles that simultaneously conjure cultural performances from different parts of the world. Rather than evoking the plantation nostalgia of minstrel shows, it was the danceable, creolized sound that may have been one of the primary attractions of this musical import to Cape Town’s harbor area.

This new music, which could already be heard there in the mid-nineteenth century—even before the start of the US Civil War and the increasingly overt racism shaping the form and function of minstrel shows—was also incorporated

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also part of a folk tradition in which it had no racial connotation, a factor which may also help to account for widespread acceptance of minstrelsy” (689). On the metatheatrical use of early forms of blackface, see Reed, *Rogue Performances*, 2009: 21.

147 *The Cape Times*, Monday, January 4, 1886.

148 On the specifics of creolized (carnival) music in the Cape, see Gaulier and Martin, *Cape Town Harmonies*, 2017; Martin, *Sounding*, 2013, esp.: 53–100. For the street parade in the city center, see, among others, the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1ItBWALzYc>, accessed September 24, 2024; for the competition at Athlone Stadium: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovjGp7nTFCc>, accessed September 24, 2024.

into local performances. These acts, featuring burnt cork makeup and grotesque costumes, adapted popular US hits for entertainment venues near the harbor.<sup>149</sup> The first carnival clubs are documented as appearing in the late 1880s, linked to the local music scene. The so-called Coon Carnival, which referenced mass culture from the United States by parading through the streets in corresponding masks, transformed the racist-zoomorphic term for Black comic figures into a mode of assembly in which its original meaning was lost.<sup>150</sup> Instead, its associations with dirty work and soot-stained faces were involuntarily reactivated.<sup>151</sup>

In this sense, Cape blackface can also be read as a form of dragging—of pulling back unforeseeable historical references. In his study of the local carnival and its clubs, the Klopse, Martin traces the term's history in relation to these performances. He highlights the creolized afterlife of European folk theater, the carnivalesque street performances of the subaltern, and their class-specific references:

Klopse refers to the origins of the troupes, when they were emanations of social and sports clubs; it therefore seems perfectly legitimate to recycle this word in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of the revellers, however, when speaking in English about themselves and the troupes they affiliate with, will still use the word “Coons” and some will talk about “Minstrels.” ... While it is true that “Coon,” an abbreviation of raccoon, became, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century [sic], associated with black-face minstrelsy and was given a racist meaning, one should not forget that words may have a life of their own and that, when they travel, their meanings change. The signification a word has in the United States cannot and should not be considered as the only signification a word can have in English. In South Africa, the understanding of “Coon” was totally transformed and came to signify the main character and the main mask in the New Year festivals ... As for “Minstrels,” those who object even to this word should be reminded that there were minstrels in Europe long before Europeans set foot in North America, and that they were jesters, jugglers, story tellers, singers and dancers whose “acts” were tightly intertwined with carnivalesque traditions ...<sup>152</sup>

149 See Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 82.

150 On the South African transposition of the “coon,” the fashion-conscious, urban, emancipated black male,” in the context not only of carnival but also of the urbanization of Zulu-speaking migrant workers, see Erlmann, “Spectatorial Lust,” 1999: 143.

151 On the connection between the dark harlequin mask and dirty work, see Riha, *Commedia dell'arte*, 1980: 29.

152 Martin, *Chronicle*, 2007: 2–3; see Oliphant, *Changing Faces*, 2013: 68; Thelwell, *Exporting Jim Crow*, 2020: x.

From Martin's perspective, blackface in the Cape was not a caricature of the Black Cape population but rather a testament to the possibility of recasting the obviously artificial, grotesque mask, which does not fit within the genre of anthropocentric *imitatio*.

Blackface, like the image of the Indians, gained even greater popularity through cinema. When Alan Crosland's early sound film *The Jazz Singer*—featuring Al Jolson in blackface—was first shown in Cape Town in 1929, the creolized-diasporic carnivalesque mask became a defining feature of the carnival.<sup>153</sup> It seemed to gesture toward an imaginary, globalized elsewhere. "Through the mask of the Coon, they have located themselves within the Black Atlantic," Martin writes.<sup>154</sup> He thus highlights that blackface at the Cape was linked to trickster figurations considered to be part of a nonwhite modernity emerging from the United States, aligning with Gilroy's argument that "blackness can sometimes connote prestige rather than the unadorned inferiority of 'bare life.'"<sup>155</sup> Transposed to the Cape, blackface also mirrored the whiteface of the Guys, the carnival dolls that were already a part of the celebration. It then became an ambivalent sign of potential resistance among an urban population that could not be easily categorized by skin color.

Yet blackface in the Cape can also be read differently. Drawing from his research on English-language stage productions for British Cape audiences in the late nineteenth century, Chinua Thelwell argues in *Exporting Jim Crow*: "Any intellectually responsible explanation for the popularity of blackface minstrelsy must acknowledge the highly racialized worldview of the Cape and Natal colonists."<sup>156</sup> However, historical circumstances may be more complex than the rigid color line cemented during the Jim Crow era in the United States. The Dutch prehistory of colonial expansion from the Cape into Asia, too, disrupted the black-and-white grid of the British Empire. The popularity of minstrel shows,

153 On the reception of *The Jazz Singer* in Cape Town, see Martin, "Imaginary Ocean," 2008: 69. On the diasporic use of blackface as a sign of a different, "non-white modernity," Brühwiler, "Blackface in America and Africa," 2012, 141; Martin, "Invincible Darkies," 2010, 439.

154 Martin, "Imaginary Ocean," 2008: 72.

155 Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 2005: 37.

156 Thelwell, *Exporting Jim Crow*, 2020: 35. Dillon, on the other hand, emphasizes the heterogeneity of the transatlantic audience in the colonial context: "ordinances notwithstanding, blacks were admitted to the theatre on a regular basis and made up an active part of the audience." See *New World Drama*, 2014: 141. Blackface in the Cape Town carnival, according to Martin's reading, was rather "an incarnation of modernity in the world of entertainment during the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the personification of a form of cultural miscegenation shaped by relations of domination." See *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 174.

which Thelwell sees as an indicator of anti-Blackness, is further complicated by colonial competition and the cultural interdependencies of various subalterns. Transoceanic perspectives are therefore indispensable.

“Minstrelsy was globalized because of the increasing influence of American culture on nations such as imperial Britain .... It was also globalized by the appropriation of the form by colonized Black nations and communities eager to engage in and construct a transatlantic conversation among different Black populations,” as Louis Chude-Sokei underscores in *The Last “Darky.”*<sup>157</sup> Dillon likewise calls for deeper reflection on transatlantic entanglements:

I would posit the temporal priority of an Atlantic performance tradition and argue that American minstrelsy overwrites a history of colonialism and anti-colonial revolt as well, replacing and erasing this broader geopolitical frame with one of nationalism and racism in which a white/black binary secures the force of white creole nationalism. Ironically, both nineteenth-century blackface minstrel performers and twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars of blackface minstrelsy have emphasized minstrelsy’s status as one of the earliest indigenous American musical and theatrical forms.<sup>158</sup>

The Cape carnivalesque “Coons” were not part of the bourgeois-colonial theater context that Thelwell examines. Instead, their blackface operated as a sign of an urban, creolized imagined elsewhere, underscoring the environmental dimension of referentiality rather than the racist representational function of the mask Thelwell describes. The Cape Townian use of carnival blackface therefore transposes the figurative into the ornamental.<sup>159</sup>

After the collapse of apartheid, blackface was replaced by glitter makeup, which typically covered the entire head. In a photograph taken during a carnival competition at Athlone Stadium, two D6 Raw supporters display their club affiliation in a way that faintly echoes Kewpie’s glamorous drag. The metamorphosis of blackface into glittering ornamentation does not simply decolonize a racist tradition; rather, it underlines the specific aesthetic quality of a mode of appearing that had already shaped the use of blackface in preapartheid Cape Town. The ornamental glitter makeup, covering the entire head, accentuates the Klopse’s outfit colors instead of the face, effectively making individual features disappear within the collective assemblage. It is therefore about

<sup>157</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky,”* 2006: 141.

<sup>158</sup> Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 248.

<sup>159</sup> On local, creolized forms of ornamentalization, see van de Geijn-Verhoeven et al., *Domestic Interiors*, 2002: 134, with regard to Asian designs in Cape Town.

referencing the social environment rather than serving as a representational or disfiguring mask.<sup>160</sup> As a second skin, the makeup does not represent a person but instead signifies connections to fellow dancers, transforming the carnival into a form of performative commoning—a collective assertion of the right to appear together.<sup>161</sup> In this sense, the carnivalesque street scenes strongly resonate with the way Kewpie's posse dragged through the rubble of District Six.



Figure 11: Mr. Raw & Mr. Raw, Carnival, Athlone Stadium, Cape Flats, 2019. Photo: Evelyn Annusß.

Challenging conventional interpretations of the face, the defacement produced by carnivalesque glitter aligns with another theater of minor, that is, nonrepresentational mimesis<sup>162</sup>—one that had long resisted hegemonic performance regimes in Old Europe and continued to shadow the history of “respectable” stage performances, despite the supposed expulsion of the HARLEQUIN. Perhaps within this folk-theatrical, genealogically interrupted undercurrent of carnival,

160 “The head is included in the body, but the face is not. The face is a surface,” write Deleuze and Guattari; *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 170.

161 On Josephine Baker's staging of skin as a modern surface phenomenon that decouples the “key signifier of cultural and racial difference” from the flesh, see Cheng, *Second Skin*, 2011, 7.

162 For the European context, see Münz, *Das “andere” Theater*, 1979.

new alliances emerged across time and space, notwithstanding the comic mask's appropriation for racist entertainment. In this sense, Cape blackface and its afterlife lend a kind of glamorous, creolized *survie* to the class-specific connotations of the dark mask of the *comici* in precolonial European *commedia*.<sup>163</sup>

These ornamental masks that accompany dance and musical performances evoke an “excessive mimesis” that tends to disrupt order.<sup>164</sup> Balke reads mimesis as performative, generative, and somatic—and thus precisely not as anthropomorphic representation, as petrified imitation. By emphasizing the constitutive dirtiness, that is, the *messiness of the mimetic*, to use his terminology, Balke highlights a specific potentiality of performing: the potentiality for referential and affective multidirectionality, of “queering” bourgeois-anthropocentric notions of representation.<sup>165</sup> Implicitly drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of becoming-minoritarian—that is, of becoming nomadic,<sup>166</sup> he foregrounds a potential to reject control.

What is described here as constitutive of mimetic practices is reflected in the Cape Town Carnival as a creolized cultural technique of making oneself similar.<sup>167</sup> The carnivalesque transposition of blackface onto the streets

163 On the performative transposition of the rural comic figure, the Bergamo dialect-speaking, sooty, filthy ARLECCHINO, see Rehin, “Harlequin Jim Crow,” 1975. It is possible, however, that the name of the comic figure in the European *commedia*, zanni (denoting figures who come in mobs, with an unclear gender), also evokes the name of Black slaves in medieval Islam (zanj).

164 Balke, *Mimesis zur Einführung*, 2018: 18; with regard to the reflection on dance and music (“tänzerisch-musikalische Darstellung”) in Koller, *Die Mimesis der Antike*, 1954, esp. 120. See also Benjamin's reading of the mimetic in recourse to dance (Benjamin, “Doctrine of the Similar” (1933), 1979: 65–69/“Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” II.1, 1991: 204–210). For a critique of ethnographic productions of alterity in the discourse on mimetic excess, marking the Collège de Sociologie as one of Balke's references (Balke, “Ähnlichkeit und Entstellung,” 2015), see Eidelpes, *Entgrenzung der Mimesis*, 2018, esp. 125. On the potential of excessive mimesis to wrest the tools of mimetic capacity from colonialism, in contrast Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 2018: 249.

165 On the essential messiness of references to the respective other of “a culture” and their function of undermining authority, see Balke, *Mimesis zur Einführung*, 2018: 16; on their power to produce dissimilarities in the similar, see *Mimesis und Figura*, 2016: 37–44; with regard to the prohibition of mimesis to subalterns in Greek antiquity: “Ähnlichkeit” 2015: 265; on the revolt dimension of mimesis, see Balke and Linseisen, *Mimesis Expanded*, “Introduction”: 2022: 12. This implies more than an understanding of the “messiness of identity” emphasized by Puar; see *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007: 212.

166 On becoming minoritarian, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987; Balke, “Ähnlichkeit und Entstellung,” 2015: 269.

167 See Kimmich, *Ins Ungefahre*, 2017: 141; Bhatti and Kimmich, *Ähnlichkeit*, 2015: 26—referring to Samir Amin's call for a “right to be similar.” Amin, *Spectres of Capitalism*, 1998: 42.

of a colonial port city such as Cape Town—and its rebellious afterlife—offers insight into people's capacity to relate to elsewhere, beyond their immediate surroundings. In this respect, Atjas and Coons in Cape Town have always already been reflexively indigenized. However, this insight, inherent to the local carnival, remains obscured if one readily assumes a general representational function of the mask and projects its racialized charge in the US context onto differently situated forms of use.

The dirty facing of this carnival, which locally purloins and resignifies a quotation from globalized mass culture, thus reveals a specific disposition of reception. The creolized blackface resists the “faceism”<sup>168</sup> that anthropomorphizes the mask and interprets the grotesque as suprahistorical—detached from its surroundings and its use—seeing it instead as the same racist distortion of an “actual” face across time and place. The Cape Town blackface quotation therefore challenges interpretations that attribute an almost absolute power to hegemonic control over references. It underscores the possibility for collective “reappropriation” and, in doing so, highlights its relationship to other modes of potentially conflicting drag.

### ***Blackface, Moffies***

In 1940, a year before Kewpie's birth, an anonymous letter to the editor in the *Cape Standard* complained about drag queens and the carnival. “Moffies,” it claimed, “should be in a hospital or some similar place, away from the public.”<sup>169</sup> The policing plea for their internment was justified as follows: “They are sexually abnormal—hermaphroditic in a pitiable condition, physically and mentally; the very thought of them should be repulsive to all but the scientists.” Drag queens, the letter continued, viewed with “almost sick … disgust,” were linked to the inner-city street carnival, where they played a special role as lead dancers, exposing the intersection of a temporary state of exception with queer everyday practices. The letter also referred to blackface as racial drag—and connected it to gender bending: Moffie Konserts (drag shows) and Coon Carnivals, it argued, confirmed the supposed primitiveness of the Coloureds and would reinforce claims of European superiority.

168 Weigel, “Das Gesicht als Artefakt,” 2013: 11; Weigel, *Grammatologie der Bilder*, 2015, esp. 267; Macho, *Vorbilder*, 2011: 291–316.

169 Coloured Student: “Slashing Attack on Coloured Coons: I Don't Like Them and Give My Reasons. ‘Disgusting and Degrading Festivals,’ *Cape Standard*, January 9, 1940: 3; quoted in Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999: 118.

Written under the name “Coloured Student” and positioned as the voice of the educated classes, the letter follows bourgeois interpellations of “respectability” under colonial rule. By demarcating queer, deviant modes of appearance that blurred existing classifications, the letter also affirmed the hegemonic *dispositif* of representation. More than a mere rejection of supposedly inferior depictions, it exposes a deeper fear of performances “too slippery … to police.”<sup>170</sup> In this sense, the letter illustrates how colonial strategies of divide and rule seeped into understandings of respectable representation, transforming them into a call for policing.

The demand to lock up drag queens, however, did not go unchallenged: “The information that Coloured Student gives about their sex is indeed enlightening … and it is apparent that he must have taken a lot of trouble to obtain information.”<sup>171</sup> Read against the grain, the sarcastically phrased letter highlights the entanglement of gender bending and blackface—linking the public visibility of supposedly *dirty bodies* and *dirty faces* to a broader connection between queering and creolization. What is often treated as oppositional—drag as a queer counterhegemonic practice and blackface as hegemonic-racist defacement—appears deeply intertwined in the context of the Cape. This connection is already evident in one of the earliest newspaper references to a drag queen performance during carnival. *Coloured Coons’ Gay Carnival*, published in the *Cape Times* on January 3, 1930, describes the fusion of gender bending and blackface through minor, carnivalesque mimesis: “He is dressed in burlesque female attire, and carries a tiny parasol. His voice is carried away by the wind but his antics draw periodical bursts of delight from the spectators as he rolls his white eyeballs or prances up and down.”<sup>172</sup> In this regard, the link drawn by Coloured Student is not plucked out of thin air.

Later sources make the local relationship between drag and blackface even more explicit. “PHA 3155 CT Coons 005” is the archival signature of a photograph housed in the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. Its call number refers to the carnival’s former name, as it was known from the nineteenth century onward, while the image itself suggests a queer citation of blackface—“reminiscent,” as it were, of Kewpie’s drag scene. Shot by an unnamed photographer on January 4, 1961—before the forced removals—the photograph captures Wale Street, which connects District Six and the Bo-Kaap. Intended as a press image for the *Cape Times* (southern Africa’s first daily newspaper, established in 1876), it was probably never published and ultimately ended up

170 Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003: 23.

171 F. Robertson, “Our Readers’ Views on Coons,” *Cape Standard*, January 16, 1940: 4. See Martin’s compilation of other sources in *Chronicles*, 2007.

172 “Coloured Coons’ Gay Carnival,” *Cape Times*, January 3, 1930.

in the archives as trash, so to speak. Unlike Kewpie's personal photographs, its collection history is fragmented, and there is no known biographical information about the people depicted. Yet this very absence allows for a reading that prioritizes the analysis of modes of appearance over retrospective projections of identity by its viewers onto its subjects.



Figure 12: Carnival, Cape Town, Wale Street at the corner of St. George, early 1960s, probably the Honolulu Dainty Darkies. National Library of South Africa, Cape Town (PHA 3155 CT Coons 005).

The carnival image foregrounds an unknown drag queen. It is impossible to determine whether their engagement with gender bending extended beyond carnival—like Kewpie's—or remained solely a festive performance. This “trouble to obtain information” underscores how the boundaries between carnival and queer everyday life in the Cape are not so clear-cut.<sup>173</sup> Taken a few years before Kewpie's well-documented images, this photograph already bears witness to a form of mimetic dragging—a transgressive form of embodied, danced performance that exceeds fixed notions of gender and identity. The drag queen depicted leads a train of dancers in minstrel costumes. In this sense, the image presents dragging not only as a performative act but also as a dynamic of being

173 For a reading of carnival as a temporal state of exception, by contrast, see Bakhtin, Rabelais, 1984; Rang, *Historische Psychologie des Karnevals*, 1983.

dragged along—perhaps less in the sense of gravitational pull and more in the joyous momentum of collectively making an appearance. Visually, what connects the drag queen to the dancers in tow is the mask they share: a specific form of blackface that anticipates the function of later glamour makeup. The image intertwines dragging and blackfacing against the backdrop of Cape Town's fraught (post)colonial history—marked by exploitative labor, segregationist policies, and the racialized aesthetics of divide and rule that continue to shape its creolized carnival.

Their body is clearly in motion at the moment the picture is taken. Only their left leg is visible. The dress accentuates their broad shoulders and muscular arms. They appear to be waving a dark tulle skirt in front of their stomach, raised at an angle as they shift their weight onto their supporting leg. Their head is covered with a kind of cap. Their outfit contrasts with the carnival-like male costumes of those dancing diagonally and at a slight distance behind them—a voor-loper seemingly in mid-jump, throwing one leg forward; an advance dancer ahead of the group in a top hat with a conducting baton; children with parasols; and a few adults. At the same time, their made-up face corresponds with the masks of the other dancers: their right eye and overemphasized mouth are painted white, while their left eye and nose area are blackened. However, unlike the grotesque masks of US minstrel shows, where racialized distortion serves as a pejorative defacement, this makeup follows a different logic. Here, the reference to skin color is replaced by lines of flight that touch or cross each other—both within the photograph and beyond its edges. These lines of flight potentially decenter the viewer's gaze, connecting the drag queen—despite their physical distance—to the masked figures behind them. Drag and carnival are linked here in a particular way: through ornamentalized face masks that do not merely grotesquely exaggerate the eyes and mouth in an interplay of black and white makeup but instead translate these features into a new constellation—one that diffracts stereotypical representations and highlights the fluid connections between bodies. The relationships among the performers are shaped by visual contrasts and correspondences that suggest rhythmic resonances. The drag queen's mirror-inverted, ornamental face paint visually connects them to the voorloper dancing behind; their complementary makeup suggests that the two appear to be dragging along the rest of the dancers, with whom they share the overemphasized mouth, forming a loose chorus. It is as though the music animating the dancers has found a visual echo in their makeup.

Together, the people stage a play of possible, asignifying modes of relating.<sup>174</sup> Their mode of appearing in the picture deterritorializes the individual

174 By way of contrast, see Nancy's ontologization of being-with, *Être singulier pluriel*, 2013.

body, exempting it from its representational function. Instead, it exposes the relational, tactile moment of this carnival, radiating outward into its surroundings and potentially resisting apartheid through blackface. In the photo, these living ornaments function not as instruments of derogatory, distorting imitation but as catalysts for mass assembly.<sup>175</sup> And it is precisely this function that the drag queen allegorizes, interweaving queer and creolized mimesis.<sup>176</sup>

In terms of gender history, Cape Coloured carnival is largely a homosocial affair; traditionally, men have taken on most of the stereotyped roles, while women have been primarily responsible for its infrastructure.<sup>177</sup> Moreover, carnival historiography often either ignores drag queens entirely or treats them merely as marginalized gay figures; conversely, within gay historiography, carnivalesque gender bending is often too readily subsumed into a broader gay community history.<sup>178</sup> As a result, either the figure itself or its context tends to be overlooked. Despite critiques of the carnival—its complicities, its homosociality, and so on—it is precisely this so-called moffie figure that reveals the queer potential of creolized modes of cultural performance. This becomes all the more evident when juxtaposed with colonial-apologetic forms of essentialized self-representation and their genealogical claims.

### ***Reenacting***

The history of propaganda mass stagings legitimizing settler colonialism in South Africa began in 1910, at a time when the street carnival was already visually dominated by blackface. That year saw the performance of the South African

175 See Kracauer's thesis of the rootlessness of living ornaments of the Weimar period, *Das Ornament der Masse*, 1977 (originally 1927): 59; *The Mass Ornament*, 1995.

176 On the prominent role of drag queens in carnival, see *Moffie van Hanover Park*, a popular carnival song (Pacey 2014: 111) in creolized Afrikaans originating from Melahu, the transatlantic "lingua franca" of the colonial era (Willemse, "Afrikaans," 2018), and initially written in Arabic in the Cape by deported Southeast Asian intellectuals (Worden et al., *Cape Town*, 1998: 127; on the Bugis script used: Groenewald, Slaves, 2010). On the queer Cape variant Gayle, see Olivier, "From Ada," 1995; see also Luyt, *Gay Language in Cape Town*. In Cape Afrikaans, words from Malay, the local Khoikhoi, isiXhosa, isiZulu etc. resonate and intertwine with Dutch, Portuguese, and English chunks.

177 On the role of women, see Baxter, "Continuity and Change," 2001; Oliphant, *Changing Faces*, 2013: 86—92; on drag queens, see Pacey, "Emergence," 2014: 118—122.

178 See Martin, *Coon Carnival*, 1999; Thelwell, *Exporting Jim Crow*, 2020. From the opposite perspective, they become an organic part of gay history; see Tucker, *Queer Visibilities*, 2009. See also Chetty, "A Drag," 1995.

Pageant of Union, a spectacle featuring over 5,000 participants, marking South Africa's entry into the age of political mass stagings.<sup>179</sup> Nostalgic depictions of colonial history dominated, with Jan van Riebeeck's landing in Table Bay in 1652 serving as the Urszene. Some audience members may have recognized a model for this Dutch-flagged scene: Charles Davidson Bell's 1851 historicist painting, in which van Riebeeck, surrounded by his soldiers, addresses a group of "natives" positioned lower in the composition. In any case, the scenic authentication of a *Herrenvolk* and its territorial claim asserted by the painting relied on the theatricalization of van Riebeeck's arrival, drawing from colonial visual arts. What appeared as a reenactment was, in fact, a performative imitation of a painted colonial imaginary.

The contrast between these colonial stagings and the aesthetic register of carnival becomes even more apparent when considering how each engages with performativity. While propaganda spectacles relied on a colonial visual culture that kept performativity latent, mimetic dancing contradicted hegemonic representational politics and always held the potential to erupt into revolt. Other key historical reenactments and tableaux vivants in South Africa's political history illustrate this dynamic. In 1938, the Boer migration into the continent's interior was staged as the folkloristic Great Trek procession. In 1952, under apartheid rule, the Van Riebeeck Festival celebrated 300 years of colonial history, serving as a platform for negotiating and communicating competing historical narratives. This was particularly evident in the representation of the so-called Cape Malay Community, as I. D. du Plessis, Commissioner of Coloured Affairs in the Ministry of Home Affairs, termed the Muslim-creole population. Classified as a subcategory of Coloured, this group was retroactively assigned a shared origin story, beginning with the arrival of Sheikh Joseph at the Cape in 1694. The pageant thus functioned as part of a broader, strategically invented tradition that essentialized and categorized cultural identities to legitimize apartheid policies.

Moreover, the "Malays" were intended to serve as a surrogate for Afrikaans customs. "Together with their language, the Cape Malays have lost any songs which their forefathers may have brought from the East," du Plessis wrote in his 1972 study *The Cape Malays*, justifying his mission to claim them for governmental purposes.<sup>180</sup> At the height of apartheid, du Plessis also intervened in the

179 On the history of South African pageants, see Kruger, *The Drama*, 1999: 23—47, on 1988; Witz, "History," 2009; with a view to the Van Riebeeck Festival of 1952 and the latent colonial rivalries: Witz, *Apartheid's Festival*, 2003.

180 Du Plessis, *The Cape Malays*, 1972: 40. Du Plessis was involved in the planning of the Group Areas, with which the population classified as nonwhite was expelled from District Six, while the Bo-Kaap remained Malays Quarter on his "folkloric" initiative;

local carnival, attempting to co-opt it as a state-controlled cultural instrument. His goal was to replace the “cooning” of the streets, to use the term current at the time, with an apartheid-sanctioned performance of Nederlandse liedjes and “traditional” Afrikaans culture. As the carnival became increasingly regimented, it also became a contested form of collective performance. It was precisely the creolized, carnivalesque blackface associated with dragging—a form that defied genealogical classification and resisted attempts to control its signification—that clashed with apartheid ideology. Rather than being affirmed by the regime, blackface was rejected—perhaps precisely because of the uncanny parallels between South African Coloureds and Black performers from the United States. Creolized people, positioned with relative privileges within the Cape’s racial hierarchy and in a broader global context, disrupted the rigid racial binaries that apartheid sought to enforce.

Later, blackface did indeed subvert the reception of official propaganda. In 1988, just a few years before its collapse, the apartheid regime attempted to restage South Africa’s colonial history. Instead of commemorating the arrival of van Riebeeck, it marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Bartolomeu Dias’s landing—the Portuguese colonial power that had reached the Cape before the VOC. This event was staged as a tableau vivant on the Mossel Bay beach, which was still reserved for Blankes. Conceived by Marie Hamman, the spectacle once again dramatized and contained intricolonial tensions in the final years of apartheid. Leslie Witz describes “what made spectators gasp in astonishment”<sup>181</sup>: amid widespread boycotts by the marginalized population and political friction leading up to the event, the role of the Khoikhoi was reportedly played by white performers—allegedly wearing Afro wigs and dark makeup.<sup>182</sup> Thus, upon his arrival on the coast, the Dias figure encountered Khoikhoi impersonators who evoked carnivalesque blackface. At a historical moment when the “others” refused to participate in apartheid’s representational spectacle, the blackened face became a site of disruption. The established *dispositif* of colonial reenactments—which had affirmed white supremacy through mass

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see Jeppie, *Historical Process*, 1986/87. On du Plessis’s role in the regulation of carnival during apartheid, see Gaulier and Martin, *Cape Town Harmonies*, 2017: 7–8; Coon Carnival, 1999: 120. On the “Malays” and Muslim history of the Cape, see Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 110–112; Haron, “Early Cape Muslims,” 2017; on the historicity and fluidity of classifications, see Jeppie, “Reclassifications,” 2001; Jephta, “On Familiar Roads,” 2015.

181 Witz, “History,” 2009: 151.

182 See the photo series of the 1988 pageant, which has since surfaced at the Bartolomeu Dias Museum at Mossel Bay—a branch of the Western Cape Archives—and includes image captions. Listed as the Khoi Group are Debby and Penny Kruger, Emile Scheepers, Albert Brand, Niels Marx, and Corrie Coetzee.

spectacles since the 1910s—was suddenly thrown into question. The obviously arbitrary mask, reminiscent of the so-called Coon Carnival of “the Coloureds,” undermined the founding narrative of apartheid, challenging the *gestus* of “this has been.”



Figure 13: Mogamat Kafunta Benjamin and unknown friend, Carnival, nearby Green Point Track, Cape Town, undated, around 1990. Melvyn Matthews Private Collection (Cape Town).

Involuntarily, this living image exposed its kinship with the grotesque-ornamental masks of an obviously artificial imagined elsewhere—masks that acknowledge their own fictitious nature. At the same time, this revealed a fundamental distinction between minor carnivalesque mimesis and the rigid demands of propaganda representation: queer, creolized performance practices remain acutely aware of the fabrication of representation and the potential for referential slippage—precisely what propaganda reenactments must suppress. By 1988, this complicit mode of representation was no longer capable of essentializing “natives” or reaffirming the colonial narrative. Shortly before the long-overdue collapse of apartheid, attempts to stage reenactments that framed history—from the colonial landing to the victory of the National Party—as a linear success story had lost their efficacy. Representation could no longer fulfill its political function, as street carnival, with its ornamentalized blackface, had evolved beyond a temporary state of exception. By 1988, Blanke with their black-painted faces and their wigs inadvertently revealed that apartheid folklore was ultimately creolized dragging itself—while carnival coons,

like carnival moffies, performatively exposed the arbitrariness of racialized and gendered classifications, as a photo of Mogamat Kafunta Benjamin from around that time shows.<sup>183</sup>

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Neither the carnival nor Kewpie's drag scenes offer a prospect of political—or even revolutionary—organization. But these queer, creolized modes of making a collective, loose appearance in public do bear witness to the possibility of encountering one another in a way other than identitarian. The world is creolizing itself, “le monde se créolise,” Glissant wrote in the 1990s in response to the longue durée of colonial contexts of violence.<sup>184</sup> At the time when apartheid collapsed after the end of the Cold War, he added an urgent warning to what he conceived of as the creolization of the world: a warning against a “return of the identitarian.”<sup>185</sup> Today, amid ongoing violent injustice and majoritarian identity-based interest politics—exacerbated by the global neoliberalization that followed the Cold War—Glissant's warning seems painfully urgent—which is also to say: it is proving useful elsewhere. Were the ANC to fail in ensuring that Zulus, Blacks, Coloureds, Indians, and Whites could live together peacefully in South Africa, Glissant claimed, something would be threatened or even lost for humanity and our future in the twenty-first century—“notre avenir.”<sup>186</sup>

Amid the current authoritarian drift, dominant politics seem not only to foster global decreolization, but also fascization.<sup>187</sup> The right-wing backlash in many places and the ways in which illiberal-libertarian politics are transforming

183 On Mogamat Benjamin, see Smith, “Remebering Kafunta,” 2024; as a *moffie voorloper*, see Oliphant, *Changing Faces*, 2013: 36. See also the Mogamat Benjamin Collection (Ben.180), District Six Museum Archive.

184 Glissant, *Introduction*, 1996: 15. On retrospective criticism, see Erasmus: “I disagree that ‘the world is creolising’ ... In my reading, Glissant suggests the world might be a better place were its inhabitants to consider themselves in relation.” See *Creolization*, 2011: 649. Mbembe takes up Glissant's thesis with regard to the living conditions of those in precarious circumstances and reformulates it as the becoming-black of the world; see *Critique of Black Reason*, 2014.

185 See, however, today's critique of unfulfilled promises of the Rainbow Nation by the Freeborn, such as Chikane, *Breaking a Rainbow*, 2018; Wa Azania, *Rainbow Nation*, 2014, *New South Africa*, 2018. On generational differences, also Newman and DeLanoy, *After Freedom*, 2014: 69–91. On the downfall of apartheid and the arrival of neoliberalism, see Godsell, “Colour of Capital,” 2018: 53; Houston et al., “Paradise Lost,” 2022.

186 Glissant, *Introduction*, 1996: 24; for the English translation: Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, 2020: 12.

187 See Toscano, *Late Fascism*, 2023.

societies of control allow new nationalisms, racisms, and “antigenderist” resentments to proliferate.<sup>188</sup> And those politics, too, make use of the carnivalesque. Hence, to better understand the terror wrought by identitarian politics, I will now turn to a different historical setting, examining Nazi propaganda as a precursor to modern policies of exclusion, self-indigenization, and authoritarian fantasies of purity—formations that can themselves be seen as reactions to what Glissant would later call the creolization of the world. I will begin with another drag scene, shot in a Munich propaganda photo studio—one that appears to invert Kewpie’s D6 performance and the carnival images it drags in tow.

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188 For critique, see Butler, *Who’s Afraid*, 2024.





Figure 14: Eva Braun, presumably at Studio Heinrich Hoffmann, ca. 1928/29. Photograph from Braun's private album, Heinrich Hoffmann Collection, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (hoff-333).

## II. Nazism

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### Debarbarizing

“ich als Al Jolson”—“me as Al Jolson”—is the handwritten caption above a black-and-white album photo. The image shows a smiling white woman in drag, staging herself as someone else—in a man’s suit, with a blackened face and a frizzy wig. Her “me” (“ich”) in the title appears unequivocal, presented clearly in a mode of as-if, and thus set apart from the name of the “other,” Al Jolson.<sup>189</sup> On the white wall in the background, her shadow double can be seen leaning slightly forward, as if dancing, while her upright, somewhat stiff body standing on nondescript wooden planks seems to have been still at the moment the shot was taken. Someone has been posing for the camera, arms outstretched, weight shifted onto the front foot.

The gesture depicted here, the position of the arms, can be read as a restaging of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), with Al Jolson in the leading role. As emphasized in advertising posters for this first officially distributed sound film, which was also shown in Cape Town around that time, the photo appears to evoke Jolson’s gestural repertoire. The backstage film being referenced here presented vaudeville music as a creolized melting pot, while visually excluding Black actors.<sup>190</sup> In the film, blackface was used to portray the son of a cantor from a religious family, who entered the Broadway scene from the bars of precarious Lower Manhattan—an impoverished predominantly Eastern European Jewish neighborhood—by way of the vaudeville theater. Both the film’s plot and Jolson’s biography seem to figure in this photograph. In any case, the person depicted is imitating Jolson with a mixture of somewhat awkward and perhaps also resentful laughter.

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189 The caption plays with the rhetorical figure of giving a face; on rhetorical face-giving, see Menke, *Prosopopoia*, 2000; see also Chase, *Giving a Face to a Name*, 1986: 82—112 (in *Decomposing Figures*); de Man, *Autobiography*, 1979; Hamacher, *Unlesbarkeit*, 1988, as well as Annuß, *Elfriede Jelinek*, 2005.

190 For prominent criticism of the film, see Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 1996; in contrast, see the readings by Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky,”* 2006: 97—104; Kelman, “Acoustic Culture,” 2006; Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 1998: 102—115.

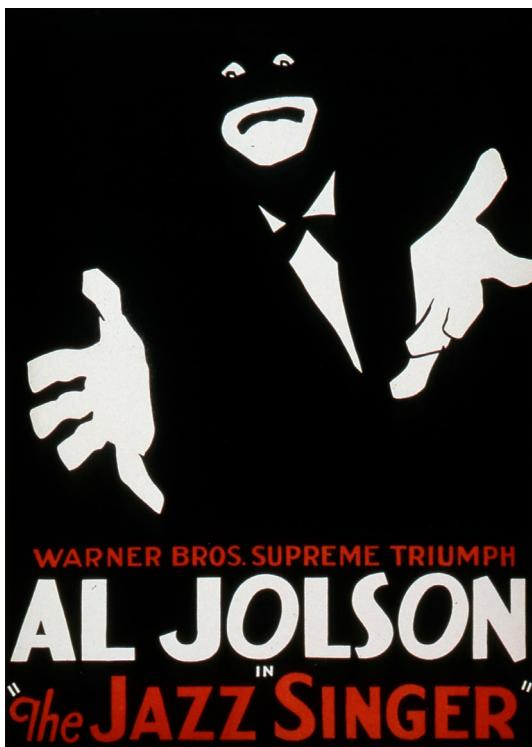


Figure 15: Advertising poster, *The Jazz Singer*, 1927. William Auerbach-Levy, Bridgeman Images.

*The Jazz Singer* introduces JACKIE RABINOWITZ as a creolized figure who grows up with ragtime in New York and eventually becomes a star against his father's wishes. Played by one of the most famous contemporary blackface actors, the persona is authenticated and marketed through Rabinowitz's biography. Born Asa Yoelsen in the then-Russian town of Srednik, Jolson himself rose from the son of a cantor to become a US entertainment icon. His cinematic alter ego allegorizes the historical entanglement of migrant Eastern European Jews and Black music within a new mass culture. On the eve of the Nazis' seizure of power, the photo echoes this entanglement.

It serves as a counterpart to Kewpie's friendly, defiant drag scene and his seemingly conspiratorial laughter in a pose that visualizes creolization, as discussed in the previous chapter. When placed in context, by contrast, this studio shot exemplifies the potentially pejorative use of creolized forms of performance. Clearly staged, it can be read, together with the caption, as an equivalential chain of resentments<sup>191</sup>—stereotypically staging all kinds of

191 See, with a focus on instituting the figure of the people, Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005. On the current right-wing construction of equivalential chains, see, for the

“others”: as a *Widerspiel*,<sup>192</sup> that is, a counterperformance, to minor mimesis; as a pejorative “false projection,” to borrow from Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s “Elements of Anti-Semitism” in their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*). At least retrospectively, this dragging ties itself to National Socialist propaganda—that is to say, it schlepps a specific reference to antisemitism along.

To open this chapter on Nazism, I read the short-circuiting of gender bending and blackfacing in this photograph as a reaction to creolization in the German interwar period, to then discuss related modes of “drag” in entertainment culture, propaganda, and cultural studies of the time. The invention of a Nazi modernity of its own will prove to be the flipside of gender bending and color bending within a mass culture that had long since been globalized. While the first chapter explored queer-creolized forms of appearance in the context of apartheid as critical theory put into practice, this chapter traces the lines of flight of exclusionary devaluation, of exoticisms and *Eigentlichkeit*, which one might loosely translate as fictitious authenticity, within a complementary configuration of allegedly *dirty* dragging.

### **Braun (Brown)**

In 2011, the photo caused a scandal in contemporary new media.<sup>193</sup> As a supposedly sensational find, it has since circulated on the internet as an obscene illustration of National Socialist racism; in this reception, blackface was perceived as an iconic, suprahistorical sign of an unchanging antiblack racism. In this sense, the image appears as appropriative, racialized dragging. Often dated to 1937, however, the photo also tells something about today’s conditions of reception: the decontextualized availability of archival material and the back-projections of contemporary discourses, which tend to occlude questions of local and historiographical situatedness, as well as questions of aesthetic differences. And indeed, the image is more complex than its reception suggests. It refers to

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German-speaking context, Wielowiejski, “Identitarian Gays,” 2020; see also the other articles in Dietze and Roth, *Right-Wing Populism and Gender*, 2020; Dietze, *Sexueller Exzptionalismus*, 2019.

192 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1969: 196/*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002: 137.

193 See <https://www.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2011/03/09/eva-braun-in-black-face>; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/eva-braun-in-black-face/2011/03/14/ABBHLiU\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/eva-braun-in-never-before-seen-images-creepily-even-intimately-familiar/2011/03/14/ABBHLiU_blog.html); <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/eva-braun-in-blackface>, accessed September 5, 2024.

Weimar mass culture, while—through its caption—linking the visualization of blackface in drag to a Jewish figure.

The copy photograph shows a young photo lab assistant, unknown at the time, who became a public persona only after 1945, and thus posthumously. Apparently shot in Munich, the original must have been taken shortly after the German film release of *The Jazz Singer* around 1928/29—according to the catalog of the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. The archive later added an additional caption: “in Faschingskostüm” (“in carnival costume”).<sup>194</sup> As a photograph retaken from an album, the picture with the caption above it can be found in the collection of Heinrich Hoffmann, who was already shaping Nazi visual politics—especially depictions of the Führer—at the time.<sup>195</sup> The photo was therefore apparently first shot in the studio that determined the graphic aesthetics of Nazi organs such as the *Völkischer Beobachter*—and presumably by the same photographer who was already responsible for the antisemitic weekly *Auf gut deutsch*—roughly: “In plain German”—and helped shape the Nazi image empire.

The frontal, professional photograph, taken slightly from above, shows Eva Braun, who would later meet Adolf Hitler in Hoffmann’s studio, but would remain absent from official Nazi imagery until 1945.<sup>196</sup> Read against this background, a specific relation comes into play: the relationship between the photograph—which seems to have been intended for private use only—and later propaganda images, in which the minstrel mask and the staging of the colonized diverge. As will be shown in more detail later, the grotesque mask of blackface was not only specifically gendered but also charged with antisemitic resentments in the Nazi era, and was thus mobilized as the allegedly terrifying image of the creolization of Europe.<sup>197</sup>

This photo comes from Braun’s private album with caption. It can be found as image 27A in album 33 of the thirty-five albums confiscated from U.S. soldiers, which ended up in the U.S. National Archives (Washington, DC) after 1945.<sup>198</sup>

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194 See photo archive Heinrich Hoffmann, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: <https://bildarchiv.bsb-muenchen.de/metaopac/search?id=bildarchiv13167&View=bildarchiv>, accessed September 5, 2024.

195 See Hoffmann’s complementary series of postcards taken around the same time, which show the future Führer rehearsing his gestures like in a silent movie (Herz, Hoffmann und Hitler, 1994: 92–137) and illustrate what Bertolt Brecht called the *theatricality of fascism* (Brecht, GBA 22.1: 561–569).

196 For the biography of Eva Braun, who became a photo lab assistant at the Heinrich Hoffmann Studio at the age of 17, see Görtemaker, *Eva Braun*, 2010.

197 On European creolization, see Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Tate, *Creolizing Europe*, 2015; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, “Archipelago,” 2015.

198 See <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/124034694>, accessed September 5, 2024. The picture is placed after photographs of a New Year’s Eve party in 1931/32, in which

The photograph itself is visibly staged. Carefully lit from the top right, it plays with Braun's oblique shadow. And it is this shadow which may evoke the *Cake Walk*, and possibly also posters from Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu—Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (A Symphony of Horror, 1922), or images from the *Schwarze Schmach* (black shame) campaign against French colonial soldiers during World War I—that is, the visually staged hauntings of German femininity by dark creatures.<sup>199</sup> Braun's shadow in the background thus still recalls visual tropes from the Weimar period that can be associated with antisemitism and racism. In contrast, however, Braun's bodily appearance does not directly cite these stereotypes, but rather, in the name of Al Jolson, the mask popularized in Cape Town as a counterimage to prevailing social conditions.

And in Braun's photo, as well, blackface remains legible as the sign of trans-oceanic mass culture.<sup>200</sup> However, her image in drag also gestures toward the formation of a specific visual politics in the wake of Nazism and can be read as a particular form of right-wing carnivalization. Her cross-dressing in blackface, taken in Hoffmann's studio, was apparently rephotographed along with the caption during the Nazi era—from the backstage of power, so to speak. Returned to Hoffmann's studio as a private souvenir of earlier times, “me as Al Jolson” does not function as a simple racist depiction or a straightforward denigration of dark skin. Rather, Braun in drag seems to project onto the visual history of European urban Jewishness—marked by forced migrations and creolization—an artificially blackened face, via the explicitly evoked name of “the Other.” The image can be read as transposing the label of creolized entertainment from the United States into a sign of nongenealogical appearance. In drag, in a man's suit, Braun invokes the exemplary figure of “the Jew” as someone “without a tribe.” Seen in this light, it concerns perhaps less the dynamic of “love and theft,” as Eric Lott describes the affectively charged use of African American music and carnivalesque performance traditions by white minstrels in the United States.<sup>201</sup> This “love” notwithstanding, the image also

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Hitler can also be seen, and before Braun's earliest vacation pictures from the 1920s. The photos are thus not organized chronologically. Moreover, unlike the other photos, the shot “as Al Jolson” is not a snapshot and is apparently the only one that shows Braun “in carnival costume.”

199 See, for example, the cover of Guido Kreutzer's 1921 *Die schwarze Schmach: Roman für das gefährdete Deutschland*. Available at [https://img.ricardostatic.ch/images/8fe14269-ebb8-4344-becb-9ec37aea5b0f/t\\_1000x750/die-schwarze-schmach-g-kreutzer-1921](https://img.ricardostatic.ch/images/8fe14269-ebb8-4344-becb-9ec37aea5b0f/t_1000x750/die-schwarze-schmach-g-kreutzer-1921), accessed September 11, 2024.

200 On the history of Jewish migration and blackface in the context of a new US mass culture, see Slobin, “Putting Blackface in Its Place,” 2003.

201 See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 1993; see also the shift in emphasis from his critique of appropriation to the thesis of the “theatricalization of race” in *Black Mirror*, 2017: 7.

drags antisemitic projections into transoceanic modern mass culture in its citation of cross-dressing and blackface referencing Jolson.

Signifying the color brown, Braun's surname can in this context be associated with a kind of mock-*browning*. Her cross-dressing can be read within the specific visual context of the shoot—"brown," that is, Nazi visual politics—as a play with referential ambivalence and, simultaneously, as a gesture of empowerment. This staging in front of the camera thus potentially also functions as a mockery of equivalential figurations of Blackness, of queerness, of Jewishness.<sup>202</sup> The image, however, does not so much invert the hegemonic white position into what Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* describes as the constitutively unrepresentable—"a void within signification"—in order to evoke "the people" as an empty signifier.<sup>203</sup> Instead, blackface here may have become an empty signifier of resentment, conflating arbitrary forms of Othering with notions of sexual deviance and with modern mass culture as miscegenation. Accordingly, the representational registers of anti-Judaism and colonialism have become obsolete. Neither hooked-nose nor jungle stereotypes appear in the picture; the memory of them lingers at most in Braun's shadow. Rather, the image invokes a vision of modern, transgressive dirtiness, in which women and men appear just as indistinguishable as "non-Aryans" and "Germans." In this context, blackface can be read through Braun's *inscriptio* as a modernized sign of supposed Jewish mimicry. Linked to Hoffmann's studio, Jolson's name in Braun's title becomes the "ground of the thing".<sup>204</sup> *On Populist Reason* brushed against the grain—the empty signifier not of "the people," but of its precondition: the invented alien who is presumed to be perpetually disguised and thus to be banished beyond the carnival.

Shot in the photo studio of an *alter Kämpfer*, an early member of the Nazi movement, and photographed again with a reference to Jolson, the image inverts US racial dynamics—the separation of black and white—that *The Jazz Singer* is often seen to epitomize. According to Michael Rogin's influential reading, the film portrays Jewish upward mobility while simultaneously erasing the presence of the Black US population. It thereby testifies to how becoming white entails exclusion via disfiguration of an invented Other, specifically via blackface. In his book *Blackface, White Noise*, perhaps the most well-known interpretation of *The Jazz Singer*, Rogin ultimately sees the film as a continuation of racist minstrel shows and a mass cultural depoliticization of creolized mimetic practices. He argues that the narrative portrays the complicity of

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202 On the analogization of Slavic and Black populations in Nazi colonial discourse and its prefiguration in European Orientalism, see Snyder, *Black Earth*, 2016.

203 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005: 105.

204 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005: 101.

Jewish immigrants by integrating into the white majority, achieved through the appropriation of early US mass culture, the performance of masculinity, and the overcoming of their own exclusion: “Blackface … allows the protagonist to exchange selves .... Blackface is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American. By putting on blackface, the Jewish jazz singer acquires … first his own voice, then assimilation through upward mobility, finally women.”<sup>205</sup>

The blackface in drag, taken at the Hoffmann photo studio and presumably sent back from Obersalzberg, Hitler’s private mountain retreat, makes Braun appear as the personification of “the Other” in its multiple figurations—as Black, Jewish, queer. Braun’s blackface seems to cast Jolson as the allegorization of “the Jew,” effeminated in drag, in keeping with common antisemitic stereotypes. In my reading, the antisemitic operation staged by the photo and its caption inverts Rogin’s interpretation. It instead presents a fundamentally different conception of whiteness—a Nazi-specific vision of supremacy.<sup>206</sup> Braun in drag is not about the integration of a Jewish immigrant into white American show business through the visual exclusion of Black performers. Rather, the caption equates the blackened face with the invisible Jewish face, portraying it as fake and making it visible as *dirty*. Situated within the Nazi context, “me as Al Jolson” allegorizes a different kind of resentment. The Othering inscribed in Jolson’s blackface, as Rogin interprets it, is here performatively reversed and charged with antisemitism, redirecting its force back onto Jolson whose gesture is cited.

Referentiality shifts here from skin color to dirtiness—also as an aesthetic form, as minor mimesis. Braun’s conspicuously blackened hands in the photograph makes this clear. In addition to white gloves—the usual minstrel sign featured in *The Jazz Singer*’s promotional poster—the image evokes Jolson’s self-referential song “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face.” It marks the film’s transformation of JACKIE RABINOWITZ into the celebrated American entertainer Jack Robin after growing up in a working-class slum, or rather in a neighborhood of the lumpen, the ragtag proletariat, that is, within earshot of the Black community and their creolized music. Braun’s drag transposes the gestural repertoire of the singing

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205 Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 1996: 95. Lhamon questions this appropriation as replacement discourse and instead outlines the accumulation of doubles in the film; *Raising Cain*, 1998: 102–115.

206 On the historicization of German-occidental whiteness, see Hund, *Wie die Deutschen weiß wurden*, 2017; Benthien, Haut, 2001:172–194. See also the critique of critical whiteness discourse from the German-speaking left-wing, postmigrant Kanak Attak: Ibrahim et al., “Decolorise It!,” 2012; <https://www.akweb.de/bewegung/diskussion-um-critical-whiteness-und-antirassismus-decolorise-it/>, accessed September 11, 2024.

figure in the so-called Coffee Dan scene, which is also featured in the poster, into a blackface performance. The lyrics of “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face,” however, are ostensibly not about black skin or minstrel masks;<sup>207</sup> instead, a father sings about his child getting dirty while playing. Whereas Rogin critiques the theft of Black music, the song itself suggests an alternative logic: it reframes the white entertainment industry’s obscene love for creolized music—as outlined by Lott—into a sanitized version suitable for underage viewers. The music in this first officially distributed sound film is stripped of almost all syncopation and anything reminiscent of jazz, blues, swing, or ragtime. In this sense, blackface in the film visually represents the domestication of a specific “dirtiness,” which is then commented on in the song “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face.”

Both Braun’s captioned photograph and Jolson’s backstage film scenes are shaped by modes of framing designed to keep mask play from being perceived as—to use Walter Lhamon’s words—“too slippery and multisignificant to police.”<sup>208</sup> Their aesthetics are akin and linked to a specific episteme. Both photo and film seem governed by the belief that one can clearly distinguish between one’s own face and the mask of another. And this fantasy of a singular, authentic face is tied to a specific sense of temporality allowing for controlled interruption. The caption above the Hoffmann studio image reflects the promise that Braun’s “filthy,” transgressive play will end by Ash Wednesday at the latest. This stands in contrast to the rebellious *Jazz Singer* quotation in the streets of Cape Town during carnival or Kewpie’s photo in front of the District Six ruins, where drag is a queer-creolized everyday practice resisting apartheid and makes no claim to a real face, a real identity, behind what is performed. Braun’s drag scene, by contrast, is designed to dissociate her face—her bodily image outside the photo—from the “other” evoked by Jolson’s name. Through rhetorical containment, Braun’s blackface drag aligns aesthetically with the backstage film genre. In turn, dramatic representation in backstage film serves to stabilize the relationship between mask and person. The blackface scenes in *The Jazz Singer*’s white cast are thus narratively contained—confined to the stage or the changing room.<sup>209</sup> The film itself signals a shift in the use of blackface, one that began, at the latest, with the official abolition of slavery in the United States, and continued in the increasingly codified form of minstrel shows.

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207 See Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 1998: 105—106. The song lyrics contrast the plot in which JACKIE RABINOWITZ is disowned by his father because of his love for what is sold in the movie as ragtime.

208 Lhamon on T. D. Rice, *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003: 3.

209 Senelick, *Changing Room*, 2000.



Figure 16: Virginia Serenaders, Sheet Music Cover, 1844. Harvard Theatre Collection on Blackface Minstrelsy, 1833–1906 (Houghton Library).

The *Jazz Singer* belongs to a genre that makes it suitable for ironic quotation in the Nazi context. It differs significantly from the rough, folk-theatrical performances of early blackface acts like those of T. D. Rice akin to *commedia dell'arte*. His performances exemplify the overt transgression of the boundaries between onstage and offstage, and between black and white, yet without regard for the

political necessity of abolition.<sup>210</sup> In contrast to figures like JIM CROW and other tramp or trickster characters, *The Jazz Singer*'s use of blackface aligns more closely with what appears in early nineteenth-century sheet music covers and, even more so, in the widely circulated advertising posters of minstrel shows around 1900: the framing and taming of the relationship between mask and face.

In *Love and Theft*, Lott refers to a cover by the Virginia Serenaders from 1844: at the top, it depicts the five musicians in blackface, costumed and performing exaggerated gestures. Below, the performers are shown with upright posture, without makeup, as respectable citizens. Mask and face, entertainment and bourgeois self-representation beyond the stage, are clearly separated.<sup>211</sup> This, however, is not a reflection on practices of figuration. Instead, the carnivalesque is domesticated. Stabilizing references became a prerequisite for using blackface as a racist representation after abolition. The Janus faces on modern minstrel advertising posters—and thus in an early form of visual mass culture—make this clear. In the Library of Congress, for example, one finds a frequently cited poster of Billy Van as *The Monologue Comedian* in the context of “Wm. H. West’s Big Minstrel Jubilee.” Dating from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the poster plays with multiple framings. Van’s portraits—his bourgeois face on the left, his blackface with wig, wide eyes, and red-painted mouth on the right—are framed in ornate gold, thus at least superficially separated yet connected by interlocking rings, that is, an infinity sign.

In *The Jazz Singer*, the separation of mask and face is even more explicit. Blackface is transposed into a film drama that clearly distinguishes between stage and backstage. In stark contrast to early cinematic experiments linked to the fairground and popular theater—with their play on endless metamorphoses—the sequences of images here are subordinated to narrative and governed by central perspective.<sup>212</sup> Although sound has not yet assumed the role it would in later talkies—reinforcing illusionistic representation—and although the music possesses its own acoustic dimension, while speech is

210 On Rice, see Annus, “Blackface,” 2014. On the HARLEQUIN’s erratic form of performance in opposition to new modes of discipline, see Münz, *Theater und Theatralität*, 1998: 62.

211 See Lott, *Love and Theft*, 1993: 20–21; however, the complementary representation of the Virginia Serenaders does not operate in a proto-Brechtian, reflexively alienating sense—as Lott suggests—but rather functions as a mode of evidence production. On the metaphor of theft and metalepsy, see Nyong’o: “minstrelsy ... heisted an image of blackness that did not exist prior to its theft but that was constituted through this theft.” See *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 112.

212 On the visuality of dramatic representations, see Heeg, “Szenen,” 1999; see also *Das Phantasma*, 2000.



Figure 17: Billy Van, “Wm. H. West’s Big Minstrel Jubilee.” Advertising poster, 1900. Library of Congress, Washington DC (2014637077).

largely confined to inserted intertitles, blackfacing emerges as a narratively contained play within the play.

It is “faceism,” in this context, that is emphasized.<sup>213</sup> Retrospective interpretations often project this representational understanding of the mask onto all forms of blackface, viewing it as a constant vehicle of racist misrepresentation, thereby overlooking its shifting forms and functions. The problematic nature of this concept of representation becomes evident in the counterpart to grotesque defacements: the staging of an actual white face. The close-up of such a face was established by a popular film that, roughly a decade before *The Jazz Singer*, played a key role in the second founding of the Ku Klux Klan: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). A milestone in film history, it introduced previously unseen special effects and camera techniques. Griffith deployed these innovations in service of a racist narrative that sought to relegitimize the plantation system and authenticate the myths of the South.<sup>214</sup>

213 Weigel, “Das Gesicht als Artefakt,” 2013: 11.

214 For criticism of *The Birth of a Nation*, see Dyer, “Into the Light,” 1996; Gubar, *Race-changes*, 1997: 57–66; Gunning, D. W. Griffith, 1994.



Figure 18: Lillian Gish as Elsie Stoneman in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915 (screenshot).

The film's awkward juxtaposition of different modes of staging blackness—the depiction of a black rapist by a white actor in black makeup, alongside the casting of subaltern roles with actual Black supporting actors—undermines the illusion, at least from the perspective of contemporary viewing habits. Yet it functions effectively in positioning another face at the center of the drama: a representation of white femininity in need of protection. The close-up of lead actress Lillian Gish contorted in fear—an affection-image in Deleuze's terms—helped to launch the cult of stardom accompanying the film.<sup>215</sup> Unlike the grotesque distortions used for ridicule, this image served to legitimize the racist violence that had been perpetrated in the Klan's name since the late 1860s. The film's cinematically rendered retrotopian pullback—the legitimization of the

215 On the *affection-image* as close-up, see Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 1997: 87–101. See also Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987): “The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close-up” (170–171); on the face of the star as close-up (241); on the white horror face—in a subliminal reference to blackface as its flipside (190). The gendering of face and blackface, however, is left out here.

Southern slavery regime—had terrifying consequences.<sup>216</sup> *The Birth of a Nation* helped establish the second Ku Klux Klan as a mass movement and triggered a new wave of lynchings in the 1910s. Gish's distorted face signals how the Klan's resurgence after its decline during the Jim Crow era was evoked. The gendered staging of victimhood in this propagandistic film drama highlights the affective pliability of hegemonic representation: the call to restore the disfigured white face through violence.

Braun's blackface in drag is quite extraordinary compared to Gish's defacement. The image does not depict Braun as a woman in need of protection. Taken in the laboratory of Nazi visual politics on the eve of the seizure of power and later captioned from the backstage realm of the Nazi state apparatus, this shot of cross-dressing may be interpreted as a gesture of feminine empowerment. Set against the backdrop of the antisemitic visual machinery in which it was apparently produced, Braun's photo in blackface appears to cast Jolson as a representative of an “un-German,” creolized US culture—a “filthy other” artificially blackened without a face of his own. In this reading, Braun marks Jolson as exemplary dirt, while her cross-dressing feminizes Jewish masculinity. The photo thus does more than simply intertwine various forms of drag (cross-dressing, playing Jewish, and blackface); it inflects the masquerade in the film it quotes with unpredictable twists, potentially shifting the association of dirtiness onto the figure of “the effeminate Jew” allegorized in the caption. From this perspective, the image does not just counter the narrative of Jewish whitening. Braun's blackface in drag appears to assert control over the carnivalesque, marking those who visually elude identification as “others.” In doing so, it cites a cinematic format already designed to regulate meaning.

In this context, Braun's caption can be read as a pun linking her own name with the “brown movement” of the Nazis. In this reading, the “ich” plays not only on Braun's surname—as a paraphrase of the dark makeup and thus a nod to the creolized US mass culture associated with Jolson and to blackface as rather “dirt” of those labeled as without a tribe,<sup>217</sup> but also evokes the political, that is, brown-shirted, context in which the studio photograph was taken. This layered pun connects references to creolized appearance and party affiliation through the personal pronoun and the foreign proper name—Jolson instead of Braun. Reflecting on the image, in any case, reveals semantic shifts, while the image itself mobilizes gender and color bending as constitutive visual markers of alterity. If deconstructive and queer-theoretical readings of drag

216 See Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 2017. On pullback and temporal drag, see again Freeman, *Time Binds*, 2010: 62; in “Blackface from Time to Time,” 2025, Lott inverts Freeman's reading with reference to the use of blackface pervaded with nostalgia for the plantation.

217 For T. D. Rice's *JIM CROW*, see Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 1998: 106.

highlight the performative contingency of gender,<sup>218</sup> Braun's image seems to suggest equivalences among what is deemed minor, setting them in contrast to Nazism. Seen in this light, the photograph's gesture may also be read as a move toward "decreolization." It appears to speculate on shared ridicule, as its *inscriptio* merges "brown" as a label for the tribeless with "brown" as the color of Nazism. The image thus playfully claims control over the conflation of references. Reading the image as a response to the contemporary globalization of entertainment culture and its Nazi-coded link to Jewishness also means that Braun's caption asserts carnivalesque laughter as something that can be controlled.

### ***Decreolizing (Baker, Krenek)***

"... who walks with bended knees ... and looks like a boxing kangaroo ... Is this a man? Is this a woman? Her lips are painted black, her skin is the color of a banana, her hair, already short, is stuck to her head as if made of caviar, her voice is high-pitched, she shakes continually, and her body slithers like a snake."<sup>219</sup> To observers in Europe in the 1920s, Josephine Baker—born in the South in 1906 and thus six years older than Braun—appeared as an illegible figure. Her *Danse Sauvage* in the *Revue nègre* became a scandal—translating female nudity, previously depicted statically in the visual arts of Old Europe, into the kinaesthetic realm. Yet beyond that, contemporary critics saw in her dancing an unrestrained, excessive physicality: they credited her with transfigurative abilities that challenged the essentialization not only of gender and skin color, but of the human figure itself. The review cited above draws on zoomorphic, racist clichés. But these were precisely the tropes embedded

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218 See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990: 146. Lott refers to the contradictory readings of gender and color bending in *Black Mirror*, 2017: 9.

219 This is taken from Pierre de Régnier's newspaper review "Aux Champs-Elysée, La Revue Nègre," published on November 12, 1925 on page 6 of *Candide: Grand Hebdomadaire Parisien et Littéraire* 2:87; cited here from Dayal, "Blackness as Symptom," 2012: 35, see also Baker and Chase, *Josephine*, 2001: 5, as well as the memoirs of her illustrator Paul Colin, who describes Baker as "part boxer kangaroo [sic], part rubber woman, part female Tarzan" (cited in the introduction to Dalton and Gates, *Josephine Baker*, 1998: 9; for the French original, see Colin, *La Croûte*, 1957: 74). On the dual character of projection and self-staging, see Cheng, *Second Skin*, 2013; Hanstein, "Revue und Recherche," 2021; Jules-Rosette, *Josephine Baker*, 2007. On Baker and drag, see Garber, *Vested Interests*, 1992: 279—281.

in a reception that also celebrated mimetic virtuosity—aesthetic skills.<sup>220</sup> Amalgamating gender bending and color bending, Baker's performances came across as more-than-human dragging.

According to Anne Anlin Cheng, Baker's stage appearances can neither be essentialized nor dismissed as mere masking; by transforming “skin into cloth,”<sup>221</sup> they instead bear witness to a specific contemporary form of precarious subjectivity. Through dance, Baker allegorized the cult of surfaces and ornamentation of the time, which, in post-World War I Europe—after the senseless destruction wrought by industrialized militarism—responded to a longing for a new beginning.<sup>222</sup> In this sense, Cheng argues, Baker enacted the contemporary crisis of selfhood within a specific context: “One of Baker's lived contradictions was that she was recreating her own imaginary 'Africa' out of her African American heritage for Europeans who were telling her what African American dance should and should not look like.”<sup>223</sup> Baker's creolized appearance in 1920s Europe—both in revue theater and in film dance scenes, such as those from *La Sirène des tropiques* (1927)—embodied the promise of a transatlantic mass culture that appeared to break with entrenched European structures of violence, gender hierarchies, and nationalisms. This promise continued to resonate in Baker's own politics, from her later work in the Résistance to her Rainbow Family.<sup>224</sup> In the 1920s, forty years after the partition of the African continent by European colonial powers and in the lingering shadow of the shell shock caused by World War I, Europe celebrated a new culture of amalgamation, exemplified by Baker.<sup>225</sup> Therefore, Baker may also be read as

220 On the mimetic capacity of resembling, see Benjamin arguing that a child does not just pretend to be a merchant or a teacher, but also a windmill or a railroad; “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 2007: 333—336, on 333/“Über das mimetische Vermögen,” II.1, 1991: 210—213, on 210; see also “Doctrine of the Similar (1933),” 1979: 65—69/“Lehre vom Ähnlichen,” II.1, 1991: 204—210. For a differing view embedded in critical race studies, i.e., on racist animalizations as “disavowed recognition,” see Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 2020: viii—xi, 681; “Animal,” 2013: 681.

221 Cheng, *Second Skin*, 2013: 172. On Baker, see also the third chapter, “Savage Dancer,” in Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 1998: 57—83; and on the quotation of African American minstrel tropes: 66.

222 See Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 2009; see also Annus, “In the Air,” 2024.

223 Cheng, *Second Skin*, 2013: 70. See also Dayal: “Baker embodied blackness as a symptom of the modern European subject”; “Blackness as Symptom,” 2012: 36.

224 On Baker's decidedly antiessentialist Rainbow Tribe, her children adopted from all over the world, and the emotional costs for those involved, see Pratt Guterl, *Josephine Baker*, 2014; on her biography, see also Horncastle, *Baker*, 2020.

225 On amalgamation as mixing, extracting, and transforming, from a perspective that counters simple notions of hybridity, see Nyong'o, *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 74, 83; see also Cockrell, “Jim Crow,” 1996: 178.



Figure 19: Josephine Baker, portrait, Paris, 1927. Photo: Lucien Waléry.

the latent negative reference in Braun's use of blackface in drag. Yet by citing Jolson instead of Baker as the contemporary icon of gender and racial transgression, of subverting anthropocentric representational registers, blackface in drag may have appeared more easily to control.

Baker's creolized language took the form of syncopated dance, distantly related to the jumping HARLEQUIN.<sup>226</sup> Despite referencing fabricated African colonial or minstrel-like plantation clichés, her bodily performance undermined racist, biologicist projections; Baker staged her sexualized "nature" as something skillfully constructed, as artistically crafted, and was thus perceived as offering a new transcontinental movement culture. It was precisely in this context that Baker drew on elements of blackface—echoing the emergence of Black US performers within a new mass culture that resisted easy containment. Photographs from the early 1920s show Baker with a bobbed haircut, oversized shoes, a plaid dress, and twisted eyes—invoking the clownish mask tradition of minstrel shows and thereby Black blackface comedians such as Bert Williams.<sup>227</sup> Baker's use of blackface allusions thus reflected the entanglement of the comic figure with creolized US mass culture and its nonidentitarian potential—emphasizing movement as mimetic excess and thus privileging an environmental, allegorical conception of mimesis over representational imitation.

Baker thus indicates a pact between creolized movement art and forms of popular theater, along with modes of perception tied to the new media of the time, which contradicted bourgeois, individualized notions of dramatic, that is, symbolic representation. Her performances in the *Revue nègre* of 1925 and other shows became mass attractions from Paris to Berlin. Her phallic banana skirt and the exotic staging of her revues aggressively exaggerated sexist and colonial racist stereotypes. As such, Baker embodied anything but the forms of authentication that characterized nineteenth-century folk shows.<sup>228</sup> Her minstrel quotation can be read as a kind of "browning" that rejected the phantasm of old lineages and the ideology of blood and soil.

226 "The "message" of the figurations of the "harlequin principle" consisted solely in their appearance, according to Münz, *Theater und Theatralität*, 1998: 62; their typical move was the jump—an indication of insubordination. On Baker's creolized dancing, see preliminary considerations in Annus, "Racisms and Representation," 2024.

227 See the illustrations in Cheng, *Second Skin*, 2013: 40–41. On Bert Williams's blackface, see Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky,"* 2006. See also Frederick Douglass's ambivalent description of a minstrel show in which Black performers appear in burnt cork; "Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders," *North Star*, June 29, 1849. See also Lott, *Love and Theft*, 1993: 36–37.

228 On the history of the *Völkerschauen*, see Lewerenz, *Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau*, 2006: 65–86; Andreassen, *Human Exhibitions*, 2015.



Figure 20: Paul Colin, *La revue nègre au Music-hall des Champs Elysées*, 1925. Josephine Baker lithograph, Stefano Bianchetti/Bridgeman Images. © Bildrecht, Vienna 2025.



Figure 21: Paul Colin, *Le Tumulte noir*, 1927. Josephine Baker lithograph, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (NPG.91.199.20A).

Instead, Baker's movement repertoire referenced an interweaving of performative cultural techniques, highlighted the affinities among popular dance forms from the Charleston to the Schuhplattler, and showcased related kinaesthetic skills.<sup>229</sup> Baker thus became a pop icon of a globalized mass culture that celebrated mimetic excess—an excess perceived as threatening by the identitarian right of the time. In this sense, Baker can be read as a dancing counterfigure to Braun's pejorative freeze of blackface in drag. While invoking various forms of Othering, yet without essentializing them, Baker allegorized a creolizing world that was also changing Old Europe.

Accordingly, in the German-speaking context of the 1920s in particular, blackface became a focal point in the cultural struggle against the so-called Jazz Republic,<sup>230</sup> to which Braun's drag scene can be linked. A "brown," National Socialist campaign aimed to expel mimetic performances like Baker's from what

229 On creolized dance forms using the example of the Cake Walk, see Kusser, *Körper in Schieflage*, 2013: 437.

230 Wipplinger, *Jazz Republic*, 2017.

Christopher Balme has called the theatrical public sphere.<sup>231</sup> On February 14, 1929—one day after Ash Wednesday—Baker was scheduled to perform at the Deutsches Theater in Munich. Her performance was preemptively banned, apparently in anticipatory obedience, and against the backdrop of earlier Nazi disruptions.<sup>232</sup> In 1928, the Austrian composer Ernst Krenek's scandalous 1927 opera *Jonny spielt auf* (*Jonny strikes up*) had already been targeted by Nazis, who attacked performances with stink bombs.<sup>233</sup> The opera portrayed a Black US musician—a petty criminal and tramp figure, contrasted with the persona of an effeminate white artistic genius from Old Europe. It played with blackface iconography and the sexualized, exoticized visual tropes of minstrelsy associated with the Jazz Age, that is, with the globalized mass culture of the Weimar Republic.

Especially in Munich, the Nazis' stronghold and self-declared "capital of the movement"—where Hoffmann's studio was located—the SA (storm troopers) had already been aggressively disrupting public events.<sup>234</sup> Alfred Jerger, the white actor who played JONNY, later claimed that he was nearly lynched until the enraged crowd realized he was merely wearing black makeup. In reality, however, National Socialist propaganda was primarily directed against blackface itself, because in contemporary reception—as in the cases of JONNY and Josephine—it signaled the creolization of Europe. In any case, in *Jonny spielt auf*, jazz was presented as the sound of a new mass age, although Krenek's composition had even less to do with Black music than *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>235</sup>

As everyone danced in circles around a globe-like clock, the choir sang in a manner reminiscent of Baker in the final scene: "Die Überfahrt beginnt! So spielt uns Jonny auf zum Tanz. Es kommt die neue Welt übers Meer gefahren mit Glanz und erbt das alte Europa durch den Tanz!" / "The crossing begins! And so Jonny plays for us to dance. The new world comes sailing across the sea in splendor and inherits Old Europe through dance!"<sup>236</sup> Krenek's *Weltreigen*, or

231 Balme, *Theatrical Public Sphere*, 2014. On Baker's reception in the context of National Socialism, see Alonzo and Martin, *Stechschritt*, 2004: 274—291, especially Dorgerloh, "Zwischen Bananenröckchen."

232 "Josephine verboten," *Die Stunde*, February 19, 1929: 7.

233 See on *Jonny spielt auf*, Rogge, *Ernst Kreneks Opern*, 1970, on the Munich scandal: 65—66; Wipplinger, "Performing Race," 2012; on the reception in Nazi Germany Alonzo and Martin, *Stechschritt*, 2004: 292—315, esp. Dümling, "Ernst Kreneks Oper": 314. On the similar Viennese reception by the composer Julius Korngold, who migrated to the United States in 1934, see his article "Operntheater" in *Neue Freie Presse*, January 1, 1928: 1—3.

234 For the specific role of Munich, see Bauer et al., *München*, 2002.

235 On music and the use of shimmy figures, see Wipplinger, "Performing Race," 2012.

236 *Jonny spielt auf*, 1926: 51.

“dance round the world,” as the subtitle proclaimed, interweaves allusions to Baker, minstrel borrowings, and blackface with the European medieval motif of the dance of death, associated with carnival and clown masks.<sup>237</sup> In this context, the Black musician figure in the opera was seen as burying “Old Europe.” Blackface was thus recontextualized and redefined in connection with the personification of death. This syncretic use resonated with the times—drawing on US minstrelsy—while also contributing to the renewed exoticization of the existing Afro-German population.<sup>238</sup> After the loss of the colonies and amid racially motivated nationalist policies, this blackface motif became a tool for “Othering” Black bodies and faces. Yet within Krenek’s work—as in Baker’s—the appropriation of blackface may also have obscured the everyday realities of creolization already present in Weimar Germany and the presence of Black Germans who had migrated from the former colonies.

In any case, *Jonny* became a hit.<sup>239</sup> Even years after the Nazi seizure of power, the minstrel-related portrayal of the protagonist—carrying a saxophone and wearing a “funny stiff hat on his head”<sup>240</sup>—continued to be attacked by Nazi propaganda as an indicator of a modernity deemed rootless and “degenerate.” Hans Severus Ziegler, a local politician from the Rhineland who had allegedly made a name for himself in 1930 as the NSDAP’s theater officer in Thuringia with his decree “Wider die Negerkultur, Für deutsches Volkstum” (“Against Negro Culture, For Germandom”), issued in response to the Krenek scandal, organized the *Entartete Musik*, or “Degenerate Music” exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1938—the same city where Baker would celebrate her spectacular comeback in 1953, adorned with feathers.<sup>241</sup> Confronted with accusations of having violated §175, the ban on homosexuality, Ziegler redirected attention toward other resentments by attacking modern artists instead. Apparently acting on his own initiative, he curated the exhibition, which featured librettos, scores,

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237 On the proximity of the medieval jester figure and the dance of death, see also Mezger, *Hofnarren im Mittelalter*, 1981.

238 On the prehistory of blackface in the German context, see Bowersox, “Blackface and Black Faces,” 2024; Gerstner, *Inszenierte Inbesitznahme*, 2017.

239 On the more than 500 performances, see Wipplinger, “Performing Race,” 2012: on 236. He attributes the prominent reception of *Jonny* to Krenek’s play with the ambivalence between blackface and blackness.

240 In German: “komischen steifen Hut auf dem Kopf.” Krenek, *Jonny spielt auf*, 1926: 10.

241 On Ziegler, see Dümling, “Hexensabbat,” 2011: esp. 192, 194–195; Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988: 144–145. See also <http://www.ziegler.rosa-winkel.de/>, accessed September 11, 2024. For the decree, see the official gazette of the Thüringisches Ministerium für Volksbildung (Thuringian Ministry of National Education), April 22, 1930, reprinted in Dümling, “Hexensabbat,” 2011: 193.

stage designs, photographs, caricatures, and selected recordings, for the Reich Music Days.<sup>242</sup>

Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who had initiated the *Entartete Kunst*, or “Degenerate Art” exhibition in 1937—which toured until 1941 and was conceived in Munich as a counterpoint to the *Erste Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (“First Great German Art Exhibition”)—had allegedly tried to block Ziegler’s crude project. Ultimately, though, he had to concede to the antimodernist faction within the party. *Entartete Musik* attested to an identitarianism that had taken on a life of its own. Ziegler’s accompanying brochure framed the exhibition as a National Socialist *Abrechnung* (reckoning), as the title of his accompanying text claimed, aiming to expose a contemporary “mental enslavement and spiritual poisoning.”<sup>243</sup> Jewishness was branded as a “ferment of decomposition” and equated with cultural Bolshevism.<sup>244</sup> And although Krenek came from a Catholic Austrian family, *Jonny spielt auf* was ultimately invoked to raise what Ziegler called the “national question of honor”:

Ein Volk, das dem *Jonny*, der ihm schon lange aufspielte, nahezu hysterisch zuzubelt, mindestens aber instinktlos zuschaut, ist seelisch und geistig so krank geworden und innerlich so wirr und unsauber, daß es für die unendliche und uns immer wieder erschütternde Reinheit und Schlichtheit und Gemütstiefe der ersten Takte der *Freischütz*-Ouvertüre gar nichts mehr übrig haben kann. ... da beginnt eine völkische Ehrenfrage.<sup>245</sup>

A nation that wildly cheers on this *Jonny*—who has been performing for them for quite some time—or at the very least watches on without any instinct, has become so spiritually and mentally diseased, so inwardly chaotic and impure, that it is no longer capable of feeling anything for the boundless, ever-moving purity, simplicity, and emotional depth of the opening notes of the *Freischütz* overture. ... what is at stake here is a matter of *national honor*.

Ziegler’s “reckoning” did not target Baker but attacked Krenek, composers such as Arnold Schönberg, Hanns Eisler, and Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith, the

242 The Propaganda Ministry used *Entartete Musik* to dissolve the previous professional association, the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein*, replacing the *Tonkünstlerfeste* it had organized with the *Reichsmusiktage*, thereby asserting itself against the interests of Alfred Rosenberg and Hermann Göring in the internal competition over music policy within the Nazi regime; see Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988, 118. See also Prieberg, *Musik im NS-Staat*, 1989. On the general chaos of competition within Nazism, see Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg*, 1970. On the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, see Hecker, “Kunststadt,” in Bauer et al., *München*, 2002, 310–316, on 314–316.

243 In German: “seelischen Versklavung und einer geistigen Vergiftung.” Ziegler, *Abrechnung*, 1938; published in Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988: 127–143, on 129.

244 In German: “Ferment der Dekomposition.” Ziegler, *Abrechnung*, 1938; in Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988: 129.

245 Ziegler, *Abrechnung*, 1938; in Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988: 133.

librettists Ernst Toller and Bert Brecht, and—apparently the only woman mentioned—the dancer Valeska Gert. Jewish and communist German-speaking artists, in particular, were targeted. After the Nazi state apparatus had consolidated its power, this strand of propaganda no longer focused on the transatlantic flavor of Weimar pop culture. Instead, the music of local classical modernism was especially portrayed as an internationalist, communist-driven decomposition of Germanness.<sup>246</sup> Whatever Ziegler—a self-proclaimed “educator of the Volk” who, after the war, became a schoolteacher in West Germany and later retired to write apologetic books about Hitler<sup>247</sup>—imagined jazz to be, Black music examples did not appear in his 1938 “reckoning.”



Figure 22: Ernst Krenek: *Jonny spielt auf* (score, title), 1927. Universal-Edition.

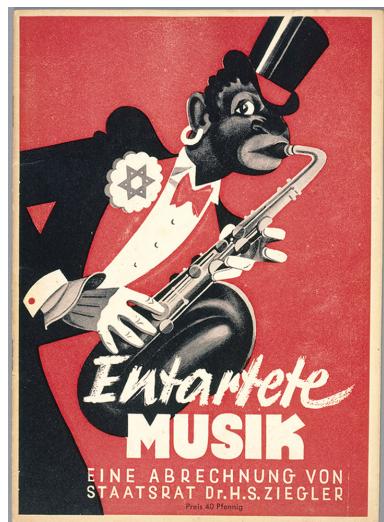


Figure 23: Hans Severus Ziegler: *Entartete Music: Eine Abrechnung* (title), 1939. bpk-Bildagentur.

The cover of his pamphlet, however, responded to the Weimar reception of the minstrel mask. Ziegler himself later claimed that the graphic—designed by Ludwig Lucky Tersch for the Völkischer Verlag Düsseldorf—ran counter to his “sense of style and ... taste.”<sup>248</sup> The cover echoed the graphic reception of black-face in Europe, prefigured by Paul Colin’s illustrations for the Baker revues,

<sup>246</sup> On the relevance of sound for early Nazi propaganda, see Annus, *Volksschule*, 2019: 73–126; “Gemeinschaftssound,” 2015.

<sup>247</sup> See Ziegler, *Wer war Hitler?*, 1970.

<sup>248</sup> In German: “Stilgefühl und ... Geschmack.” Ziegler quoted in Dümling and Girth, *Entartete Musik*, 1988: 145.

and specifically referenced the title page of Krenek's score.<sup>249</sup> While Colin had increasingly emphasized the transfigurative dimension of Baker's movements in his drawings, Krenek's cover was concerned with static illustration.<sup>250</sup> As a visual link between the Jazz Age and modern opera, it depicted a saxophonist in checked trousers and a slanted hat—a minstrel allusion—while the Universal edition featured a photograph of Alfred Jerger, also holding a saxophone and wearing an oversized flower in his buttonhole.<sup>251</sup> JONNY was thus being marketed during the Weimar era as a figuration of new music in the broadest sense—a representation of a modern world. The equivalence between European classical-modern music and creolized mass culture from the United States was already being foreshadowed. Tersch's *Entartete Musik* cover mirrored Krenek's but replaced JONNY's flower with a Star of David and distorted his face into something zoomorphic. The exaggerated blackface reference was thus given an antisemitic charge, visualizing the supposed connection between so-called cultural Bolshevik modernism and Jewish conspiracy. Aimed at the German-speaking educated middle class, this Nazi "reckoning" and its accompanying visual politics built on earlier efforts at decreolization—echoing the Jolson caption on Braun's blackface photo in drag.

### ***Oddkinships I (Benjamin, Kafka)***

On the eve of the National Socialist regime, in 1933, Walter Benjamin's "Erfahrung und Armut ("Experience and Poverty") called for a new barbarism in response to the devastation of World War I and the threat of German nationalism hardening into state fascism. This call for a positive notion of barbarism—a new language marked by "its arbitrary, constructed nature"<sup>252</sup> and a rejection of anthropomorphism as a principle of humanist, i. e. anthropocentric *imitatio*—signified a turn toward contemporary minor aesthetics, related to mass culture, as a way to confront the present. Benjamin portrayed this present as a ghostly, seemingly endless mummers' dance: "philistines in carnival disguises roll endlessly

249 On the significance of the saxophone on the advertising poster, see Wipplinger, *Jazz Republic*, 2017: 127—128. The reproduction of Colin's lithographs can be found in Lahs-Gonzales, *Josephine Baker*, 2006: 13.

250 See the introduction by Dalton and Gates, "Josephine Baker," 1998: 4—12.

251 See Dümling, "Jonny," 2004: 191.

252 Benjamin, with reference to Scheerbart, "Experience and Poverty," 2005, 733. In German: "Zug zum willkürlichen Konstruktiven." Benjamin "Erfahrung und Armut," II.1, 1991, 216. In contrast, see the Nazi discourse on the Jewish "mixed race" and the ethnologically justified notion of the rootless bastard; see the corresponding propaganda material in Alonzo and Martin, *Stechsritt*, 2004, esp. 376—377.

down the streets, wearing distorted masks covered in flour and cardboard crowns on their heads"; "we need to remind ourselves of Ensor's magnificent paintings, in which the streets of great cities are filled with ghost."<sup>253</sup> Benjamin described a cultural climate energized by "astrology and the wisdom of yoga, Christian Science and chiromancy, vegetarianism and gnosis, scholasticism and spiritualism,"<sup>254</sup> in which he saw the flipside of a destructive "development of technology"<sup>255</sup> as badly in need of a different, "barbarized," and disruptive countercarnival. In "Erfahrung und Armut," he outlined a break with the Old World faintly prefiguring Glissant's notion of creolization, though otherwise disengaged from colonial history and respective everyday amalgamations:

was ist das ganze Bildungsgut wert, wenn uns nicht eben Erfahrung mit ihm verbindet? ... Diese Erfahrungssarmut ist Armut nicht nur an privaten sondern an Menschheitserfahrungen überhaupt. Und damit eine Art von neuem Barbarentum. Barbarentum?

In der Tat. Wir sagen es, um einen neuen, positiven Begriff des Barbarentums einzuführen. Denn wohin bringt die Armut an Erfahrung den Barbaren? Sie bringt ihn dahin, von vorn zu beginnen; von Neuem anzufangen; mit Wenigem auszukommen ...<sup>256</sup>

For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience? ... Indeed (let's admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism. Barbarism?

Yes, indeed. We say this, in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces them to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with little and build up further, looking neither left nor right.

253 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2005, 732. In German: "karnevalistisch vermummte Spießbürger, mehlbestäubte verzerrte Masken, Flitterkronen über der Stirne, wälzen sich unabsehbar die Gassen entlang"; man müsse "an die großartigen Gemälde von Ensor denken, auf denen ein Spuk die Straßen großer Städte" erfülle. Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," II.1, 1991: 215. On James Ensor's paintings, see Becks-Malorny, *James Ensor*, 2016.

254 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 2005, 732. In German: "Astrologie und Yoga-Weisheit, Christian Science und Chiromantie, Vegetarianismus und Gnosis, Scholastik und Spiritualismus." Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," II.1, 1991: 214. What Benjamin barely hinted at were the gender and colonial dimensions of the general lack of experience he described.

255 Benjamin, Experience and Poverty, 2005, 732. In German: der Kehrseite einer zerstörerischen "Entfaltung der Technik." Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," II.1, 1991: 215.

256 Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut," II.1, 1991: 215; "Experience and Poverty," 2005, 732.

For Benjamin, the break with the past was necessary because a language once considered as shared had been lost. In a frequently quoted passage, he attributed this loss to the shell shock of World War I:

nie sind Erfahrungen gründlicher Lügen gestraft worden als die strategischen durch den Stellungskrieg, die wirtschaftlichen durch die Inflation, die körperlichen durch den Hunger, die sittlichen durch die Machthaber. Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gefahren war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft, in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken, und in der Mitte, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige gebrechliche Menschenkörper.<sup>257</sup>

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.

“Erfahrung und Armut” evoked the trauma of vulnerable bodies amidst their destroyed surroundings—of being confronted with an environment that no longer seemed to be a given.<sup>258</sup> It countered the defeat of the German army and the militaristic, expansionist justifications for war with a nonnostalgic engagement with cultural remains. Against the backdrop of the traumas of World War I, Benjamin did not invoke the decline of the West but instead conjured Walt Disney’s *MICKEY MOUSE*—a figure not just animated by technical marvels, but also making fun of them. He used a popular cartoon to highlight the potential of a globalized, US-style mass culture to conceive of mimesis as beyond anthropocentric imitation. In opposition to the destructive, nationalist use of technology, Benjamin proposed a playful, “environmental” way of relating to the world through constantly shifting figurations:

Denn das Merkwürdigste an ihnen ist ja, daß sie allesamt ohne Maschinerie, improvisiert, aus dem Körper der Micky-Maus, ihrer Partisanen und ihrer Verfolger, aus den alltäglichsten Möbeln genau so wie aus Baum, Wolken oder See hervorgehen.

For the most extraordinary thing about them, is that they all appear, quite without any machinery, to have been improvised out of the body of Mickey Mouse, out of his supporters and persecutors, and out of the most ordinary pieces of furniture, as well as from trees, clouds, and the sea.

257 Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut,” II.1, 1991: 214; Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” 2005, 732.

258 See Annus, “In the Air,” 2024; with regard to Brecht, see Kirsch, “Fatzers Aggregate,” 2016; with reference to Sloterdijk’s discussion of “Atmoterror,” *Luftbeben*, 2002.

Natur und Technik, Primitivität und Komfort sind hier vollkommen eins geworden und vor den Augen der Leute, die an den endlosen Komplikationen des Alltags müde geworden sind und denen der Zweck des Lebens nur als fernster Fluchtpunkt in einer unendlichen Perspektive von Mitteln auftaucht, erscheint erlösend ein Dasein, das in jeder Wendung auf die einfachste und zugleich komfortabelste Art sich selbst genügt, in dem ein Auto nicht schwerer wiegt als ein Strohhut und die Frucht am Baum so schnell sich rundet wie die Gondel eines Luftballons.<sup>259</sup>

Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon.

Benjamin described these transfigurations as improvised—emerging from the surroundings, from furniture or trees, before people's eyes. To advocate for a positive notion of new barbarism, and thus for a contemporary, transformed aesthetic attuned to the affordances of new media, however, it was a specific kind of figuration—a now largely forgotten blackface reference transposed into animated film—that he brought into play.

In 1928, Walt Disney's *MICKEY MOUSE* in the animated cartoon *Steamboat Willie*, drew on minstrel and vaudeville masks by depicting a white-gloved, black-faced mouse with huge eyes.<sup>260</sup> In these early portrayals, the memory of blackface was still clearly legible—at least within the US context.<sup>261</sup> The unruly figure evoked the “oddkin” of *JIM CROW*. Benjamin's reading, however, did not address US segregation. Instead, *MICKEY MOUSE* offered him a vision of how shared significations could be discarded elsewhere in order to laughingly “make a new start; to make a little go a long way.”<sup>262</sup> Against the backdrop of World War I, Benjamin described a specific disposition for the reception of creolized mass culture. From this perspective, the political stakes of the resentful struggle against an emerging transatlantic mass culture—intensifying in the Weimar Republic—become more legible. Braun posing in blackface and Baker dancing “grotesquely,” as so many contemporary observers claimed, emerge

259 Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut,” II.1, 1991: 218—219; “Experience and Poverty,” 2005, 735.

260 See <https://archive.org/details/steamboat-willie-mickey>, accessed September 11, 2024.

261 On the connection between blackface and comics, with recourse to Art Spiegelman's *MICKEY MOUSE* adaptation, see Frahm, *Sprache des Comics*, 2010: 309—314; Ditschke et al., “Birth of a Nation,” 2009: 15—21.

262 Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty*, 2005, 732. In German: “von Neuem anzufangen; ... mit Wenigem auszukommen.” Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut,” II.1, 1991: 215.

as paradigmatic antipodes of dragging within this context. Complementary to the Cape Town Carnival and its reception of US mass culture, in the German context blackface was recontextualized as a contested sign of the nomadic.

Later, in a note from his so-called *Passagen-Werk* (The Arcades Project), probably written in 1937 in exile in Paris, Benjamin outlined the deterritorializing, nongenealogical gathering of found objects as a kind of dirty dragging: as collecting rags (*Lumpen*). In this, he reflected on his own style of writing: performative transpositions, modified quotations without quotation marks. In a note on literary montage, he wrote:

Aber die Lumpen, den Abfall: die will ich nicht inventarisieren sondern sie auf die einzig mögliche Weise zu ihrem Rechte kommen lassen: sie verwenden.<sup>263</sup>

But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

Countering the territorial violence of the Nazis, Benjamin's note described dragging as a kind of nomadic schlepping, indifferent to the origins of found objects.<sup>264</sup> Against the backdrop of forced flight, Benjamin's understanding of quotation as performative transposition was decidedly political. It also resonated with a conception of language that recalled the history of earlier forced migrations in Europe. In ancient Greece, incomprehensible, foreign stammering was described as barbaric. Benjamin's advocacy for a new, barbaric attitude and his later reflections on ragpicking as dragging aimed toward understanding language as constitutively foreign. It exposed the difference between ahistorical quoting that serves confirmation bias and a deterritorializing, creolized use of signs.

This deterritorializing practice also aligns with Franz Kafka's understanding of language. Benjamin's view is thus not singular, yet specifically situated, resonating—like Kafka's—with the echo of forced migration in specific cultural techniques. Within Europe, they may reflect the impact of the history of anti-Judaism, which later developed an afterlife as colonial terror. In 1912, shortly before World War I, Kafka delivered what would become known as his *Rede über die jiddische Sprache*, which has been translated as “An Introductory

263 Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, V.1, 1991, 574; N 1a, 8; *The Arcades Project*, 1999, 460, N1a, 8. See Annuß, “Dirty Dragging,” 2022. On Benjamin's praxeological understanding of quoting, see Menke, “Nach-Leben im Zitat,” 1991; *Sprachfiguren*, 1991. Benjamin inverts Marx's devaluation of ragpickers, vagabonds, and of “the whole indefinite mass,” i.e., “der ganzen unbestimmten Masse,” in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx, 1972, MEW 8, 63).

264 On the nomadic as opposed to the genealogical, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987; Deleuze, “Pensée nomade,” 1963/“Nomad Thought,” 1992; Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 2011.

Talk on the Yiddish Language.”<sup>265</sup> Kafka’s perspective was tied to his encounter with Eastern European exile theater and its performative approach to language. As a confused jargon, he argued, Yiddish disrupted the orderly structures of understanding typical of Western Europe. Highlighting the exemplary nature of Yiddish theater, Kafka described it as a form of what I am elucidating here as dragging: without understanding a single word, a listener would still grasp more than expected. As the youngest European language, Kafka continued, Yiddish lacked a formal grammar, consisting instead of foreign words and dialects, and retaining the haste and liveliness with which it had stolen from other idioms. As a hustler slang (*Gaunersprache*) that dragged foreign terms along with it, Yiddish for Kafka revealed both the arbitrariness and the potential of referentiality. He thus portrayed Yiddish as a form of reflexive dragging—of deliberately collecting all kinds of expressions like rags, indifferent to their former signification, and instead offering multidirectional translations. This nonproprietary understanding of language has found a contemporary anti-identitarian afterlife, as in Saul Zaritt’s *Taytsh Manifesto*: “Taytsh is an untranslatable vernacular of translation … not entirely one’s own.”<sup>266</sup>

Kafka did not invoke Yiddish to assert the linguistic territoriality of Jews or to lay claim to the language of a religious community. Rather, his reference to a small, exiled popular theater served as a reflection on language as a nomadic deterritorialization of German. Bettine Menke reads Kafka’s *Rede über die jiddische Sprache* as a rejection of the national language model.<sup>267</sup> In this view, language does not assimilate what it has stolen into settled possession, but instead prevents it from coming to rest.<sup>268</sup> By exposing the groundlessness of linguistic concatenations, she argues, Kafka thus illuminated a defining feature of language as such.<sup>269</sup> Like creolized language use, this deterritorializing conception of language, which he shared with Benjamin, is shaped by forced migration. It is specifically tied to the history of political violence and the cultural techniques of modern mass culture. Both Benjamin and Kafka linked their vision of a language without grounding to the media assemblages of their

265 See Kafka, “Jargon,” 1993; for the English version: Kafka, “An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” 1990, 263–266; see also Menke, “Zerstreuungsbewegungen,” 2019, esp.: 243–250.

266 Zaritt, *Taytsh Manifesto*, 2021: 213. On the connection between Yiddish and creolization, see also Isabel Frey’s dissertation *Voicing Yiddishland: Diasporic Afterlives of Yiddish Folksongs* (mdw, 2024).

267 See Menke, “Zerstreuungsbewegungen,” 2019: 243; with reference to Kilcher, *Sprachendiskurse*, 2007: 69.

268 See Menke, “Zerstreuungsbewegungen,” 2019: 249.

269 Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?*, 2005, by contrast, is paradigmatic for the widespread discourse on cultural appropriation as theft during the last decades.

time, thereby highlighting a particular diasporic disposition for engaging with mass culture. This can be seen in Kafka's short text *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden* (1913), published around the same time as his *Rede über die jiddische Sprache* and inadequately translated as *The Wish to Be a Red Indian* instead of *Wish to Become (an) Indian*. Cast in the *irrealis*, the text—at first glance an instance of “ethnic drag” romantically playing “Amerindian”—invokes the prominent figuration of indigeneity in contemporary cinema, as well as within the German literary canon.<sup>270</sup> Kafka, however, does so in order to deterritorialize imagined indigeneity:

Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf.<sup>271</sup>

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone.

Omitting personal pronouns and quoting cinematic stagings of “the Indian,” the text explores the relationship between figure and surrounding. Kafka thus reflects on the act of projection, just as his text can be read as a rhetorical mimesis of a tracking shot. By shattering the visual frame of contemporary westerns and liquidating the figure of the native, the text abandons control of the reins. As it transforms trembling ground into a smoothly mown heath—a homely landscape—it stages a kind of becoming environmental that resists the romanticization of “wild” life. In relation to Kafka's portrayal of Yiddish as jargon, the form of his *Indian* text performs the very deterritorializing movement of language it describes. Kafka's becoming-Indian thus defigures imagined indigeneity.<sup>272</sup> By letting referentiality go astray, his text challenges self-assuring projections onto rootedness in one's environment and simultaneously highlights the particular situatedness of the imagined elsewhere it evokes.

270 See Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 2009. For a rereading of the German cultural infatuation with North American “Indians,” see also Balzer, *Ethik der Appropriation*, 2022.

271 Kafka, “Indian,” 1996 (originally published in 1913); “The Wish to Be a Red Indian,” 1971, 421.

272 Established in the 1980s as a legal category, “indigeneity,” by now serves as a globalized marker of identity; see Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism*, 2003. The starting point of today's use of the term is less the necessary securing of the right to local subsistence labor than the genealogical connection to the land; for a critique of respective figures of thought, see Erasmus, “Who Was Here First?,” 2020.

Citing him without quotation marks, that is, without indicating, Deleuze translated Kafka's engagement with language into the notion of a nomadic becoming-minoritarian.<sup>273</sup> In a short 1973 text, *Pensée nomade* ("Nomad Thought"), Deleuze evokes modes of writing that aim less at signification than at deterritorializing affects.<sup>274</sup> Such modes of writing, he suggests—implicitly drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival—are linked to a Dionysian, contagious, transgressive culture of laughter.<sup>275</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari describe nomadic thinking as a practice of thinking in flight lines of becoming, a thinking in transversal deterritorializations, a rhizomatic thinking that not only gestures beyond points of origin, but also beyond their deconstructions.<sup>276</sup> Glissant in turn quotes these reflections on the rhizomatic and the nomadic—again without explicit references—in his readings of Caribbean literature. He transposes them into a reflection on cultural techniques indebted to concrete processes of creolization and located in the Black Atlantic. Provincializing Deleuze and Guattari, he thus gives their thinking a correspondingly materialist twist<sup>277</sup>—foregrounding, against the backdrop of a world long since creolized, the aftereffects of colonial violence. Anti-identitarian transfigurative cultural techniques, then, are not confined to twentieth-century artistic or mass cultural developments. For Glissant, a writer committed to thinking through transversal relations rather than clearly definable notions of rootedness haunted by fantasies of purity, they are prefigured in the cultural techniques of the enslaved—those forced during the Middle Passage to forge a creolized language from dislocated and untraceable fragments, from rags so to speak, in order to communicate despite of mutual incomprehension.<sup>278</sup> Benjamin's and Kafka's understandings of language can be linked to questions of political history and to the emergence of transoceanic modes of relation due to forced migration. Kafka's nomadic, deterritorializing writing and Benjamin's call for a new barbarism transpose mass cultural forms—forms that themselves negotiate processes of creolization through the quotation of blackface or reflexive figurations of indigeneity—into texts that reject territorial terror. Their work evokes the destructive violence of World War I (Benjamin) and movements of flight from

273 On Kafka's understanding of language as nomadic deterritorialization, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 88; Deleuze/Guattari, *Kafka*, 1986.

274 See Deleuze, *Pensée nomade*, 1973; "Nomad Thought," 1992.

275 See Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 1984. With Warstat, the carnival could be read as "social theatricality" (2018).

276 On the rhizome as antigenealogy, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 3—25.

277 On the postcolonial critique of Deleuze and Guattari, see Bay, "Transkulturelle Stockungen," 2010.

278 See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 1997.

antisemitic violence sedimented in language (Kafka). These texts are thus not merely concerned with a particular theory of language, but with mobilizing its political potential against the afterlives of political violence and the identitarian epistemes that sustain it. They demonstrate that modern mass culture cannot be reduced to either the containment and commodification of the represented—as in *The Jazz Singer*—or to racist caricature, as in minstrel shows. Even when evoking stereotypes, these texts do justice to transfigurative, deterritorializing, nomadic forms of relating.

Read alongside Glissant, the potential for alliance among such related yet specifically situated intellectual movements and cultural techniques becomes evident: they show how to do without phantasms of rootedness and linear genealogies, and to assert instead the right to assemble *tout-monde*. Here, the *oddkinship*—borrowing Donna Haraway’s term—between creolized performative practices in the South African Cape and deterritorializing modes of writing in Central Europe comes into view.<sup>279</sup> Glissant explores the history of creolization under colonial conditions in the Black Atlantic; in Benjamin’s notion of the new barbarism, similar figures of thought arise in response to the trauma of industrialized, mass-destructive war; in Kafka’s writing, they recall the history of antisemitism and forced migration within Europe. Beyond their specific local and historical contexts, the nonidentitarian, nomadic epistemes emerging from these perspectives evoke an unforeseeable potential for trans-oceanic solidarity—an alternative to the violence of divide and rule.<sup>280</sup>

### **Exoticisms (Revue)**

Around the time the Nazis exploited the quotation of blackface in Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* as a sign of the supposed world conspiracy of cultural Bolshevism and Judaism during the summer of 1938, and orchestrated the November Pogrom as an escalation of antisemitic boycotts into open violence, a comic revue took place in Berlin from February 19 to March 6. It was a modern entertainment spectacle attuned to its time and a countermodel to the minstrel show—an updated form

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279 See Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016; for a critique of her abstract “non-natalism,” which ignores racist biopolitics, see Dow and Lamoreaux, “Situated Kinmaking,” 2020.

280 On the more recent debate regarding the potential for solidarity, see Kastner and Susemichel, *Unbedingte Solidarität*, 2021; referring to Elam’s concept of groundless solidarity in *Feminism and Deconstruction*, 1994: 69; Mokre, “Solidarität,” 2021; “Leere Signifikanten,” 2024; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009: 115. On the political difference between assemblies and assemblages of identities, see also Butler, *Notes*, 2016.

of colonial racism. Directed by Wolf Völker with musical arrangements by Joe Rixner, and performed by the Deutschlandhalle orchestra under Karl Stäcker, the revue accompanied the Internationale Automobilausstellung (International Motor Show) as a demonstration of German technical prowess. Traces of it remain today in the collection of stage designer Traugott Müller in the archive of the Institute of Theater Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin.<sup>281</sup> Reportedly, 10,000 spectators filled the Deutschlandhalle's arena to see *Ki sua heli: mit 300 km/h durch die Tropen* (*Ki sua heli: through the tropics at 300 km/h*) on a 500-square-meter stage.

The title played on the exoticism of early film and operetta. But this revue—centered on a fictional film expedition into the East African jungle—not only continued the popular pact of nineteenth-century operettas and chorus girl formations of contemporary mass spectacles and films—the *Mädchenkomplexe*—as described by Siegfried Kracauer.<sup>282</sup> It also recalled the deep entanglement between industrial exhibitions and ethnological shows—the staging of hegemonic and colonized cultures.<sup>283</sup> On the eve of World War II, and in the shadow of Germany's loss of its "place in the sun" after World War I, the expedition narrative served as a kind of surrogate colonialism. As Susann Lewerenz has shown, it responded to fantasies of global mobility and exotic consumption.<sup>284</sup> In doing so, the revue referenced cinema, which by the early twentieth century had displaced the *Völkerschauen* (human zoos) as the medium for presenting imagined foreign worlds to German audiences. These fictive geographies stood in marked contrast to the pejorative portrayals of globalized, nomadic modernity associated with blackface.

The revue's program made no explicit mention of contemporary colonial discourse, though it did present Kiswahili as the "lingua franca of the whole of equatorial Africa." Yet from the very first scene—*Der unberührte Urwald* (The untouched jungle)—colonial implications were unmistakable. This scene, staged through the "stamping dance of the natives" and the "mask dance of the medicine men,"<sup>285</sup> portrayed the jungle as territory awaiting colonization. According

281 Traugott Müller's papers include the program booklet of the revue *Ki sua heli*, an album with numerous rehearsal photos and a collection of mostly undated excerpts from newspaper reviews; Theaterhistorische Sammlungen, Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin. On *Ki sua heli*, see also Lewerenz, *Geteilte Welten*, 2017: 259–263.

282 On the chorus girl formations, see Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 1995: 75–76. See also Matala de Mazza's study *Der populäre Pakt*, 2018, on modern European entertainment culture's reclaiming of the freedom to wear masks and its subsequent development into an instrument of governing.

283 See Annus, "Astramentum," 2022.

284 See Lewerenz, *Divided Worlds*, 2017: 261.

285 In German: "Stampftanz der Eingeborenen" and "Maskentanz der Medizinhäner." *Ki sua heli* (program booklet), 1938: 5 and 7.

to one of the many newspaper reviews, white female dancers later appeared in a “parade of tropical products,”<sup>286</sup> presented like trophies. In response to the loss of the so-called “German territories” after World War I, the revue avoided naming any specific colony, yet ultimately laid claim to the entire continent through the white female allegorization of African resources.<sup>287</sup> If creolized mass culture of the time was given a grotesque, zoomorphic face in the illustration for Ziegler’s *Entartete Musik* exhibition, then the exoticism of this Africa revue served as a surrogate for both the “Jazz Republic” (Wipplinger)<sup>288</sup> and the lost colonies. To that end, the revue staged a stark contrast between Black bodies—figured as natives—and the modern marvels of German technology.<sup>289</sup>

The space for this celebrated “colonial revue” had been designed by former “shock troop leader” and stage designer Traugott Müller,<sup>290</sup> whose papers include numerous rehearsal photographs. Hans Hessling and Jupp Hussels took on the roles of adventurers and were initially positioned above the audience’s heads, overlooking the stage and cracking jokes. The bird’s-eye view, typical of colonial visual regimes, framed the scene from a position of dominance. The spectacle later culminated in a sensational scene in which the pilot Hanna Reitsch flew through the *Deutschlandhalle* in a Focke helicopter. Celebrating modern technology, *Ki sua heli* offered the illusion of national superiority and foreshadowed what entertainment cinema would fully realize by World War II—particularly in aviation films—as a complement to Leni Riefenstahl’s beginning of *Triumph of the Will*, her film on the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg: the ideologically charged perspective of the Führer persona.<sup>291</sup>

286 J. Müller-Marein, “Das Schiff der Tänzerinnen,” February 19, 1938; Müller papers, clippings, n.d.

287 For indirect colonial revisionist propaganda in contemporary popular culture, including operettas such as Heinz Henschke’s *Die oder keine: Große Ausstattungs-Operette in 10 Bildern*, which was first performed in the Berlin Metropol Theater and later, in the following two years, in the Admiralspalast, see Lewerenz, *Geteilte Welten*, 2017: 263.

288 Wipplinger, *Jazz Republic*, 2017; on “jazz” in the Weimar Republic and its Nazi reception, see also Alonzo and Martin, *Stechschritt*, 2004: 240–273, on the jazz ban of 1935: 269.

289 On “the logic of the ‘indigenization’ of colonists,” see in a different context Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017, 57.

290 On the “colonial revue,” see “Hanna Reitsch fliegt durch die *Deutschlandhalle*,” February 21, 1938; Müller papers, clippings, n.d. The term “Stoßtruppführer” (shock troop leader) comes from the program booklet on Müller’s participation in World War I; see Felix Lützkendorf, “Stoßtruppführer—Bühnenarchitekt: Traugott Müller erzählt von seinem Leben und Wollen,” 1938: 14–16, on 14.

291 On the significance of the gaze for theatrical propaganda, see Annuß, *Volksschule*, 2019: 405–437. On the connection between aviation and fascism, see also Esposito,



Figure 24: Hanna Reitsch, flying through the Deutschlandhalle, *Ki sua heli*, Berlin, 1938. Traugott Müller Collection, Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

While Reitsch addressed an audience that explicitly included female *Volksgenossen*, or “Volk-comrades,” at a time when the country was preparing for

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*Mythische Moderne*, 2011. The Führer’s perspective as a bird’s eye view has been set as a means and trope of propaganda since the opening scene of Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (1935), at the latest.

war,<sup>292</sup> Black German performers were cast as an exoticized backdrop. The staging of technology and colonialism were thus mutually dependent. Only Louis Brody, the best-known Black actor in Weimar film, was explicitly named in the program. Whereas the Black extras remained anonymous, he portrayed the role of Chief BOSAMBO.<sup>293</sup> Before the Nazi seizure of power, Brody had publicly spoken out against the racist “black shame” campaign, was involved in the founding of the Liga für Menschenrechte (League for Human Rights) and was considered a communist. During World War II, he appeared in anti-British colonial propaganda films such as *Ohm Krüger* (1941), set during the South African Boer War, as well as in *Carl Peters* (1941) and *Germanin* (1943). And in the antisemitic Nazi counterpart to *The Birth of a Nation*, Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß* (1940), Brody played the role of the Black subaltern. During the Weimar period, he had called himself Alcolson—presumably referencing both his alcohol consumption and the blackface actor Jolson. In *Ki sua heli*, he was marketed as a doppelgänger of the American film star Paul Robeson, who had played another BOSAMBO in Zoltan Korda’s film *Sanders of the River* (1935).<sup>294</sup> Brody’s BOSAMBO, however, remained a supporting character, and was listed solely as a singer in the program booklet, and was thus separated from the main protagonists of the plot.

The reviews and the program booklet remained largely silent about who appeared in *Ki sua heli* as “natives” performing so-called African war, mask, and sword dances.<sup>295</sup> One article claimed that, for the first time, “Völkerkunde,” that is, ethnology, had assisted in a revue; totem poles, palm trees, and chattering Hagenbeck flamingos surrounded the stage, serving to place “us in a “jungle mood.”<sup>296</sup> The totems—resembling torture poles and supposedly referencing East African carving art—more likely evoked the expressionist-inflected reception of “primitivism” from the period before the Nazi seizure of power. The headdresses of the African figures, meanwhile, apparently wrapped in brightly colored cloths, seemed to recall the feathered ornaments of stereotypical “Indians” in nineteenth-century Wild West shows or contemporary western films. Appearing half-naked, they visually echoed the 120 equally nameless, feathered white revue girls of the ballet company.

292 See also the propaganda for women aviators, as in in Helmut Weiß’s exoticist film *Quax in Afrika*, shot in 1943/44 and starring Heinz Rühmann.

293 On the biography of Louis Brody, see Nagl, “Sieh mal ...,” 2004: 83–87; Louis Brody, 2005. In the program booklet he is announced as “Negersänger” Brody-Mpessa.

294 On the Nazi reception of Robeson, see Alonzo and Martin, *Zwischen Stechschritt und Charleston*, 2004: 316–324, esp. Naumann, “Euphorie,” 2004.

295 On “Kriegs-, Masken- und Schwerttänze,” see “Wassergraben mit 200 Flamingos”; Müller papers, clippings, n.d.

296 Clippings, Müller papers, collection of criticism, n.d.

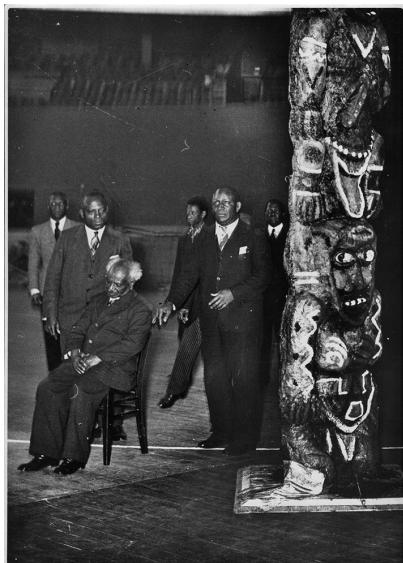


Figure 25: Rehearsal photo, *Ki sua heli*, Deutschlandhalle Berlin, 1938. Traugott Müller Collection, Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

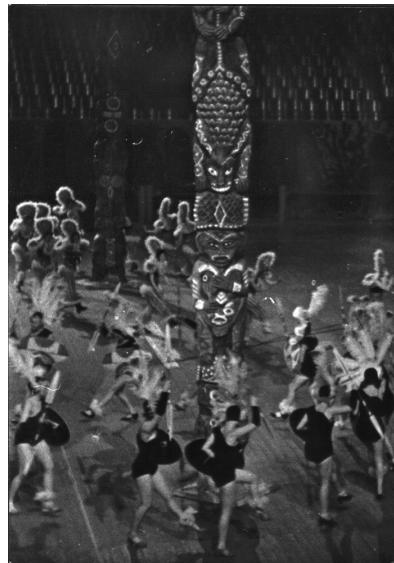


Figure 26: Rehearsal photo, *Ki sua heli*, Deutschlandhalle Berlin, 1938. Traugott Müller Collection, Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

As choral figures on the periphery, they exposed the superimposition of gender and colonial political hierarchies.<sup>297</sup>

The staging of African indigeneity came across as rather ambivalent, as suggested between the lines of the feature pages. J. Müller-Marein, for example, describes “negro groups” that, as he writes, “have been living in Germany for a long time but have lost nothing of the exoticism of their tropical homeland.”<sup>298</sup> The article implies that those representing Africa were part of the German population. Another piece claims there were fifty-six people from Berlin, Hamburg, and other German cities who would present “the wild dances of their homeland.”<sup>299</sup> Yet rehearsal photographs from Traugott Müller’s papers show them in street clothes, clearly identifying them as urban German residents.

297 On the emphasis on nudity, see “Hanna Reitsch fliegt durch die Deutschlandhalle,” February 21, 1938; Müller papers, clippings, n. d.

298 The German is “Negergruppen.” “Das Schiff der Tänzerinnen” from February 18, 1938; Müller papers, clippings, n. d.

299 “Der Ozean liegt am Funkturm. 56 Neger sprechen ‘Ki sua heli’ in der Deutschlandhalle”; Müller papers, clippings, n. d.

By 1938, Jews had long been excluded from the stage. "Each group that the Nazis subjected to their peculiar 'racial' gaze," as Robbie Aitken and Eve Rosenhaft write regarding the paradoxical situation of the Black German population under Nazi rule, "had its own history of social negotiations around 'otherness' and of cultural racialization, and those histories informed the way that they were treated in practice."<sup>300</sup> The contradictions between racist segregationist agendas on the one hand and colonial revisionist interests within parts of the Nazi apparatus on the other resulted in an arbitrary, flexible treatment of the Black population by the authorities. Policy fluctuated between deportation plans and restrictions on emigration, yet over the course of World War II, it became increasingly radicalized.<sup>301</sup> The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 deepened the precarious position of Black Germans, pushing them further into roles as African extras. As people were declared stateless and excluded from the legal system, prevailing gender policies—tied to miscegenation discourses about so-called racial shame—increasingly led to forced sterilizations in the second half of the 1930s.<sup>302</sup> In the 1940s, some Black Germans were deported to concentration camps or confined in psychiatric institutions. As Aitken and Rosenhaft note: "in official thinking and practice there was a progressive assimilation of Blacks to a global category of 'racial aliens' subject to removal without any separate rationale and without regard to historical, sentimental or foreign-policy considerations."<sup>303</sup>

Nazi entertainment and propaganda thus inverted what Rogin outlines in *The Jazz Singer*. Jews were not gradually whitened and integrated into dominant society; rather, exclusionary policies that had once been unimaginable were tested on fellow citizens—from the performance bans and exclusion from public service in 1933, to the loss of citizenship rights in 1935, to expropriation and exclusion from public life in 1938, and finally, from 1941 onward, to deportation

300 Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, 2013: 232; on the contradictory Nazi policies, see Chapter 7: 231—278. On the differentiation of Black victims of the Nazis, see Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims*, 2003: 87. See also Campf, *Other Germans*, 2004: 21.

301 On the exemplary treatment of the Deutsche Afrika-Schau, an initially self-organized, primarily Afro-German travelling circus that toured National Socialist Germany and Austria until 1940, see Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, 2013: 250—259; Joeden-Forgey, "Deutsche Afrika-Schau," 2004; Lewerenz, *Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau*, 2006; on the gradual displacement of women, the former main attraction of Völkerschauen: 110—115; Geteilte Welten, 2017: 225—230.

302 On the denial of citizenship rights at the time and its consequences, see the chapter on the end of human rights in Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2017 (originally published in 1951): 349—396; German version: *Elemente und Ursprünge*, 1986 (\*1955): 422—470. On the history of racist forced sterilizations under National Socialism, see Lewerenz, *Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau*, 2006: 53; Pommerin, "Sterilisierung," 2004.

303 Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, 2013: 274.

and industrial extermination. Ostracism was gradually extended to further categories of othered groups, including the Black German population. Work opportunities for them were increasingly restricted to colonially coded jobs such as selling tropical fruit, caring for animals at the zoo, or other precarious but exoticizing labor,<sup>304</sup> while the supposed African performers in *Ki sua heli* were assigned an intermediate status as minor choral figures, closer to stage decoration—somewhere between the revue girls and the animals from the Hagenbeck Zoo. These extras were thus rendered zoomorphic—not, however, to expose the supposedly degenerate face of a culture dominated by Jewish-Bolshevik world conspiracy, as indicated on the cover of Ziegler's *Abrechnung*, with its blackface figure as a signifier of “degenerate” music. Rather, they were staged to stand in for an African premodernity—as a counterimage to German technological mastery. In *Ki sua heli*, this counterimage was foundational to the fiction of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the ethnonational community.



Figure 27: Intermission photo, *Ki sua heli*, Deutschlandhalle Berlin, 1938. Traugott Müller Collection, Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

The rehearsal photos found in the Traugott Müller collection are a reminder of what the propagandistic stage spectacle had to conceal. Curious and perhaps

304 See Aitken and Rosenhaft, *Black Germany*, 2013: 250.

slightly surprised at being photographed, three children, along with an older and a younger woman—each dressed in everyday local street clothes—look up toward the camera, which captures them from a diagonal angle. They are positioned inside a painted hut, part of Müller’s jungle stage design. Their names may no longer be traceable, but their image speaks to what the spectacle itself left out. They likely did not appear in *Ki sua heli* at all and at most worked backstage, since their very presence contradicted the neat division between Blacks performing Africans and a white, modern “master race.” Perhaps the people depicted in the photograph were relatives of the male extras.<sup>305</sup> The photo bears witness to the existence of a part of the German population that the revue’s visual politics worked to erase—gradually rendering the grotesque hypervisibility of blackface in Nazi propaganda obsolete. Probably taken during a rehearsal break, the image brings into view something other than personifications of a continent supposedly without any history.<sup>306</sup> It reveals that Nazi Germany had long since been creolized—to paraphrase Glissant, that colonization had led to reverse migration and, especially in urban centers, had produced everyday relational modes of amalgamation that developed independently of imported US popular culture. The exoticization of the supposed “other” in a jungle setting was itself precarious, as the photo makes clear. While contrasting the Weimar era creolization of mass culture, the staging of *Ki sua heli* was nonetheless shaped by the nomadic dynamics the Nazis sought to deny.

In this respect, Braun’s blackface in drag, the promotion of the *Entartete Musik* exhibition, and the photograph of anonymous people described here form a constellation that challenges us to explore the complexity of political histories of violence and their resulting visual politics. In the case of the revue, Nazi depictions of Africa were determined by the ideological charge of native blood and soil that accompanied the invention of an Aryan, Germanic modernity. The theatricalization of African natives and the performative production of the national community were thus complementary forms of Nazi propaganda, intended to banish the nomadic, creolized signature of the present.

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305 On children of Black extras in *Völkerschauen* and in the circus during Nazism, see Theodor Michael’s autobiography *Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu*, 2013.

306 On Africa as a “Kindernation” (child nation), see the posthumously published transcripts of Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of history (1986, 12: 120).

## Indigenizing

Exotic spectacles such as *Ki sua heli* were preceded by experiments in propagandistic mass culture labeled as genuinely National Socialist. These were buttressed, not least, by academic claims of Germanic lineages. Alongside a visual regime of antisemitic invective—prefigured, for instance, by Braun’s photo in drag—the Nazis relied on fictitious, ethnonationalist “self-indigenization:” an assertion of their own autochthonous rootedness in a German blood and soil. The performative flipside of these exclusionary policies, marked by derogatory and exoticizing hypervisibilizations of supposed Others, can be observed in two case studies: the so-called *Thingspiele*—mass choral propaganda theater—and a form of Germanic ethnology (*Volkskunde*) shaped by dance studies. The *Thingspiele* theatricalized a German modernity supposedly cleansed of the impurities of cultural contaminations through fictionalized, militaristic reenactments of the Nazi seizure of power and the staging of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. *Volkskunde*, in turn, supported this performative fiction with retrospectively invented customs drawing from *männerbündian*—i.e., fraternal—fantasies and provided the genealogical legitimization of contemporary territorial politics. Theater and ethnology each invoked moving bodies in the service of Nazi propaganda: as instruments of decreolization and the cleansing of cultural entanglements. While targeting allegedly “dirty” modes of performing and relating, these invocations themselves could be read as a form of racialized dragging: as the exaggerated staging of a people’s body—the Nazi *Volkskörper*.

### **Thing (Euringer, Heynicke)**

“Rooted” in an ancient Germanic folk etymology, invented by theatre studies, the *Thingspiele*—a mass theatrical form devised for Nazi propaganda shortly after their seizure of power—were conceived as modernized court plays meant to revive claimed Germanic origins in a modern guise.<sup>307</sup> In practice, this supposedly ancestral label served as a vehicle to extend avantgarde movement and choral aesthetics of the Weimar period. These mass spectacles sought to performatively conjure the national community, presenting the becoming of one people as the realization of its “nature” by Nazi ideology. In open-air

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307 On the *Thingspiel*, see Annus, *Volksschule*, 2019 (the section on Kurt Heynicke’s *Der Weg ins Reich* contained here is the continuation of a longer chapter: 266–278); Stommer, *Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft*, 1985. The term “Thing,” a transliteration of “concilium,” comes from contemporary translations of Tacitus and serves the Germanized branding of the Nazi mass spectacles.

theaters—Thingstätten—constructed by local governments in coordination with the Nazi propaganda ministry, specially recruited marching columns moved through the audience. Supposedly playing themselves, these performers were meant to simulate a territorially bounded mode of participation. At first, the movement repertoire still bore the mark of early interwar avant-garde experimentation, particularly the tradition of “Ausdruckstanz,” that is, so-called German dance. The Thingspiele were designed to generate surrogate communal experiences within a staged sense of collective unity. While Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead* defines surrogation as the creolized signature of the circum-Atlantic world shaped by colonial trauma,<sup>308</sup> the Thingspiele instead grappled with the traumas of World War I as described by Benjamin in *Erfahrung und Armut*, thus emerging as a National Socialist form of surrogation.

The choral mass performances, mainly staged by the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labor Service) and party branches, “reenacted” the alleged Nazi revolution of 1933. The prominent playwright Richard Euringer, in particular, used his theatrical work as a vehicle for personal reckoning. His first award-winning Thingspiel, *Deutsche Passion* 1933, which restaged Germany’s defeat in World War I as a passion play, served as a model.<sup>309</sup> However, my focus here is on Euringer’s largely unknown and apparently never-performed later 1935 play *Totentanz*, which returns to the theme of defeat in World War I and a soldierly national rebirth under Nazi rule. More starkly than other Thingspiele, this five-scene *Totentanz* violently distances itself from the creolized aesthetics of the Jazz Age and reveals the symptomatic terror embedded in Nazi figurations of indigeneity. In turn, Kurt Heynicke’s *Der Weg ins Reich* (The path to the Reich), which recounts the consolidation of the Nazi state apparatus, illustrates how the brutality of *Totentanz* was transformed into the choric staging of structural violence. Here, the Volksgemeinschaft becomes presented as a surrounding figure and immobilized.

“Jazzen! Jazzen! Jazzen! / Bis die Därme platzen! ... Tanzen! Tanzen! Tanzen! // Freßt die Völkerwanzen!”<sup>310</sup> —in English: “Jazz! Jazz! Jazz till the guts burst! ... Dance! Dance! Dance! Feast on the lice of the Volk.”—declares *DER TOTE MANN* (The dead man), the redeemer figure in Euringer’s choral court play *Totentanz*. Labeled by its subtitle as “a dance of the living dead and the awakened musketeers,”<sup>311</sup> that is, of low-ranking soldiers, the work draws on

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308 See Roach, *Cities*, 1996.

309 See Annuß, “Quoting Passion Aesthetics,” 2023.

310 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 28. See also Annuß, “Environnement et communauté nationale,” 2024.

311 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 28. In German: “Ein Tanz der lebendig Toten und der erweckten Muskoten.”

medieval allegories and contemporary grotesque number revues at the same time. More than any other *Thingspiel*, it exposes the violent phantasm of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft as set against a globalized mass culture, thus anticipating the sociocidal turn of Nazi politics. *Totentanz* aimed to restore soldierly masculinity. The play belongs to that “flood of war books” which, according to Benjamin’s *Experience and Poverty*, indicated the “loss of experience passing from mouth to ear.”<sup>312</sup> *Totentanz* lays bare how the traumas of World War I were transformed into nationalist self-victimization and, ultimately, into political violence. Euringer’s ghostly choral play depicts vigilante justice carried out by the dead against grotesquely rendered, supposedly “dirty” figures. This is made explicit in the “Leitsätze zur Spielgestaltung”—or “Guidelines for Staging”—that precede the play itself:

Bei der Aufführung als Tanzwerk treten die Schieber der Lebewelt—auschließlich der Goldenen Puppe—in hölzernen Gesichtsmasken auf, die den Charakter typisieren. Man spare nicht an Spukgewändern! Typen wie der Weltvampir sind ins Phantastische zu steigern, Typen wie das Schnapsgesicht, der Spießbürger und der Präsident ins Groteske zu übertragen, da und dort nicht ohne Humor. Die toten Muskoten dagegen erscheinen grau und ernst, vertraut und menschlich. Die Uniformen der Nationen, auf das Schlichteste stilisiert, kennzeichnen den Träger etwa. Dem internationalen Spuk setzen sie den Mannschaftskorpsgeist jeglicher Nation entgegen. Die Scharen des Volkes erscheinen bäuerlich, was nicht besagt, es dürften die Stände der Schaffenden nicht irgendwie erkenntlich sein. Nur tritt der Halbwelt der Metropole hier die andere Welt entgegen.<sup>313</sup>

In the choreographed performance, the dealers of the demimonde appear wearing typified wooden character masks—except for the Golden Doll. No expense should be spared on ghostly costumes! Figures such as the *World Vampire* should be elevated into the realm of the fantastic, while figures like the *Booze-Face*, the *Petty Bourgeois*, and the *President* should be grotesquely exaggerated—at times not without humor. The dead musketeers, by contrast, appear as gray, solemn, familiar, and humane. Their national uniforms, modestly stylized, indicate their bearers. They counter the international specter with the male *esprit de corps* of each nation.

The crowds of the *Volk* appear peasant-like—which is not to say that the various social strands of working people may not be recognizable somehow. It is simply that the underworld of the *metropolis* is here confronted by the other world.

312 Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” 2005. 731—732. In German: “Was sich dann 10 Jahre danach in der Flut der Kriegsbücher ergossen hat, war alles andere als Erfahrung, die vom Mund zum Ohr strömt.” Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut,” II.1, 1991: 214.

313 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 15—16.

Euringer's play, which suffers from the genre problem that the depiction of the demimonde appears much more spectacular than some grayish defeated soldiers, also makes subliminal reference to the Weimar reception of a new transoceanic mass culture. Accordingly, ghostly figures form a kind of equivalential chain of killability—the constitutive outside of the Volksgemeinschaft: “Gauner, Schieber, Spekulanten/Volksverhetzer, Intriganten,/Bankbanditen, Parasiten,/Literaten, Trustmagnaten/und geheime Diplomaten” (“crooks, dealers, speculators/demagogues, schemers, bank bandits, parasites/literati, trust magnates/and secret diplomats”).<sup>314</sup> These figures ghostly dance around a naked PUPPE (doll)—“das vergeilte Weibsgesicht” (“the horny female face”)—while “Frechstes Jazzgeplärr” (“cheekiest jazz blare”) begins.<sup>315</sup>

In the second scene, the music by Leipzig composer Siegfried Walther Müller transforms, as noted in the stage directions, into a *Carmagnole der Schieber- und der Lebewelt um die Goldne Gliederpuppe*—“im Tanztakt gestampft” (“Carmagnole of the racketeers and the demimonde around the golden jointed doll” ... “stomped in dance rhythm”)<sup>316</sup> Euringer mixes the dance-of-death motif with borrowings from Max Reinhardt's Salzburg *Jedermann*, the allegory of the golden MAMMON. The naked, golden PUPPE, which can also be read as an allusion to creolized, “brown” mass culture personified by Baker, calls for dancing: “Die Kugel rollt, die Welt ist rund/und kreiselt um die Pole. ... tanzt die Carmagnole!”<sup>317</sup> (“The ball rolls, the world is round/and spins around the poles. ... dance the carmagnole!”) The Thingspiel begins where Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* ends—with the dance around the world. Respectively, the PUPPE, later calling for face paint,<sup>318</sup> appears as the allegory of the Jazz Republic and its uncontrollable, transoceanic-nomadic mass culture.

In the third scene, Euringer contrasts this with the chorus of the fallen from all factions of World War I, accompanied by marching music. Colonial soldiers from the French army also rising from mass graves evoke Old World European racism, intertwining fears of racial mixing with imperial claims to land, and drawing a sharp line between the colonized cast as indigenous and the threat of creolization:

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314 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 15—16.

315 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 16.

316 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 16.

317 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 16.

318 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 18.

## TOTE SENEGALENER:

Schleppten uns, weiß nicht, wohin.  
 Wußten nie, warum, wieso,  
 und zittern und frieren noch immer so.  
 Sind erbärmlich aufgewacht;  
 treibt ihr uns wieder in die Schlacht?!

DER TOTE MANN: Arme Luder! Macht nach  
 Haus!  
 Fechten's wohl alleine aus.<sup>319</sup>

## DEAD SENEGALESE NEGROES:

Dragged us—who knows where.  
 Never knew the why or wherefore,  
 and are still shaking and freezing.  
 Woke up wretched—  
 you're sending us to war again?!

THE DEAD MAN: Poor bastards! Get your-  
 selves home!  
 We'll have to fight it out on our own.

Unlike the golden, hollow *PUPPE*, which later shatters like porcelain, the colonial soldiers serving in the French army appear as part of the returning dead.<sup>320</sup> However, the chorus of Senegalese soldiers also illustrates the ambivalence with which the relation to the African continent is portrayed. Following the logic of *Totentanz*, they should be sent back—to Africa, their “homeland”—as victims of French imperialism, since the play’s main target is an internationalist mass culture framed as Jewish, for instance, in references to Max Reinhardt’s Salzburg *Jedermann*. Its appendages—the world of the racketeers and the demimonde are finally danced to death in a “Massengrub” (mass pit) by *TOTER MANN*, a figure reminiscent of Hitler in the persona of “the nameless soldier.”<sup>321</sup> Accordingly, the “hellish sabbath of the orgy” in the final scene culminates in a “dance of horror” to the “heroic” rhythm of marching music.<sup>322</sup> In the aftermath of Germany’s 1918 defeat, the play offers necropolitical National Socialist masculinity. Respectively, the choreographed massacre serves to protect a village-like community of women, children, and the elderly catering to contemporary retrotopian fantasies of purity and transposing veterans’ traumas into the fictionalized annihilation of “the Others.” As in Krenek’s work, Euringer’s associates blackness not only with skin color but, referring to its Old World European, that is, pre-Black Atlantic understanding, with death and the invisible. Euringer’s *Totentanz* thus blends the dance of death motif with coloniality, modern racism, and resentment toward the nomadic or creolization. In doing so, however, it evokes premodern aesthetics that resist representation.

319 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 23. In the case of the colonial soldiers, Euringer lets the meter stumble, while he ascribes a march-like rhythm to the German martyrs.

320 Euringer thus does not follow the common distinction between the figure of the “loyal Askari” and the personification of “black shame”; see Lewerenz, *Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau*, 2006, 132–136. Bruno Schönlank, *Der gespaltene Mensch*, 1927, provides the countermodel to the revisionist colonial discourse in the German-language theater of the Weimar period.

321 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 32; on the figure of the nameless soldier: 27; see also Euringer’s *Deutsche Passion*, 1934.

322 Euringer, *Totentanz*, 1935: 25.

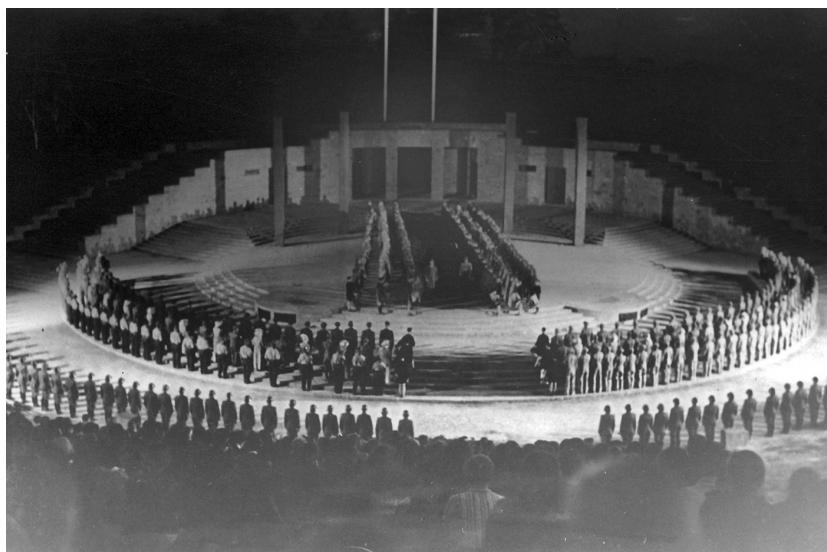


Figure 28: *Der Weg ins Reich*, Thingstätte Heiligenberg, Reichsfestspiele Heidelberg, 1935. Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

In the early years of Nazism, the stagings of the seizure of power demanded constant aesthetic transformation to appeal to a mass audience. In the mid-1930s, shortly before the end of the *Thingspiel* era, the apotropaic ban of a creolized carnivalesque—clearly evident in Euringer's *Totentanz*—became transposed onto the expulsion of the comic figure. Kurt Heynicke's *Der Weg ins Reich* premiered at the Heidelberg Thingstätte, which had just been completed the same year as the Nuremberg Laws, which codified Nazi racial ideology by stripping citizenship from Jews and prohibiting “racial defilement” through marriage or sexual relations.<sup>323</sup> The 1935 production transformed the theater's architecture into a mass choreography of bodies. In this model production, directed by Lothar Müthel and—once again—designed and choreographed by Traugott Müller, the image of the national community became rendered geometrically; the soldierly chorus was staged as a wall to exclude the comic figure. *Der Weg ins Reich* pursued a propaganda aesthetic that banished creolized mass culture along with overly ambivalent folk-theatrical elements by ornamentalizing the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Performance photos show how the

<sup>323</sup> For more details, see Annufß, *Volksschule*, 2019: 251–280. The corporatist construct of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was envisioned to comprise 90 combatants (men and women), 450 main chorus members, and 30 followers (*Mitläufer*); see Heynicke, *Der Weg ins Reich*, 1935: 5. On the Nazi reception, see Braumüller, “Kurt Heynicke,” 1935.

chorus became arranged as an extension of the stage architecture in standing still in strict ranks and files.

The mass assault on “the Others,” which plays a central role in *Totentanz*, is merely alluded to through two exemplary figures: the *ABTRÜNNIGE* (renegade)—reminiscent of *MEPHISTO* from Goethe’s *Faust*—who is eventually expelled and drags with him a chorus of *MITLÄUFER* (followers), functioning as a counter-chorus to the groups of *KÄMPFENDE* (fighters); and the “geckenhaft gekleideten” (“foppishly dressed”)<sup>324</sup> *SCHWANKENDE* (waverer), who fails to penetrate the closed ranks of the chorus. Played by Hans Hessling, who would later also appear in *Ki sua heli*, the *SCHWANKENDE* is ultimately driven off the stage. Müthel and Müller adapted the expulsion of the *HARLEQUIN* for the Nazi stage, and in targeting the comic figure, they also attacked the genre associated with it: namely, Old European folk theater and its play with referential slipperiness. Euringer’s crude portrayals of violence were translated into the spatial arrangement, which thus became a chorally generated environment—a living wall.

This Thing aesthetic again serves to exorcise the nomadic figure. The persona with a stick, white gaiters, and a conspicuous hat—first hobbling, then merely limping—can also be read as an implicit minstrel reference, evoking “Jump Jim Crow” and their ilk; however, the citation omits the element of blackface. Müller’s costume sketch shows the *SCHWANKENDE* in a yellow long-tailed dandy jacket with matching headgear and striped trousers with gaiters, faintly recalling depictions of *ZIP COON*. Ostensibly identified by the audience as “the Jew,”<sup>325</sup> this harlequin-like minstrel figure is presented as only “half a man”—a drag-like character associated with contemporary antisemitic and homophobic stereotypes. He appears as an allegory of everything that contradicts the statuesque image of an idealized, corporatist national community—colorful, yet orderly. Still, *Der Weg ins Reich* stages this national community as inherently precarious. It is not only the apparently “foppish” *SCHWANKENDE*—neither a “real man” nor a “real German”—who is introduced as a figure of minor mimesis. Reversing their costumes and speech,<sup>326</sup> the *MITLÄUFER* initially attempt to infiltrate the *MAIN CHORUS*, embodying the community of the Volk, in disguise, only to be swept along by its sound and to become reintegrated by once again reversing their garb.<sup>327</sup> The choral scene thus explicitly stages a collective withdrawal from “drag.”

<sup>324</sup> Heynicke, *Der Weg ins Reich*, 1935: 13. See Ihering, “Auf der Thingstätte,” 1935.

<sup>325</sup> See Röhr, “Reichsfestspiele Heidelberg,” 1935.

<sup>326</sup> See Heynicke, *Der Weg ins Reich*, 1935: 12.

<sup>327</sup> Heynicke writes: “Der Schluß des Abmarschliedes rauscht noch einmal zwingend auf. Wie von ihm gezogen, marschieren die Mitläufer dem Hauptchor nach”; in English:



Figure 29: *DER SCHWANKENDE* (the waverer), costume sketch: Traugott Müller, 1938 (detail). Traugott Müller Collection, Theaterhistorische Sammlungen of the Theater Studies Institute at the FU Berlin.

In turn, colonial discourse is transposed into a portrayal of land appropriation on home soil. The figure of the *HEIMKEHRER* (returnee) is depicted as an engineer who has “worked, toiled, lost, won, grabbed” in a foreign country.<sup>328</sup> In the new Germany, he contributes to building a dam—subjugating nature. Precisely because of his experiences abroad, he comes to embody a modern racist perspective on German supremacy. At the same time, he represents the *Führer*

“The end of the marching-off song once again roars out compellingly. As if pulled by it, the followers march after the main choir.” See *Der Weg ins Reich*, 1935: 38.

328 In German: “geschafft, /Geschuftet, verloren, gewonnen, erraft.” Heynicke, *Der Weg ins Reich*, 1935: 15. The figure of the returning engineer is an updated *Faust II* quotation. Heynicke turns Goethe’s plot into a happy ending and reinforces its latent colonial reference; on *FAUST* as entrepreneur and colonizer, see Hegemann, “Mit welcher Freude,” 2017; Jäger, *Fausts Kolonie*, 2011; Goethe’s “Faust,” 2021.

perspective. In the play, this is set in contrast to a völkisch, familial ancestor cult, represented by an old peasant woman who initially refuses to relinquish her family's land to advance the national community, but ultimately submits to the collective cause. The *Thingspiel* concludes with a spectacle of fire that harmonizes modernity and archaic cult. It stands at the threshold between the early militaristic mass stagings and the later mass ornamental spectacles. The *Thingspiele* bear witness to how the Nazis essentialized "blood and soil" through the choral figure of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as they consolidated their rule. At the same time, the abrupt demise of these *Thing* plays in the mid-1930s illustrates how swiftly propaganda instruments can lose their effectiveness.<sup>329</sup> Later, up until the beginning of World War II, mass ornamental pageants were staged alongside revues such as *Ki sua heli*, which clearly no longer relied on representational choral performance to enable surrogate participation.<sup>330</sup> As *Der Weg ins Reich* demonstrates, the national community was transposed into a deployed "environmental figuration," and thus rendered as second nature.

During the Weimar Republic, Siegfried Kracauer had argued that ornaments of the masses, as a modern "rational and empty form of the cult,"<sup>331</sup> could evoke an understanding of social relationships as collective labor, rather than organic. Kracauer saw them as the antithesis of blood-and-soil ideologies and respective group figures. The *Thingspiele*, however, repurposed the ornamental—as a territorial figure and a performative threat of exclusion. They gave concrete form to the national community, transforming it from a figure evoking the uprising of the dead (*Totentanz*) into a domesticated environment purged of unruly movement (*Der Weg ins Reich*). Nazi *Volkskunde*—an ethnographic discipline based on racial understandings of the ancient Germans—in turn conceptualized the *Volksgemeinschaft* through the occlusion of the carnivalesque from the study of masking rituals. Here, too, the aim was to expel references to mass culture and borrowings from globalized mimetic forms, to code the Volk as soldierly and masculine, and to suppress reflexive performativity.

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329 On the rejection of cultic rituals after the consolidation of the state apparatus, see Hitler's *Kulturrede* at the Congress of the Nuremberg Party Rally on September 6, 1938, quoted in Domarus, Hitler, 1988, 1: 892—894.

330 On the concept of externalization, see Lessenich, *Neben uns*, 2016. On the appropriation of mass ornaments by the Nazis, who used them to ideologically communize the crowd from a supposed Führer perspective rather than to represent the national community, see Annus, *Volksschule*, 2019, 416—437.

331 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 1995, 84. In German: "Leerform des Kults." Kracauer, *Ornament der Masse*, 1977: 61.

### ***Volkskunde (Wolfram, Perchten)***

One sees a ghostly, at first glance barely decipherable bustle of wandering, disguised people—some appear alone, others in pairs, and still others in gangs. At the outset, strange figures dressed in suits made of fir branches or pinecones climb up the side of a house and enter through a window, dragging along a man with a sooty face. Then someone appears in a patchwork costume—a kind of Harlequin-style red-and-white jumpsuit, with a white face mask and a pointed patchwork cap—swinging a doll on a leash. Then, someone in uniform, straddling a toy horse, cracks a whip. Eventually, a kind of procession comes into view: older men wearing fantastical, reflective headdresses adorned with brightly colored flowers—some several meters high—walk alongside young men dressed in dirndl. Their cross-dressing is accompanied by spectacularly monstrous apparitions: one wears a fur costume with cowbells; others don grotesque wooden masks with horns. Some simply have black, red, or white cloths over their faces, with eye holes cut out. Others wear Orientalized masks: one has a turban, another a glued-on beard and a fez, yet another has black makeup and resembles a carol singer. Then the figure with the toy horse and whip reappears. Eventually, the older men with their enormous headdresses dance in pairs with the young men in dirndl, jumping with one knee raised, arms on hips—a bit reminiscent of “Jump Jim Crow” and the images of T. D. Rice dancing.

After this carnivalesque arsenal of figures is introduced, the camera pans over the fantastically costumed procession, then cuts back into the action. Some figures spin in place, others dance or wrestle in pairs. At some point, the men with the towering headdresses bow—supported by the young men dressed as girls. Women appear only occasionally, unmasked, as companions of the procession. Interspersed throughout are shots of the snow-covered mountain landscape. The visual dramaturgy ties the masked figures to their idyllic surroundings. After a sharp cut, the footage turns to black and white and is shown from shifting angles. Some figures now resemble witches with brooms. At one point, a court scene with a verdict is shown.

The silent film, which possesses a grainy texture, has no voice-over commentary, suggesting the images would speak for themselves. This 16-millimeter ethnographic documentary was produced around the turn of 1940. It depicts the Gasteiner Perchtenlauf—a masked procession featuring stock characters from the Alpine region, occurring every four years as a house-to-house ritual, now recognized as part of UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage.<sup>332</sup> The nearly twelve-

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332 For the synonymous use of *Perchten* and masks in historical sources, see Kammerhofer-Aggermann, *Perchtenlauf*, 2002. For an overview of today's arsenal of figures, see the Gastein *Perchten* website: [www.gasteinerperchten.com](http://www.gasteinerperchten.com), accessed September 12,

minute film was copyrighted in 1984 by the Österreichisches Bundesinstitut für den wissenschaftlichen Film Wien (Austrian Federal Institute for Scientific Film Vienna) and is now accessible online via the Österreichische Mediathek, the audiovisual archive of the Technisches Museum Wien.<sup>333</sup> Ostensibly capturing indigenous customs, the film carefully frames and focuses on the action, deliberately excluding any elements that might indicate the contemporary filming situation.<sup>334</sup> The fade-ins of the snow-covered landscape similarly avoid revealing that, at the time of filming, Gastein had long become a popular tourist destination with associated infrastructure.<sup>335</sup> Clearly, the masks, figures, and their repertoire of movements were meant to appear as ritual forms untouched by modernity. At first glance, this seems entirely unrelated to the *Thingspiele*. The point of connection, however, lies in an understanding of performance not as drag, but as a cultic link to the dead within a suprahistorical community figure.

Neither the film nor the accompanying idyllic photographs of the Perchten procession in the snowy landscape can simply be considered documents of ancient customs; rather, they are evidence of its National Socialist invention. They were produced against the backdrop of Austria's annexation, the so-called Anschluss, into the Nazi state and form part of the research project of Richard Wolfram, considered the founder of Austrian ethnology—of *Volkskunde*.<sup>336</sup>

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2024. Perchten runs were first reinvented in the nineteenth century in the context of the rural exodus of the time, and then again from the 1960s onward in the course of mass tourism developments in urban areas; on the function of this invention of tradition (Hobsbawm, 1996), see Kammerhofer-Aggermann, "Kramperl," 2002; "Prozess," 2002; Köstlin, "Bräuche," 2002. See also the descriptions by Adrian, "Perchtenlauf," 2002 (originally published in 1948), and Andrée-Eysn, "Die Perchten," 1905.

333 The footage is dated January 7, 1940. The credits, added later by the Österreichisches Bundesinstitut für den wissenschaftlichen Film Wien, name Richard Wolfram as the author and cameraman; after his official denazification, he dedicated a merely descriptive commentary to this "strong tradition" of Perchten: <https://www.mediathek.at/katalogsuche/suche/detail/?pool=BWEB&uid=018AA5A1-1B9-01FCE-00000484-0189A3E5&cHash=cc97945d539ffa82f91c86a988dd308f>; 11:39, C 1984 editing Lisl Waltner, Österreichische Mediathek, Technisches Museum Wien; accessed September 12, 2024.

334 On the fictionality of the documentary, see Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," 1981; Balke et al., *Durchbrochene Ordnungen*, 2020.

335 For the history of Gastein, which lies on an Alpine pack trail leading to Venice and has been widely connected for centuries through mining and its role as a spa, see Gruber, *Über 1000 Jahre*, 2020. Today's genetic studies of bone finds point to early historical migratory movements from Iran via the southern Russian steppe to Gastein (see p. 8).

336 On the history of German-Austrian ethnography (*Volkskunde*) and Wolfram's role, see Bockhorn, "Brauchtumsaufnahme," 2002; "Von Ritualen," 1994; Höck, "Richard Wolfram," 2019; Johler, "Richard Wolfram," 2021; Ottenbacher, "Richard Wolfram,"



Figure 30: Perchten procession, Gastein Valley, 1940. Salzburger Landesinstitut für Volkskunde (NSLA, rw\_48-2).

Wolfram began photographing the Gasteiner Perchtenlauf as early as 1936 and documented it again in 1940, 1944, and later in 1962.<sup>337</sup> In his habilitation thesis *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* (Sword dance and brotherhood), partially published by the German Bärenreiter Verlag in 1936 and 1937, Wolfram argues that the Perchten procession, with its jumps and stamping dances, represents the ancient Germanic Wilde Jagd (Wild Hunt), and should thus be understood as a reenactment rather than mere masquerade. According to Wolfram, the Perchten procession evokes a ghostly army of fallen warriors led by the Germanic god Wotan. The Perchten frenzy was a magical rite of movement, he argues, emphasizing both performative and genealogical aspects.<sup>338</sup> In his interpretation, old Germanic legends have always been performed, not just narrated, and as manifestations of living customs they revive those who had died.<sup>339</sup> For

1989. Wolfram's papers are held—apparently having been purged by Wolfram himself of most Nazi traces—in the Salzburger Landesinstitut für Volkskunde (SLIVK, NRW); see Kammerhofer-Aggermann, "Mythen," 2020: 120. Wolfram's papers also contain the complete manuscript of the only partially published habilitation thesis *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* (SLIVK, NRW, Manuskripte 1998-N, 2000-N, pp. 1—350 of 639).

337 For the numerous photographs that have not been systematically catalogued, see Greger, "Zum Bildnachlass von Richard Wolfram," 2022; Bleyer, "Perchtenaufnahmen," 2002; Bockhorn, "Brauchtumsaufnahme," 2002.

338 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936—38: 290. On his later Perchten research, see Wolfram, "Percht und Perchtengestalten," 1979.

339 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936—38: 258.

him, the blackened faces therefore explicitly mark the Perchten as deceased figures, distinguishing their appearances from mere masking practices.<sup>340</sup> He thereby explicitly contests earlier interpretations that described Perchten processions as fertility or vegetation rites of pre-Christian origin,<sup>341</sup> as well as contemporary readings of blackened faces within the context of globalized mass culture as racialized drag.

Drawing on ethnological theories of brotherhood and male bonding (Männerbund), Wolfram interprets the blackening of the face as a means of erasing one's identifiability and thereby entering a suprahistorical warrior community.<sup>342</sup> Deliberately ignoring both contemporary blackface and Germany's colonial legacy, he thus redefines the black mask as the emblem of a Germanic warrior cult and its afterlife in a secret fraternity. This situates the blackened faces seen in contemporary Perchten processions within a traditional framework of combative masculinity presumed to be untouched by modernity.<sup>343</sup> In the absence of local Germanic sources, Wolfram turned to Tacitus, who had described Germanic tribes as "indigenous."<sup>344</sup> Never having seen them himself, Tacitus linked the Germanic *Harii*—who blackened their bodies in battle—to the trope of the army of the dead.<sup>345</sup>

In Wolfram's tribalist interpretation, blackening the skin did not merely serve to impersonate the ancestors, but to embody them through mimesis. He buttressed this claim with all kinds of sources, including Book XIII of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Ordericus Vitalis, a Norman chronicler from the twelfth century, who describes a nocturnal apparition with "two Ethiopians"

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340 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936—38: 291.

341 See for example Adrian, *Von Salzburger Sitt' und Brauch*, 1924.

342 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936—38: 104.

343 The Krampus and Perchten exhibits in the Salzburger Weihnachtsmuseum from around 1900, which are reminiscent of minstrel shows, bear witness to the contrary; see, for example, the Perchten figurines with Afro hairstyles depicted in Gockerell, *Weihnachtszeit*, 2000: 59, 63.

344 On the "Germanos indigenas," see Tacitus, *Germania*, 1932: 14; with reference to the term "Thing" in Ronge's translation to German: 23. Geschiere, *Perils of Belonging*, 2009, describes the pitfalls of the thought figure of the indigenous today.

345 See Tacitus, *Germany and Its Tribes*, chapter 43: "The *Harii*, besides being superior in strength to the tribes just enumerated, savage as they are, make the most of their natural ferocity by the help of art and opportunity. Their shields are black, their bodies dyed. They choose dark nights for battle, and, by the dread and gloomy aspect of their death-like host, strike terror into the foe, who can never confront their strange and almost infernal appearance. For in all battles it is the eye which is first vanquished." Tacitus, *Complete Works of Tacitus*, 1942, translated by Alfred John Church, quoted from Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1351.phi002.perseus-eng1:43>.

dragging along a massive torture pole.<sup>346</sup> Wolfram insisted that these accounts of a nocturnal “armed band” were not fantasies, but evidence of a mimetic reenactment of the Wild Hunt.<sup>347</sup> At the same time, he sought to shield this ritual repertoire from transcontinental references. He “indigenized” the “Ethiopians,” casting their appearance within a thanatopolitical framework.

Likewise, he ignored the obvious cross-dressing of the young Perchten in Gastein, linking the masked procession exclusively to martial dance as an embodiment of the army of the dead.<sup>348</sup> By conjuring the dancing undead, Wolfram’s ethnographic reading aligns with Euringer’s *Totentanz*.<sup>349</sup> Yet unlike the mass theatrical staging of the community of the Volk in the *Thingspiele*, Wolfram treated “Germanic customs” as an indigenous revival of the dead. While the *Thingspiele* were propaganda tools for performatively becoming the national community, Wolfram’s *Volkskunde* framed contemporary Alpine traditions as living proof of the Germanic roots of Austrian culture. Like the *Thingspiele*, National Socialist *Volkskunde* positions itself here as a counter-model to drag and its incorporation into carnivalesque modes of performance.

However, Wolfram’s invention of timeless customs, informed by dance research, was also distinctly modern.<sup>350</sup> At the turn of the century, the Viennese scholar Rudolf Much had already described an ancient Germanic world in his influential book *Deutsche Stammeskunde* (German tribal studies).<sup>351</sup> Wolfram, however, gave his assertions a performative twist, transposing the nineteenth-century German national mythizations of Perchten legends into the twentieth century tale of actual nocturnal reenactments and linking them to contemporaneous studies of secret brotherhoods (*Männerbund-Forschung*).<sup>352</sup> This shift in perspective within *Volkskunde* coincided with the Nazis’

346 Vitalis, “Ecclesiaestiae,” 1855; cited in Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 256.

347 Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 258. Corresponding approaches can be found in the Austrian medievalist Otto Höfler, who taught at German universities during the Nazi era, worked for the SS-Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe, and undertook field research with Wolfram (*Kultische Geheimbünde*, 1934, on 45); and in theater studies with Robert Stumpfl, *Kultspiele*, 1936.

348 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 278.

349 Like Euringer in his *Totentanz*, Wolfram continued to attack jazz in his post-Nazi research as a chaotic, unchained antithesis to his Old World European dance tradition; see *Volkstänze*, 1951. Even during the Nazi era, Wolfram interpreted the *Schwerttanz*, a folk dance performed by men with weapons, as an “ancient” rural, fraternal ritual custom; see *Männerbund*, 1936/37, 45; on the *Totentanz* as Germanic heritage, 112.

350 With regard to the focus on performativity, studies of Nazi theater and performance studies align; see Annus, “Wollt ihr die totale Theaterwissenschaft,” 2016.

351 See Much, *Stammeskunde*, 1900.

352 See Johler, “Richard Wolfram,” 2021.

institutionalization of theater studies, as a discipline that was also emancipating itself from German philology and that served the Ministry of Propaganda in developing mass theatrical modes of surrogate experience.<sup>353</sup> Like the theater studies of his day, Wolfram thus anticipated the performative turn in recent research on mimesis and performativity<sup>354</sup>—albeit with the aim of fabulating a Germanic homosocial, militaristic revival of the dead.<sup>355</sup> Claiming blood and soil, he interpreted the masked Perchten dancers and their movement repertoire as an embodied archive of the Wild Hunt.

Wolfram thus engaged in speculative thinking to address gaps in the archival record, aiming to decreolize the mask repertoire, as we might say, through ethnological dance research. What today appears as a scientifically untenable Germano-fiction—a rather wild fusion of people and landscape—was deeply complicit in the political violence of its time. Wolfram's treatment of sources was shaped by his research environment and was emblematic of the instrumentalization of ethnologically validated origin stories. While his habilitation thesis had been published in Germany before the Anschluss of Austria, Wolfram's film officially served Nazi government policy. His “documentation” of the Perchten in the Gastein Valley, in the Austrian Alpine Pongau region, was produced two years after Austria's integration into the Nazi state and one year after the Nazi regime banned the Jewish population from wearing the dirndl and other traditional garments.<sup>356</sup> The film described at the beginning of this

353 In 1955, Wolfram gave a lecture on *Sword Dancing and the Männerbund* at the University of Cologne, where the initiator of the Thing propaganda, Carl Niessen, was head of the Institute of Theater Studies and the ethnologically oriented Theaterhistorische Sammlungen. It was apparently expected that he could contribute to Wolfram's rehabilitation; on the connection between Wolfram and Niessen, see Höck, “Richard Wolfram,” 2019: 515. On Niessen, see Probst, *Objekte*, 2023.

354 On mimesis, see Balke, “Ähnlichkeit und Entstellung,” 2015; “Mimesis und Figura,” 2016; *Mimesis zur Einführung*, 2018; Balke and Linseisen, *Mimesis Expanded*, 2022; on movement repertoire, Schneider, “Performance Remains Again,” 2012; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 2003.

355 See Mbembe on the tremendous work of fabrication bound up with the European Enlightenment and its colonial flipside: “The expansion of the European spatial horizon, then, went hand in hand with a division and shrinking of the historical and cultural imagination and, in certain cases, a relative closing of the mind.” *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017, 17.

356 On the antisemitic Nazi ban on traditional costume (Trachtenverbot) in 1938, see Kerschbaumer, “Organisiertes Heimatbrauchtum,” 1996: 126; “Rekonstruktion,” 1996: 294. On the transformation of traditional costume into a folkloristically legitimized Nazi weapon of exclusion, see Nikitsch, “Tracht,” 2019. Schurtz reads traditional costume in the nineteenth century as a badge of gender and class; see *Philosophie der Tracht*, 1891: 5.

chapter was also part of a large-scale field research project on customs in the Salzburg region, directed by Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler and conducted in cooperation with the police. The Alpine region on the German-Austrian border held particular significance for the propagandistic claim of a shared Austrian-German heritage, which countered the clerical-fascist policies of the Austrian corporatist state that had prevailed until 1938. The Catholic Church had long branded the Perchten processions as pagan rituals and sought to regulate their potential transformation into peasant uprisings. Wolfram's research thus supported the anticlerical Nazi agenda directed against Austria's rival fascism.<sup>357</sup>

The Perchten film was produced within the framework of the Lehr- und Forschungsstätte für Germanisch-Deutsche Volkskunde (Teaching and Research Center for Germanic-German Ethnology/Tribal Studies) founded in Salzburg in 1938 as part of the SS-Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe (SS Research Association for German Ancestral Heritage).<sup>358</sup> Wolfram, a party member since 1932 and already well-networked during the years when the Austrian NSDAP had been outlawed (1933–1938), was appointed head of the center after the Anschluss; he received financial backing, and his work was classified as important to the war effort. In 1939, he was promoted to professor at the University of Vienna. Within the context of his work for the SS-Ahnenerbe, his habilitation thesis appears in retrospect as a latent legitimization of the so-called Schutzstaffel, the SS as a paramilitary "security" organization: the blackened bodies he describes in *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* could be read in relation to the black SS uniforms adorned with skull and crossbones emblems, that is, as a continuation of the black army of the dead.<sup>359</sup> That Wolfram reformulated earlier Männerbund theories from the turn of the century and Germanized ethnographic ideas originally linked to

357 See Talós, *Austrofaschismus*, 2005, and *Das austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem*, 2013. Although the Perchten runs were repeatedly banned by the Catholic Church, after 1938 they were popularly linked to the expulsion of the Protestant population from the Salzburg region between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and thus mobilized for Nazi propaganda. See also Eberhard Wolfgang Möller's *Frankenburger Würfspiel*, first performed in 1936 as part of the cultural program for the Olympic Games in Berlin, for similar propaganda claims to peasant uprisings; see Annus, *Volksschule*, 2019: 345–388. On the differing Austrian reception of the Thing after the Anschluss in 1938, see Annus, "Thingspielen in Österreich," 2017.

358 See Johler, "Richard Wolfram," 2021: 1312, 1317. On the "SS-Ahnenerbe" as an umbrella organization for all kinds of obscure and occult positions, see Kater, *Das "Ahnenerbe,"* 2006.

359 On the history of SS uniforms and their citation of paramilitary Freikorps, see chapters 8 and 9 in Diehl, *Macht*, 2005; Ruda, *Totenkopf*, 2023: 327–415.

the tropics—thus “indigenizing” them—accordingly assumed a specific political function with regard to the most murderous of Nazi organizations.<sup>360</sup> He de-eroticized homosocial community myths, aligning them with the image of a heteronormative paramilitary elite tasked with securing and protecting the entire Volksgemeinschaft.<sup>361</sup> Wolfram’s research, which distinguished the cross-dressing of the Perchten from contemporary drag, gender bending, and blackface, thus became a weapon on multiple fronts.

Shortly before the collapse of the regime, black-masked Schiachperchten, that is, ugly-masked Perchten, threw themselves to the ground before a Gauleiter.<sup>362</sup> On closer inspection, Wolfram’s brand of Volkskunde, however, was more directly complicit in the terror of the Nazi regime. While the Perchten were portrayed as descendants of the ancient Germanic tribes, Wolfram, who was rehabilitated in 1954, appears to have been involved not only in art theft and resettlement operations, but also in the murderous policies of the SS. When he failed to “reeducate” Norwegian students at the Sennheim training camp in Alsace, he had them deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp, where fifty of them were subjected to medical experiments and where prisoners were killed through the most brutal forced labor.<sup>363</sup> This episode reveals the vicious underside of Wolfram’s academic entanglement with the SS, whose Totenkopfstandarten were tasked with organizing concentration and extermination camps and conducting human experimentation. Read as a case study, Wolfram’s work uncannily exemplifies the politicality embedded in academic fantasies of indigeneity.

This is also evident in Wolfram’s justification of irregular jurisdiction, which characterizes the Thingspiele, as well. *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* emphasized the link between masked processions and quasi-judicial stagings.

360 On the ethnological invention of Männerbünde around 1900, see Schurtz, *Altersklassen*, 1902: 261, 264; *Urgeschichte*, 1900: 110–115; in the Austrian research context, see Much, *Deutsche Stammeskunde*, 1900. For a critique of studies on Männerbünde as a symptom of changing gender relations around the turn of the century, see Brunotte, *Zwischen Eros*, 2004; Bruns, *Politik des Eros*, 2008/*Politics of Eros*, 2011; Treiblmayr, “Männerbünde,” 2010; Völger and von Welck, *Männerbande*, 1990.

361 On Himmler’s position, which stands in contrast to Alfred Bäumler’s publications related to the Rosenberg faction, see Winter, “Sippengemeinschaft,” 2013. On the differentiation and changeability of National Socialist masculinities, see Connell, “Masculinity and Nazism,” 2013, as well as the overview of Nazi masculinity research by Dietrich and Heise in their volume *Männlichkeitstkonstruktionen*, 2013, with reference to Connell, *Masculinities*, 2005. On homophobia in the Nazi era, see also zur Nieden, *Homosexualität*, 2005.

362 On January 9, 1944, see Kerschbaumer, “Organisiertes Heimatbrauchtum,” 1996: 127.

363 See Kater, *Das “Ahnenerbe”*, 2006: 185–186; Ottenbacher, “Richard Wolfram,” 1989.

Wolfram thus associated the Perchten—as well as the Alpine Krampus runs around December 6, in which adolescent men wearing dark wooden masks and fur costumes parade from house to house—with rural, boisterous reprimand courts of peasant secret societies. Although he mentions neither the Thingspiele nor the SS, his research can in fact be related to the legitimization of the Nazi regime's production of a permanent state of exception.<sup>364</sup> Wolfram used his “folklife studies” to legitimize extralegal jurisdictions, and thereby also the contemporary policy of irregular governance (*Maßnahmenpolitik*), invoking what he called the unpredictable Janus face of the customs described in *Schwertanz und Männerbund*.<sup>365</sup>

Wolfram justified, for instance, the right to steal during *Heischegänge*, that is, ritual soliciting processions. Reading these performative practices as traditional moral courts or playful inspections of household cleanliness, he claimed that the *Heischegänge* lived on in playful form in the *Perchtenlauf* and in *charivaris*—legitimizing how gangs of men would break into houses and, for instance, “disguised as Jews,” steal something or engage in “bloody brawls.”<sup>366</sup> Hence he did not associate these appearances with acts of private revenge, sexual harassment, or local lynching under the cover of masked, noisy parades, but rather saw them as forms of communal moral enforcement. Accordingly, he further situated these processions within the framework of political uprisings for local order. In this sense, he described the vigilante public shaming procession known as *Haberfeldtreiben* in the Bavarian town of Miesbach—a secret peasant court of rebuke from 1863 that some had still sought to revive in 1919—as well as the *Gastein Perchten* as political performances.<sup>367</sup> And he interpreted these masked processions as protests against the corruption of those in power, legitimized by age-old customs. The peasant secret society remained entirely impenetrable to the authorities, Wolfram claimed in reference to the *Haberfeldtreiben*, as long as the custom was upheld with its traditional rigor.<sup>368</sup>

The *Gastein Perchtenlauf* that Wolfram filmed, however, also draws on the carnivalization of courtly pageantry. On closer inspection these borrowings reveal themselves as performative transpositions that contradict Wolfram’s

364 On the permanent state of exception under Nazism, see Benjamin's theses on the philosophy of history, “On the Concept of History,” 2006, 389–400. Original German version: “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” 1991, I.2: 691–704.

365 Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 292.

366 Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 151 (in the Hungarian context), 281 (with the Perchten). For the history of deadly clashes between opposing groups, so-called “Passen,” see Zimburg, “Der Perchtenlauf,” 1947: 40.

367 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 239, on *Haberfeldtreiben*: 226–236. On its function as a moral court, see also Queri, *Bauernerotik*, 1911.

368 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936–38: 231.

reading. Herod and his wife, Roman soldiers, and fanfares—figures featured in the Gastein masquerade shot by Wolfram—are today seen as a blend of St. Nicholas plays and carnival satire.<sup>369</sup> The Gastein Krampus runs are likewise connected to this tradition. In these events, masked young men visit their fellow villagers to scold them, distribute small gifts, and demand schnapps in return. At the end of these rituals—reminiscent of plays, in which baby Jesus was traditionally, and until recently, performed by men dressed as young girls—the Kramperl are finally unleashed: increasingly drunken devil figures clad in fur costumes and grotesque dark wooden masks. Krampus runs, associated with winter customs during the “dead” Rauh- or Glöcklernächte—Twelfth Night, or masked bell-runner night—carry with them a parody of prevailing justice. As carnivalesque performances, they do indeed echo independent jurisdictions that often served to violently enforce traditional norms under the protection of masks.<sup>370</sup> On the one hand, such performances recall earlier uprisings against authority; on the other, they invoke the social, and at times terroristic, disciplining historically associated with male-adolescent parades—targeted at young girls or “fallen” women and, in certain instances, at the Jewish or Protestant population.<sup>371</sup>

The reference to the Gastein Perchten run also highlights what Wolfram’s reading of masked states of exception actively represses: the entanglement of diverse performative techniques, whose origins cannot be traced as neatly as *Schwerttanz und Männerbund* implies—particularly in light of histories of forced migration. In their regionally adapted forms of performance, continually responding to local conditions, the Perchten testify to long-distance trade routes and networks (via old pack trails and mountain passes reaching as far as Venice); to experiences of flight and expulsion; to rural carnivalesque parodies of courtly spectacles; and to the citation of modern mass culture. They are less domestic than nomadic figurations.

In the case of the neighboring Pinzgauer Tresterer—a variant of Perchtentum distinguished by feathered crowns and long ribboned head-dresses—carnival elements are joined by echoes of nineteenth-century Amerindian stereotypes.<sup>372</sup> Photographs such as the one above taken before National Socialism and collected by Österreichisches Volkskundemuseum clearly show, just as historical sources indicate, what Ignaz Kürsinger noted in

369 See Wierer et al., *Gasteiner Perchten*, 2001: 69.

370 On the local Thing, see Gruber, *Über 1000 Jahre*, 2020: 267–269.

371 On the anti-Judaic coding of the devil figure, see DiNola, *Der Teufel*, 1990: 371–375.

372 On the Amerindian interpretations of the Pinzgauer Tresterer, see Kleindorfer-Marx, “Jetzt kommen gar Indianer,” 2018. On the Tresterer, see also Kammerhofer-Aggermann, *Matthias tanzt*, 2017; *Salzburger Tresterer*, 2018; *Malkievicz Schönperchten*, 2020.

1841: "ihre Kleidung und Tanz erinnerte mich lebhaft an die Tänze der Indianer, wie ich sie in Bildern sah" ("Their clothing and dance reminded me vividly of the dances of the Indians as I saw them in pictures").<sup>373</sup> Kürsinger continues by emphasizing their resemblance to the HARLEQUIN:

Sie ziehen von Pfarre zu Pfarre, begrüssen die besseren Häuser, so ihnen die Mühe des Tanzes mit Branntwein und Brod gelohnt wird, und kehren dann friedlich wieder zu ihren Arbeiten zurück. Alt und Jung, Groß und Klein läuft diesem uralten Volks-Schauspiele zu, weidet sich fröhlich an den Sprüngen der Tresterer, freuet sich über die Berchten und belachet den Hanswurst.<sup>374</sup>

They travel from parish to parish, greeting the better-off households—provided the effort of dancing is repaid with brandy and bread—before peacefully returning to their work. People of all ages and sizes gather for this time-honored folk play, happily taking pleasure in the Tresterer's jumps, cheering the Berchten, and laughing at the Hanswurst.



Figure 31: Pinzgauer Tresterer, undated. Österreichisches Volkskundemuseum, Vienna (CC PDM 1.0).

The Perchten also cite an amalgam of earlier practices, which Wolfram overwrites, thereby obscuring performative entanglements. The Viennese ethnographer Wilhelm Hein, by contrast, had already asserted in the nineteenth century:

373 Kürsinger, *Ober-Pinztgau*, 1841: 166.

374 Kürsinger, *Ober-Pinztgau*, 1841: 166.

Die große Aehnlichkeit dieser Masken in Form und Auffassung mit den Tanz-, Beschwörungs- und Teufelslarven verschiedener Völker, verleiht ihnen nicht bloß österreichische und mitteleuropäische volkskundliche Bedeutung, sondern stellt sie in eine Linie mit jenen Erzeugnissen, in welchen sich allerorts der Menschengeist in gleicher Weise offenbart; sie bilden daher ein unentbehrliches Glied in der Gesamtheit der Volksvermummungen, wie sie bei allen Völkern des Erdballs geübt werden.<sup>375</sup>

The strong resemblance these masks bear in both form and conception to the dance, invocation, and devil masks of various peoples not only lends them ethnographic significance in the context of Austria and Central Europe, but also aligns them with those cultural forms in which the human spirit reveals itself in the same way everywhere; they thus form an indispensable link in the totality of folk masquerade as practiced by all the peoples of the world.

Even in Wolfram's original book manuscript, preserved in his papers at the Salzburger Landesinstitut für Volkskunde, there are recurring echoes of parallels between his ostensibly Germanic field research and African ethnology. Moreover, in the book version released in three installments, which for unexplained reasons breaks off mid-text without the remainder being published, he notes that his research on the sword dance reminded him of African step dancing.<sup>376</sup>

Contemporary scholarship traces the Perchten repertoire back to medieval jumping processions, prop dances performed by craftsmen, or courtly morris dances,<sup>377</sup> pointing to comparable practices throughout Europe. This applies particularly to the so-called Schönperchten, that is, the beautiful Perchten, with their towering caps: older men accompanied by their "Gsellinnen" ("female companions")—boys dressed as girls, referred to as "sekundierende Nachtänzer" ("secounding dancers"). As shown in Wolfram's film, they bow to the houses they pass. This cites performances of the Salzburg court, where the Venetian carnival—internationally influential around 1600—was celebrated as part of a spectacular Baroque urban cultural politics, intended among other things to channel street carnival.<sup>378</sup> Nevertheless, bans on masks and court

375 Hein, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* (Berlin); cited in Wenger, *Gasteiner Perchtentanz*, 1911: 15. Hein founded an association, a journal, and a museum for folklore in 1894, thus institutionalizing the field in Austria early on. His findings, published in the *Berliner Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, are quoted in a 1911 volume on the Gastein Perchtentanz by Iwo Arnold Wenger. Wenger, in turn, emphasizes that these processions feature devil's grimaces and animal masks, whose frightening ugliness and bizarreness are echoed in similar forms across the globe. *Gasteiner Perchtentanz*, 1911: 15.

376 See Wolfram, *Männerbund*, 1936—38: 68.

377 See Wierer et al., *Gasteiner Perchten*, 2001: 11.

378 More recent historiography on the Perchten emphasizes carnival references in place of supposedly cultic elements; see Kammerhofer-Aggermann, "Salzburger Karneval,"

edicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—measures aimed not least at cross-dressing and the carnivalization of gender—also indicate the carnivalization of courtly and liturgical performances from below. Astrid Kusser describes the Cake Walk as a parodic creolization of European social dances by those enslaved on the plantation.<sup>379</sup> The Alpine peasants' quotation of courtly dances, carnivalesque masked festivals, and *commedia* performances from the Salzburg court into the kinaesthetic jumping repertoire of the Perchten can be seen as distantly related.<sup>380</sup>

The intertwined history of performative citation also recalls long-forgotten local contexts of violence. Some figures and masks—such as the towering table caps of the Schönperchten—are today attributed to Tyrolean customs. Their migration to the Gastein Valley, however, dates back to the expulsion of the Protestant population from the Salzburg region by the Catholic Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The now “cleansed” Gastein Valley was repopulated with laborers from Tyrol, who brought the Perchten caps with them and gradually transformed them into oversized forms.<sup>381</sup> Appearances of figures such as Frau Perchta and the so-called Schnabelperchten can likewise be read as performative transpositions of plague narratives; the “long nose” of the Perchta, documented as early as the fourteenth century, also references the plague doctors’ medical masks—though this connection is barely legible today. Incorporated into the costume repertoire of the Venetian carnival, these masks made their way to the Salzburg court and from there, apparently, into rural winter processions.<sup>382</sup> Even the witch figures evoke the often gendered persecutions

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2014/15. See also Hutter, “Salzburger,” 2002; Rest and Seiser, *Wild und schön*, 2016; Rumpf, *Perchten*, 1991; Schuhladen, “Zur Geschichte,” 1992, emphasizing discontinuities: 45; Wierer, “Gasteiner Perchtengeschichte,” 2002; Wierer et al., *Gasteiner Passen*, 2002; *Gasteiner Perchten*, 2001. The Venetian carnival sometimes took place around the turn of the year and its history thus testifies to the proximity of supposedly Germanic winter customs to carnivalesque masked processions. For the history of bans on these forms of performance and their connection with the exclusion and expulsion of Protestants, see also Dohle and Kammerhofer-Aggermann, “Maskenverbote,” 2002, who offer an analysis based on court records. Regarding the cessation of the nighttime dances in Gastein, see the mandate of the Salzburg ruler from 1756. Pfarrarchiv Taxenbach, *Repertorium*; cited in Gruber, *Über 1000 Jahre*, 2020: 423.

379 See Kusser, *Körper in Schieflage*, 2013, on 33. On the unpredictable, unruly afterlife of colonial repertoire, see also Kusser, “Visuelle Präsentationen,” 2007; “Deutscher Karneval im Black Atlantic,” 2009.

380 See Kammerhofer-Aggermann, “Salzburger Karneval,” 2014/15; Wierer et al., *Gasteiner Perchten*, 2001, on 11.

381 See Wierer et al., *Gasteiner Perchten*, 2001: 22.

382 On the history of the Gastein plague, see Gruber, *Über 1000 Jahre*, 2020: 152–160, 399.

ties to plague-related fears.<sup>383</sup> Accordingly, the masks depicted in Wolfram's film can be linked to both earlier and contemporary political violence.



Figure 32: Krampus run, Gastein 2022, Bassetti Pass. Photo: Evelyn Annus.

In the context of Wolfram's SS affiliation, the Germanized and militarized Perchten were understood as pre-Nazi courts of reprimand—beyond the reach of state control and regulation. At the same time, Wolfram sought to purge the comic-carnivalesque elements—expelling, as it were, the HARLEQUIN, with all its grotesque entourage and all its dragging. In the context of his activities in Salzburg for the SS-Ahnenerbe, Wolfram instrumentalized the Perchten as a latent, genealogical legitimization of Nazi state terror prior to its collapse in 1945, and as an ethnonationalistically indigenized counterfigure to the nomad. Read against the grain, this instrumentalization underscores the microfascist potential of carnivalesque performance,<sup>384</sup> something that remains visible in other contexts today. Through the Nazi reception of the Perchten, the terroristic

<sup>383</sup> On witch hunts in Gastein, see Gruber, *Über 1000 Jahre*, 2020: 382—387. On the transposition of witch hunts into colonial forms of violence, see Federici, *Caliban*, 2004. On the terror of witch burnings in the seventeenth century, see also Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 2008 (originally published in 2000).

<sup>384</sup> On the connection between roving bands and microfascisms, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987 (Chapter 12 on war machines: 351—423).

potential of masked, anonymous parades comes into play—not as expressions of traditional jurisdiction, the Thing, so to speak, but as the possible violent flipside of carnivalesque transgression. Despite the existence of regional resistance to the Nazis,<sup>385</sup> Wolfram's readings of these performances provoke questions about the diverse ways in which mimesis can be politically mobilized.

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From 1941 onward, theatrical condemnations of the nomadic in propaganda, art, and scholarship—accompanied by genealogical fabulations—helped legitimize the industrial extermination of those who had been marked as tribeless, impure, dirty, and lacking primordial affiliation to blood and soil—in other words, as always already in drag. Against the backdrop of current and often competing debates on antisemitism and colonial racism, this chapter has sought to analyze the violent equations of figures of “the Other.” In the case of Nazism, the dangers of essentializing, territorializing thinking become starkly apparent. Eva Braun's antisemically charged photograph in blackface-drag, the exoticism of *Ki sua heli*, the performative invention of the Volksgemeinschaft in propaganda theater, and the legitimization of the Germanic Thing lineage through Volkskunde—the Nazi materials assembled in this chapter—testify to diverse strategies of fascist decreolization, to a fictive process of “dedragging,” so to speak. Beyond the antisemitic charge of blackface, and its reading as a modern figure of globalization, Nazi representations of “African natives” served to banish the contemporary creolization of the world—epitomized in the figure of the nomad—through a German project of “debarbarization.” What emerges here are both differentiated forms of representational racism and their complementary role in the ideological construction of blood and soil—as well as their inverse: the ethnonationalist claim of autochthony through figurations of the Volksgemeinschaft in the Thingspiel, and the justification of extralegal, supposedly indigenous jurisdiction through the expulsion of carnivalesque performativity in Volkskunde. These forms of propaganda, which were by no means uniformly effective, perished with the end of the regime at the latest. Yet the modes and figures of thought embedded in them continue to reappear elsewhere in new forms.

An analysis of the Nazi era, in particular, makes clear which of these need to be reexamined today—and to what extent the debate around mimetic messiness demands greater precision. The political right is increasingly contributing to the dismantling of international law and legal protections for refugees—legal

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385 On local Nazi resistance, see Felber et al., *Politisches Salzkammergut*, 2024.

frameworks established in direct response to Nazi terror after 1945—through its appeals to majoritarian identitarianism. This chapter, by contrast, employs historiography to mediate between the increasingly siloed debates on antisemitism and colonialism. In this context, Baker's dance, along with Benjamin's and Kafka's understandings of language, serve as examples that not only recall the figure of nomadic schlepping-along in relation to creolized, queer cultural techniques, but also foreground a figure of *dirty dragging* which points toward possible future alliances.<sup>386</sup>

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386 See Bruns, "Antisemitism and Colonial Racisms," 2022: 47; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009, with regard to the corresponding potential for alliances in the struggle against antisemitism and colonial racism.



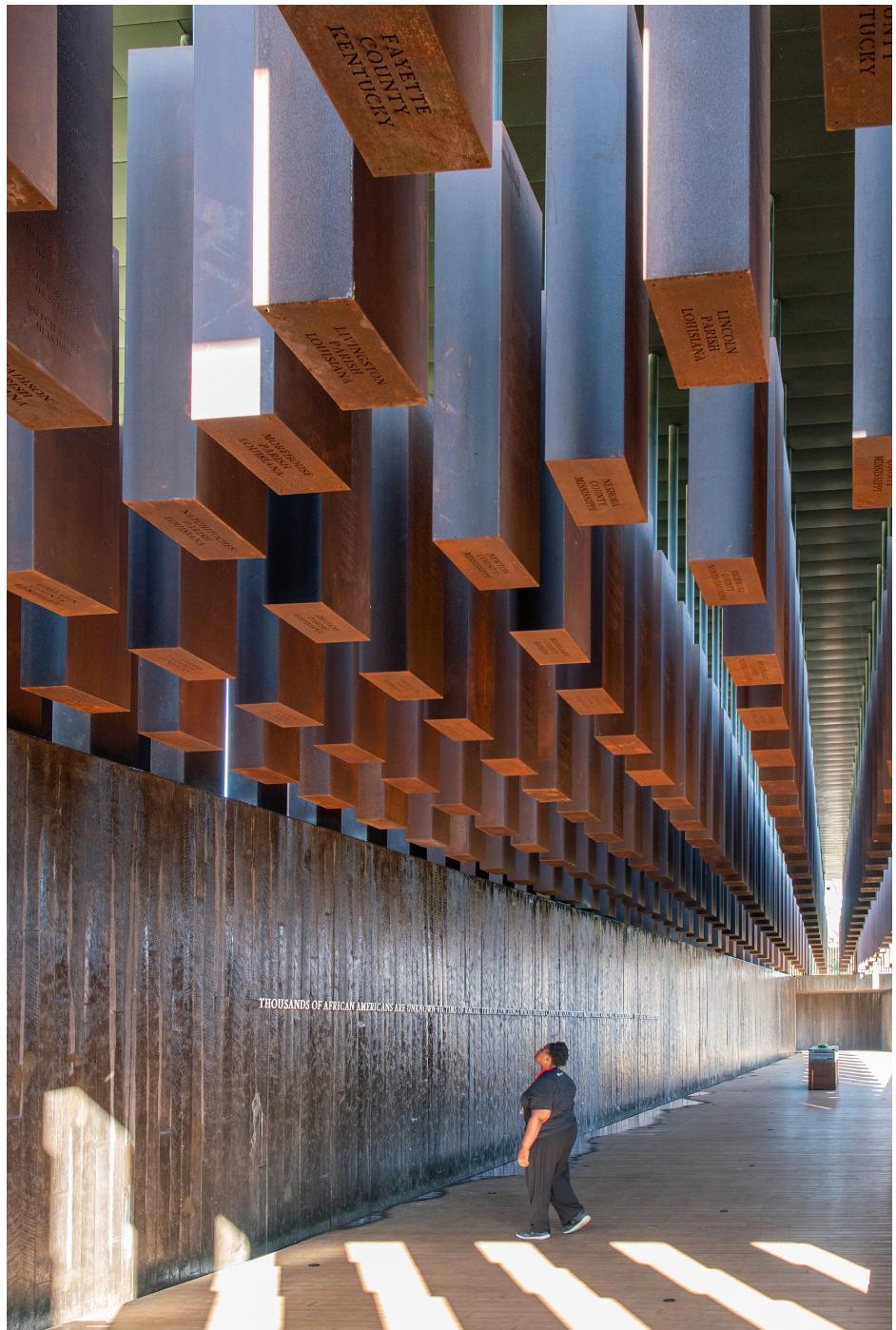


Figure 33: Lynching Memorial, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, 2018. Photo: Alan Karchmer.

## III. Jim Crow

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### Vexations

In the spring of 2020, medical masks took over public life as the coronavirus pandemic set in. Suddenly, people began showing up in different masquerades in various locations to protest local mask mandates—and to share their photos on social media for maximum attention.<sup>387</sup> Throwing together a chaotic repertoire of heavy signs (*signes lourdes*) in a kind of global contest over iconography, the carnivalesque became politically loaded in a particular way. The headline-grabbing figure of Q Shaman (staged by former actor, the now-pardoned Capitol rioter Jake Angeli) featured a face painted like the Star-Spangled Banner, a fur hat with buffalo horns evoking *Playing Indian* in Deloria's terms, and a tattoo of Thor's hammer across his torso—calling to mind the legacy of old Germanic warriors as imagined in trash action films.<sup>388</sup> Yellow stars and similar signs—meant to link mask mandates to Nazism and the Holocaust—were used in the German-speaking context at so-called hygiene demonstrations to frame protesters as victims of a health dictatorship.<sup>389</sup> And in both San Diego, California, and Hillenburg, Thuringia, people eventually showed up wearing white hoods, posing for photos in supermarkets or photoshopping themselves accordingly

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387 On the changed media culture of self-publication and the transformation of mimesis, see Balke, *Mimesis*, 2018: 228—229. On the role of blackface citations, see also Köppert, “Digital Blackface,” 2025.

388 On Jake Angeli, see <https://people.com/politics/justice-dept-walks-back-claim-capitol-rioters-sought-to-capture-assassinate-politicians/>, accessed September 24, 2024.

389 Costumes in the German-speaking context also include Perchten masks. See preliminary considerations on the protests against government policies to contain COVID-19 in *Affekt und Gefolgschaft*, 2023; *Populismus und Kritik*, 2024. See also Nachtwey et al., *Corona-Proteste*, 2020; Amlinger and Nachtwey, *Gekränte Freiheit*, 2022: 247—297 (with reference to Adorno's studies on the authoritarian character, written in the 1940s and published in English in 1950, German version: 1995); Reichardt, *Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft*, 2021.

to post their images online.<sup>390</sup> While staging themselves as shopping in defiance of local mask rules, they were citing the visual language associated with the Ku Klux Klan.

These forms of making an appearance speak to a media attention economy driven by transgressive insults and operate like extrajudicial court spectacles.<sup>391</sup> The reality TV show *The Apprentice* had already staged a similar mode of address as early as 2004, in what ultimately became a carnivalesque courtroom—a show that shaped Donald Trump's media persona for more than a decade.<sup>392</sup> His recurring TV performances as a boss who loudly humiliates and fires others not only foreshadowed his presidency but also mirror today's social media appearances, celebrating a carnivalesque authoritarianism as rebellion against "mainstream politics." Respectively, Trump performing the presidency like a carnival king, has made taboo breaking and putting down others part of a serial carnival routine.

Within this context, the revival of Klan masks—which recall the history of faceless racist terror—signals the persistent afterlife of violence in the play with referential slippery. Masks of this kind may not guard against COVID-19, but they shield their wearers like vigilantes from accountability. And such performances—whether in supermarkets or online—can be read both as carnivalesque commentary on mandated medical masks and as overt threats, aimed not only at pandemic policies but especially at those associated with the victims of the long history of white supremacy that the hoods cite. As masquerades, they are symptomatic of a kind of temporal drag from the political right: the performative transposition of signs from a political violence long thought to have been overcome. Such citations of Klan masks are clearly not a subversive

390 See David Hernandez, "Man Wears KKK Hood While Grocery Shopping," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-04/man-kkk-hood-in-santee-san-diego-sparks-outrage>, accessed September 24, 2024; [https://www.gannett-cdn.com/presto/2020/05/05/USAT/c35db4ec-989e-44da-b9b9-0214718c2f8b-Screen\\_Shot\\_2020-05-05\\_at\\_5.38.20\\_AM.png?crop=2205,1240,x-0,y0&width=2205&height=1240&format=pjpeg&auto=webp](https://www.gannett-cdn.com/presto/2020/05/05/USAT/c35db4ec-989e-44da-b9b9-0214718c2f8b-Screen_Shot_2020-05-05_at_5.38.20_AM.png?crop=2205,1240,x-0,y0&width=2205&height=1240&format=pjpeg&auto=webp), accessed September 22, 2022; Sebastian Haak, "Hassbotschaft unter Mundschutz. Rassistischer Vorfall in einem Supermarkt in Südhüringen," *Neues Deutschland*, May 5, 2020: 5.

391 On resentful forms of mimesis and their connection to today's media structure, see Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment*, 2022; regarding gender politics, Nagle, Kill All Normies, 2017. On corresponding performances of masculinity and their social causes, see for the US—from a prepandemic perspective—Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 2016 and Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 2013.

392 On Trumpism, see Koch et al., *Great Disruptor*, 2020.

move, but seem to be driven by terroristic, männerbündian fantasies,<sup>393</sup> just as this carnivalesque play with historical references is embedded within a global right-wing backlash, where “queer wokeness” has been cast in the role of the police. At the same time, the right-wing appropriation of transgression signals the current shift from neoliberal *laissez-faire* to illiberal regimes of liberalist economics and their disruptive claim of states of exception.



Figure 34: Supermarket, San Diego, California, social media post, 2020 (screenshot).



Figure 35: Supermarket, Hillenburg, South Thuringia, social media post, 2020 (screenshot).

In its “dragging”—defying rules to contain the coronavirus while visually schlepping along racist terror—the citations of the Klan reveals how performative cultural techniques can be mobilized to cater to the afterlife of white supremacy. People demonstrated how the medical mask mandate could be metapolitically “overperformed.” This right-wing state of exception in drag, then, did not aim for a universal “laughter of the entire people,”<sup>394</sup> as Mikhail Bakhtin described the medieval European carnival—that is to say, a temporary overturning of the social order. Instead, this Klan “dragging” in this case deliberately evoked memories of carnivalesque, masked, racist lynching spectacles

393 For the corresponding reformulation of temporal drag see Lott, “Blackface from Time to Time,” 2025.

394 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 1984, 111. Bakhtin’s view perhaps overly romanticized carnival also in reaction to Stalinism. See, by contrast, Mbembe: “Bakhtin’s error was to attribute these practices to the dominated. But the production of the burlesque is not specific to this group.” Mbembe, *Postcolony*, 2001, 133. For a critique of Mbembe’s critique see again Crichton and Northover, *Globalization*, 2009, 109.

carried out by faceless vigilantes, who were already subverting “police” control over cultural references in the nineteenth century.<sup>395</sup>

In the libertarian uprisings for an illiberal order—be it the storming of the Capitol in Washington or the Reichstag in Berlin—masks referencing racism or antisemitism have become iconic signs of today’s regressive, postdemocratic politics. These political performances highlight both the hollowing out of state institutions and the continued legacy of historic violence: the way long-held resentments remain transposable to the present. So what, exactly, do these Klan masks call forth into the present? Following the Civil War in the United States and the fall of slavery, carnivalesque performances in the South quickly turned into terror against Black communities and abolitionists. Meanwhile, the Southern white elite celebrated itself in exclusive carnival balls and parade floats, citing imagery from courtly masquerade traditions. From early on, the right-wing “carnival” took on the form of a vexing signifier, its masking practices swinging between terror and control. When viewed together, these forms of appearing in public reveal the brutal underside of minor mimesis—another kind of dirty dragging, whose legacy continues to endanger conviviality today.

The first section of this chapter focuses on various kinds of masked facelessness and their histories, entangling the exploration of creolization (Chapter 1) and decreolization (Chapter 2). The spotlight shifts here to the South since the Civil War—specifically, the push for new, modern forms of segregation institutionalized as Jim Crow—a term that is historically misleading, that is to say, in its reference to T. D. Rice’s blackface performances of the 1830s. The first groups of Ku Klux Klan, which emerged in the 1860s, offered, I will argue, a blueprint for today’s right-wing carnivalization of politics. That said, their media strategy drew not on visual imagery, but on striking rhetorical fictions, to “contagiously” draw attention to anonymously roaming, carnivalesque mobs and to foment terror. To this end, the Klan drew from Old World European traditions of rural shaming rituals—precisely those “arsenals of masks” outlined in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, to reiterate the point made above: the fraternal Klan marks only one—vigilante—side of contemporary right-wing carnival styles; the other is the elite Southern carnival, with its courtly forms of performing that developed in the later second half of the nineteenth century in places like New Orleans. In this context, Mardi Gras developed as a patriarchal tool of governmentality by a faceless high society that—in staunch opposition to creolized social relations—invented its own lineage, while also foreshadowing the mafia-like dynamics of today’s illiberal politics.

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395 For a critique of vigilantism and its gendering, see Dorlin, *Self-Defense*, 2022, 82–110.

At Mardi Gras, however, these Old World European traditions of masquerade are continually challenged by subaltern gangs who bring different forms of mimetic dragging into play. While their unruly appearances in the back streets have been repeatedly co-opted and folded into city branding campaigns, their repertoire, especially in contrast to the right-wing carnival, still gestures toward the possibility of other ways of relating. That is why the later part of this chapter will engage with “second lining”—the dancing along and behind of Zulu, of the Indians, or the Baby Dolls, that is, of the stock figures of New Orleans’s creolized Mardi Gras.<sup>396</sup> In the context of the highly charged visual coding of white and black masks within the United States, I will trace the shift from invisibilization to image proliferation for those subalterns who were never meant to mask themselves under Jim Crow by taking up the question raised at the start regarding Kewpie’s drag scene: what forms of a danced performing otherwise may challenge politics of divide and control? In calling to mind the affective potential of collectively moving bodies, I will return again to context-specific, though related forms of a queer “touching across.”<sup>397</sup> Facing today’s identitarian, neoauthoritarian governmentality and ever-increasing surveillance, it is politically vital not to forget the often-overlooked joy of gathering irregularly, relating unpredictably, forging new kinships, making room for another, and moving together in public. Yet nomadic roving has a violent flipside, too.

### **Terror (Ku Klux Klan)**

In 1867, a series of short, puzzling notes appeared in the *Pulaski Citizen*, a small weekly paper in rural southern Tennessee. “What does it mean?,” or “Kuklux Klan,” they announced—a mysterious series establishing a name without a face. This—as Elaine S. Frantz shows in *Ku-klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction*—is how the Klan began: “as a name.”<sup>398</sup> In her book, Frantz

396 On the differing and shifting use of *creole* as a designation for a population group in New Orleans, see the second chapter of Lief, *Staging New Orleans*, 2011, 14–32; see also Regis, *Local*, 2019. I refer here instead to Glissant’s understanding of creolization processes, that is, the interweaving of cultural techniques (*Introduction*, 1996; *Poétique de la relation*, 1990/*Poetics of Relation*, 1997). On second lining see Regis, “Blackness,” 2001; “Second Lines,” 1999.

397 This is Dinshaw’s formulation in Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 2007, 178; see also Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 1999, 3.

398 Frantz, *Ku-Klux*, 2015, 27. On the retrospective self-mythologization of the “weird potency” of this previously meaningless designation and the transformation of a loose group in search of entertainment into a “band of Regulators,” see the Klan members Lester and Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan*, 1905: 56, 73.

explores how the first generation of these Tennessee-based vigilantes emerged, how they used performance and media, and eventually became a nationwide, yet decentralized terrorist movement after the U.S. Civil War. To avoid being placed under a military government by the North, Tennessee became the only former Confederate state to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment before Reconstruction, which granted previously enslaved men the right to vote.

In Pulaski—a remote town of about three thousand residents, cut off from new trade and transportation networks, where the South's failure to modernize was apparent—a self-styled Klan captured new kinds of media attention amid the turbulence of Reconstruction. There, strange newspaper pieces called up carnivalesque parades in a kind of rhetorical masquerade.<sup>399</sup> On June 7, 1867, the *Pulaski Citizen*—apparently issued by Klan kin—ran an article titled “KuKlux Klan: Grand Demonstration Wednesday Night.” The piece already spins a tale of something that retrospectively could be read as right-wing carnival:

About 10 o'clock we discovered the head of the column as it came over the hill west of the square. The crowd waited impatiently for their approach. A closer view discovered their banners and transparencies, with all manner of mottoes and devices, speers, sabres, &c. The column was led by what we supposed to be the Grand Cyclops, who had on a flowing white robe, a white hat about eighteen inches high. He had a very venerable and benevolent looking face, and long silvery locks. He had an escort on each side of him, bearing brilliant transparencies. The master of the ceremonies was gorgiously caparisoned, and his “toot, toot, toot,” on a very graveyard-ish sounding instrument, seemed to be perfectly understood by every ku kluxer. Next to the G. C. there followed two of the tallest men out of jail. One of them had on a robe of many colors, with a hideous mask, and a transparent hat, in which he carried a brilliant gas lamp, a box of matches and several other articles. It is said that he was discovered taking a bottle from a shelf in his hat, and that he and his companion took several social drinks together. The other one had on a blood red hat which was so tall that he never did see the top of it. They conversed in dutch, hebrew, or some other language which we couldn't comprehend. No two of them were dressed alike, all having on masks and some sort of fanciful costume.<sup>400</sup>

399 On the rhetorical “face of speech,” see Menke, *Prosopoiia*, 2000.

400 The *Pulaski Citizen*, June 7, 1867: 3; <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033964/1867-06-07/ed-1/seq-3/>, accessed September 11, 2024 (all spelling as in the original); see Frantz, *Ku-Klux*, 2015: 51.

The article about an outlandish procession led by a figure dressed in a billowing robe, with long silver curls and a hat nearly two feet tall, reads like a sketch of a Perchtenzug, a pagan pageant of Old World European figures. This also applies to the grotesquely masked companions in multicolored costumes: one with a transparent cap bearing a gas lamp, matches, and a bottle; another sporting a towering headdress. Through descriptions of their nonsense speech—supposedly including “Hebrew,” that is, signifying incomprehensibility—and a nod to the “graveyard-ish sounding instrument” wielded by the Master of Ceremonies,<sup>401</sup> the dance-of-death-like gang was depicted as playing with ambiguous signifiers. Instead of one single face, the *Pulaski Citizen* gave “Kuklux” a vivid arsenal of imaginary masks—masks whose unruly variety stood apart from the later iconography of the Invisible Empire in white robes and hinted at diverse masking practices from elsewhere.<sup>402</sup> The spectacle thus not only blurred the traces of the participants: in the context of mid-nineteenth-century print culture—before its visual turn—it was precisely this mask play that first brought attention to the idea of a mysterious secret society. Although that initial public rhetorical appearance under the label of Ku Klux carried no overt political message, it unmistakably took place in the context of the South’s 1865 defeat in the Civil War.<sup>403</sup> The Klan’s media appearance may have been a symptom of political weakness; but its imagined form proved to be an effective weapon. It seemed to downplay the vigilante violence that would soon follow. The article foreshadowed an uprising of a gang of political losers who sought to impose a racially reconfigured order. And indeed, the rhetorical trickery—possibly enacted through real masked demonstrations—spilled over into actual violence.<sup>404</sup> Its afterlife gestures toward the terror potential embedded in carnivalesque forms of making a scene in public.

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401 On the significance of whistles, see, from a Klan perspective, Lester and Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan*, 1905: 59. On the modernity of such sounds, see Lhamon, *Raising Cain*, 1998: 110.

402 “Kuklux” is the designation in Lester and Wilson, *Ku Klux Klan*, 1905: 47. For the history of Klan masks see Frantz, “Midnight Rangers,” 2005; *Ku-Klux*, 2015; Kinney, *Hood*, 2016; “How the Klan Got Its Hoods,” 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/127242/klan-got-hood>, accessed September 24, 2024. On the proximity of Klan hoods and carnivalesque appearances in the context of Mardi Gras see Godet, “Multiple Representations,” 2017: 237. That said, Klan hoods—which in the United States paradigmatically signify WASP cultural attributes—recall Catholic penitential robes from southern Europe and thus also testify to the fact that the Klan itself is a creolized phenomenon.

403 For the history of the Civil War in the United States and its aftereffects see Masur, *U.S. Civil War*, 2020; Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning*, 2012.

404 On the double character of the German “*vexieren*” as a term meaning both “playing hide-and-seek” and “vexing,” see *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*, accessed September 11, 2024.

After 1865, the South saw the rise of numerous vigilante groups that refused to recognize new governance. In the postwar chaos—which often left those who had been enslaved without money, education, or work—violence escalated rapidly. This history is powerfully recalled today by the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, opened in 2018 as part of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.<sup>405</sup> It draws on the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg and Berlin's Holocaust Memorial. Seemingly endless arrays of steel columns, suspended from the ceiling and marked with the names of sites of terror, evoke the scale of violence unleashed during that era—violence that would later reappear in lynching postcards and live on in carnival.<sup>406</sup>

What the Pulaski Citizen had described as a performance that seemed both comical and harmless mutated within months into a murderous movement. This “carnival” was never just a form of appearing in the form of play acting: it deliberately folded the death of “the Others,” the unmasked, into its grotesque masquerade. After the Confederacy’s defeat, the collapse of the plantation system with its “belligerent accumulation,” and the fall of Southern white masculine subjecthood, the Klan began surfacing unpredictably across the South as a faceless terrorist force.<sup>407</sup> As the name drew wider attention, it became a

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405 On the Civil Rights Trail and the privately funded lynching memorial in Montgomery see <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html>, accessed September 24, 2024. Canetti describes the relationship between mob and lynching terror: “In addition there remains to this day one unashamedly primitive pack—the pack which operates under the name of *lynch law*. The word is as shameless as the thing, for what actually happens is a negation of law. The victim is not thought worthy of it; he perishes like an animal, with none of the forms usual amongst men.” See *Crowds and Power*, 1973, 117. In German: “Eine unverschämte Art von Meute hat man noch heute in jedem Akt von Lynch-Justiz vor sich. Das Wort ist so unverschämt wie die Sache, denn es geht um eine Aufhebung der Justiz. Der Beschuldigte wird ihrer nicht für wert gehalten. Er soll ohne alle Formen, die für Menschen üblich sind, umkommen wie ein Tier.” *Masse und Macht*, 1980: 130.

406 On the visual politics of lynchings, whose victims are 99 percent men, see Allen and Littlefield, *Without Sanctuary*, 2000: [https://archive.org/details/without\\_xxx\\_2000\\_00\\_7106](https://archive.org/details/without_xxx_2000_00_7106), accessed September 12, 2024; Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 2004; Young, “The Black Body,” 2005; on the visual history of violence and the photographs marked by modes of respectability responding to it see also Därmann, *Undienlichkeit*, 2020: 182—205.

407 For a respective reformulation of Marx’s notion of *primitive accumulation* in the context of colonial critique, see the research project of Katja Diefenbach, Ruth Sonderegger, and Pablo Valdivia de Orozco, who organized an international conference on Belligerent Accumulation at the European University Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder, in May 2024: <https://accumulation-race-aesthetics.org/belligerent-accumulation/>; <https://accumulation-race-aesthetics.org/research-statement/>, accessed August 13, 2025.

label for locally driven lynchings. By the latter half of 1867, “Klan” was already regionally linked to terror acts in various parts of the South. It did not signify continuous or centrally organized violence; instead, terror under the Klan’s name kept flaring up in different places, carrying forward the rhetorical game of deniability along with public executions.

In Pulaski, the Klan did not consist of established plantation owners, but of young veterans. Frantz refers to an image of the presumed founding members—faces unmasked, hats crooked on their heads, looking coolly into the camera with guitars.<sup>408</sup> She argues that this imagery linked the Klan to the visual repertoire of the minstrel genre. Possessing no resources except access to a local newspaper, the Klan succeeded in establishing its media presence over the next few years through this borrowed, Northern-coined repertoire—celebrating unaccountability. By planting playful “alt facts” in the press, it reshaped how the Northern urban public saw the South. The conspiracies fed by signs and revelations found on today’s social media platforms—pushed by QAnon and others—were in a sense prefigured by these “Klandrops.”<sup>409</sup> Shaped by the logic of emerging mass media, the 1860s Klan was, in this light, a distinctly modern phenomenon.

On that Wednesday night described above, if we follow the rhetoric of the accounts mentioned, the vexing signifiers spilled over into something like a staged parade: “All wondered,” the article begins, “and many expressed the belief that it was all a hoax, and that there was no such thing as a kuklux klan.” According to the *Pulaski Citizen*, flyers of unknown origin had advertised the procession as a celebration of the Klan’s first anniversary. Coded notes containing orders from a Grand Cyclops had allegedly surfaced repeatedly—either left at the paper by another shadowy figure, the Grand Turk, or, as they claimed, mysteriously fluttering in from nowhere:

We are warned not to make an effort to find out the objects of the “mystic klan,” and to allow the Grand Cyclops to issue his orders without molestation. Well, old Cyclops, just issue as many orders as you please, but if we catch your Grand Turk “cyphering” round our

408 See Frantz, *Ku-Klux*, 2015: 33; “Midnight Rangers,” 2005: 812; [https://external-content.duckduckgo.com/iu/?u=https%3A%2F%2Ftse1.mm.bing.net%2Fth%3Fid%3DOIP.XdwGTN8TaTGeQy\\_wCpaUawHaEn%26pid%3DApi&f=1&ipt=28b-716b0acf7139d9b6dfa7269910355fc65c0fbaebb251fb0a9a2fca6817171&ipo=images](https://external-content.duckduckgo.com/iu/?u=https%3A%2F%2Ftse1.mm.bing.net%2Fth%3Fid%3DOIP.XdwGTN8TaTGeQy_wCpaUawHaEn%26pid%3DApi&f=1&ipt=28b-716b0acf7139d9b6dfa7269910355fc65c0fbaebb251fb0a9a2fca6817171&ipo=images), accessed September 11, 2024.

409 On the topicality of the postfactual, see Gess, *Halbwahrheiten*, 2021. Tavia Nyong’o incisively notes: “In times like these, fabulationality is itself due for a certain degree of redress.” See *Afro-Fabulations*, 2018: 21. On self-reflexive constellations of Afro-fabulations, see Heidenreich, “Whose Portrait?” 2025.

door late at night, we'll upset him with a "shooting-stick." Look out, old Turk, we are some Cyclops ourself on our own premises.<sup>410</sup>

A veritable series of brief notices, buried deep in the back pages, introduced these unknown figures as sudden, elusive appearances, as if fact and fiction blurred entirely. Questions about their origins or intentions seemed ultimately unanswerable. The texts advertised the Klan as a haunting specter: uncertain, unplaceable, and impossible to pin down. It remained unclear who, if anyone, was actually speaking in its name:

Will any one venture to tell us what it means, if it means anything at all? What is a "KuKlux Klan," and who is this "Grand Cyclops" that issues his mysterious imperatives and orders? Can any one give us a little light on that subject? Here is the order: "TAKE NOTICE. — The Kuklux Klan will assemble at their usual place of rendezvous ... exactly at the hour of midnight, in costume and bearing the arms of the Klan. By or of the Grand Cyclops.

The G. T.<sup>411</sup>

Reporting and the *mystic klan's* roving, untraceable apparitions fed off one another. Even its alliterative name scattered clues in every direction. That syncretic name, open to fictional genealogies of all kinds, leaned hard into displaced, nomadic referentiality—unlike the "me as Al Jolson" captioned by Eva Braun (Chapter 2), whose rhetorics remained tightly contained. Richard Wolfram's research on the afterlife of ritual performances of old Germanic secret brotherhoods, as discussed above, would later lend intellectual cover to the Nazi cult of ancestry and help legitimize state terror as a permanent state of exception. The Klan, by contrast—emerging from the ruins of political defeat—refused any neat origin story or official politics. Its nomadic appearance anticipated how the hoods that would later become its signature reemerged during COVID-era protests and claimed a carnivalesque calendar of ever-possible states of exception along with shifting tales of origin.

Subsequently, even the Klan's founding date was changed—backdated, seemingly for effect, to Christmas Day 1865. That clearly invoked masked winter rituals among adolescent men, akin to the ones Wolfram later appropriated for the Nazis. The Southern summer parade of the Klan described above can thus also be read in consideration of intimidating rituals and masked masculine

410 Quoted from an article under the heading "KuKlux Klan" in *The Pulaski Citizen*, April 5, 1867.

411 *The Pulaski Citizen*, March 29, 1867: 3.

processions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as explored in the previous chapter with regard to *Schwerttanz und Männerbund*. The depiction of the Grand Cyclops—with his silver curls, white robe, and entourage—closely resembles Alpine Saint Nicholas figures, who move from house to house, accompanied by roaring devilish Krampus companions in fur and distorted dark masks, and are part of the broader Perchten tradition.<sup>412</sup> Performing rudimentary “Thingspiele” in village parlors, they enacted their own rustic form of justice. A mask now housed in the Chicago History Museum, dated to the 1870s, makes this especially clear. It strongly recalls those Christmastime Saint Nicholas plays in Europe, long reserved for costumed men—indicating the fraternal gendering of this other dirtiness of political violence the Klan unleashed.



Figure 36: Ku Klux Klan mask once belonging to Joseph Boyce Stewart, 1870s, Lincoln County, Tennessee. Chicago History Museum (ICHI-062420).

412 On the relationship between Perchten and St. Nicholas plays, see Kammerhofer-Aggermann, “Sankt Nikolaus,” 2002.

In looking at the masking repertoire used by the early Klan, a distant kinship emerges with ritualized rural-fraternal retributive court spectacles in Old World Europe. One cannot say for sure how such a masquerade—reminiscent of Haberer, Glöckler, Krampusse, or Perchten—made its way into the *Pulaski Citizen*, appeared on the streets of the South, and entered the homes of its victims. It may have arrived via the German New Year's carnival in Philadelphia, that is, in the North,<sup>413</sup> through the Mardi Gras traditions of Memphis or New Orleans, or by means of some other unspecified processions. However, the mention of towering hats evokes the headwear and costumes known also from the Alpine regions. From a comparative perspective, the description of that alleged first Klan parade conjures images of young men dancing through streets and from house to house: white-robed Glöckler with illuminated headwear or Krampusse with dark masks. The garb described in the *Pulaski Citizen* thus hints at nomadic performative transpositions.<sup>414</sup>

Citing carnivalesque parades aimed less at “self-indigenization” in claiming an unbroken return of a Germanic Wild Hunt as Wolfram had. Rather, the Klan is foremost a New World phenomenon. The image of bodies lashing out in sudden terror was picked up, but without being contained in a single backstory. Instead, the Klan leaned into an open play with slippery references—translating the Wild Hunt, for instance, into the vigilantes’ claim that they were Confederate soldiers who had returned from the dead. The Klan thus tapped into a motif that Nazis such as Euringer and Wolfram would later project back onto the medieval tradition of the dance of death in claiming its Germanic roots. For the Klan, however, it was rather spectacle than such genealogies that mattered; their performance was all about drawing attention. In that sense, the Klan reflects a kind of modernity that makes it particularly meme-ready for contemporary media. The afterlife of rural European masquerade—which perhaps arrived in Pulaski via its adaptation into the minstrel genre—was thus recast in a locally specific and deliberate way, shaped by the political climate of the time. These young ex-Confederates, having experienced cultural defeat in the Civil War, were carving out a new role for themselves, one that reshaped their militarized masculinity through carnivalesque terror. As Frantz notes, the Klan was not simply about restoring the old plantation order, but about the invention of a fundamentally changed hegemonic white Southern masculinity

413 Davis, “Parades and Power,” 1988; on the intertwining of blackface and gender bending in the history of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade, see DuComb, “The Wenches,” 2018.

414 For the “continued existence of ancient European folk theatricals well into nineteenth-century America,” and the close connection of Klan, minstrelsy, and mumming plays, see Cockrell, *Demons*, 1997: xiii–xiv; 33, 46, 56.

and the modern fight for attention: “Ku-Klux drew from popular culture to reconstruct their destabilized gender identities and reaffirm the racial dominance at its core.”<sup>415</sup> This carnivalesque, terrorist masculinity in minstrel blackface and other disguises aimed to impose the new racist order that would later be known as Jim Crow.

In citing rural European masquerade, however, the early Klan first and foremost brought into play two kinds of masking that were not yet mentioned in the *Pulaski Citizen* article quoted above but are highlighted by Frantz: cross-dressing and face-blackening.<sup>416</sup> Blackface can certainly be seen as a minstrel citation, but the blackened face also functions as a marker of combative masculinity. It taps into performative techniques tied to the heroization of death, the rough justice of militant male bands, and punitive rituals such as tarring and feathering, reframed in the context of the Civil War. This specific blend of spectacle and terror breaks through the boundaries separating gender bending from carnivalesque comedy, lines that would later become sharply drawn, for instance, in SS *Volkskunde*. As the hoaxes circulated by the Klan demonstrate, the contemporary power of their performance lies in enforcing the carnivalesque play with ambiguity rather than trying to suppress it. In this sense, the Klan’s early appearances are quite literally readable as in drag. And it is precisely this form of public spectacle that now, in the wake of the current right-wing backlash, seems newly appealing to some.

In his book *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe reads the carnivalesque as the “banality of power,”<sup>417</sup> where the obscene and the grotesque serve as intrinsic moments of domination, channeled through noninstitutionalized forms of public performance. But the history of the Klan—emerging on the cusp of Jim Crow and the rise of a modern racist order codified into law after the collapse of the plantation-based slavery regime in the South—makes clear that the relationship between terror and carnival needs to be situated more precisely. It also provokes a deeper look at how specific regimes of domination change over time. The first Klan dissolved in the early 1870s. Its acts of terror faded from view after systematic racism was consolidated through formal state policy. When the Southern states began installing new segregation laws—effectively a form

415 Frantz, *Ku-Klux*, 2015: 78.

416 On the differentiated spectrum of meanings of blackened faces with regard to the Klan in the context of Reconstruction, see Frantz, “Reading the Blackened Faces,” in *Facing Drag*, 2025. See also Cockrell on “nonracial folk blackface masking” in *Demons*, 1997: 52; on “Black Gothic,” see Smith-Rosenberg, *Violent Empire*, 2010: 413. The play with references is also a hallmark of early blackface acts and is adopted by the Klan; on T. D. Rice’s reply signed with Jim Crow to a newspaper review, see Annus, “Blackface,” 2014.

417 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 2001: 102.

of apartheid aimed to perpetuate the hyperexploitation of Black labor—night-time terror began to die down.<sup>418</sup> The Klan vanished just as the paramilitary battle over a racial color line under contemporary capitalism seemed won. In New Orleans—some 750 kilometers south of Pulaski, situated on the Mississippi and a key destination of steamboat tourism—this shift coincided with carnival's transformation into a mass spectacle. Yet through the carnival masquerade, the Klan's faceless terror gained an afterlife in a new, governmental form of faceless crowd control in the context of Southern white supremacism.

### **Control (Comus)**

What Errol Laborde and others now call “classic American Carnival”<sup>419</sup> may be seen as one of the templates for the early masquerades of the Klan. Yet carnival also absorbed the Klan's spectacles just as the brief post-Civil War era of democratization and abolition came to a close. Terror thus began to give way to what would become known as Jim Crow. As the white supremacist vigilante movement started to fade, new economic elites rose and found ways to put carnival to governmental use.

The history of New Orleans Mardi Gras—arguably the most creolized and spectacular carnival in the United States—reflects the shift from rural, fraternal vigilantism to urban, paternalistic modes of crowd control. Unlike Pulaski, New Orleans—a major port city where the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico—has been crucial for North-South commerce since the invention of the steamboat. In the nineteenth century, as carnival and the rise of a new upper class became entangled, Mardi Gras was turned into a tool for governmentality focused on mass tourism, city branding, and the commodification of entertainment. This coincided with the displacement of a fluid caste system. The distinction between the enslaved and *gens de couleur libre*—some of whom participating in the exploitation of bare labor—was now transformed to

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418 On the Jim Crow era and segregation laws, see A. Reed, *The South*, 2022; on the corresponding “burdened subject no longer enslaved, but not yet free,” see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 1997: 206. On the concept of petty apartheid, see Lalu, *Undoing Apartheid*, 2022.

419 As Errol Laborde, contemporary chronicler of the New Orleanian Mardi Gras in the tradition of Perry Young (1969), writes in *Mardi Gras*, 2013: 81, “With lineage that traces back to Mobile and farther back to the Mummers in Philadelphia, what evolved in New Orleans is the classic American Carnival, which, like many things American, has a touch of European afterlife.” On the colonial prehistory of Mardi Gras beginning around 1700, cf., however, Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 27—44; Godet, *From Anger to Joy*, 2024; *Playing with Race*, 2016: 258—260; Sublette, *The World*, 2008.

conform to a rigid color line.<sup>420</sup> Before the Civil War, a rising coalition of mostly Northern white newcomers—benefiting from the Deep South’s connection to the industrial North and the transport revolution—had speculated in goods traded through the plantation economy. They became now tied to shifting market dynamics brought on by the era’s mobility boom.

And even before 1861, when the war broke out, questions of modern urban development were playing a role for those who sought to gain from the transformation of the existing economy.<sup>421</sup> As Reconstruction took hold and profit systems collapsed along with the end of slavery, New Orleans required a new commercial model. Until then, it had been the leading hub for the American slave trade and, after the Haitian Revolution around the turn of the century, the central node of sugar commerce across the Black Atlantic. Like Cape Town, New Orleans was plugged into transatlantic trade and had long been a creolized port city with a Romance-style carnival tradition.<sup>422</sup> In line with Louisiana’s French and Spanish colonial history, Mardi Gras blended street processions and ball culture, anchored in the Catholic calendar. But even before abolition, shifting internal migration patterns signaled the rise of new social formations, which would also reconfigure carnival.

Standard histories date the start of Mardi Gras in New Orleans to the winter of 1856–1857, when the Mistick Krewe of Comus was founded—the same year Dred Scott failed in his bid for freedom before the U.S. Supreme Court,

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420 On the political history of the color line in New Orleans and its caste system before segregation, see Powell, *The Accidental City*, 2012; on the three classifications up to the mid-nineteenth century—comparable to Cape Town—see Brook, *The Accident of Color*, 2019. See also Vidal, *Louisiana*, 2014; *Caribbean New Orleans*, 2019. On the exemplary role of New Orleans as a port city in the formation of diasporic communities and the specific function of carnival, see Abrahams, “Conflict Displays,” 2017. With regard to demographic developments and Mardi Gras, see also Gotham, “Authentic New Orleans,” 2007: 22–44; on gender history, the segregation of marriages (1894), and public life (1896), as well as prostitution, see Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 18–19; Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 224–233. To again quote Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 143, “The few remaining pockets of interracial association disappeared from New Orleans in the 1880s.” On the historical geography of New Orleans, see Campanella, *Bienville’s Dilemma*, 2008; *Cityscapes of New Orleans*, 2017.

421 On the contemporary revolutionization of trade, industrialization, and mobility from a transregional perspective, see Smith-Rosenberg, *The Violent Empire*, 2010.

422 On the family resemblance of the creolized port cities Cape Town and New Orleans, see Fredrickson, *White Supremacy*, 1981: 258; Saunders, “Cape Town and New Orleans,” 2000. With regard to the second half of the nineteenth century in both cities, Bickford-Smith points out “social ‘integration’ as a ‘lower-class phenomenon’; *Ethnic Pride*, 1995: 37.

and eighty years after independence.<sup>423</sup> During carnival, Comus staged a kind of roving theater parade—at first with only two floats—and hosted a spectacular, invitation-only ball featuring tableaux vivants.<sup>424</sup> The masked secret society was made up of affluent anglophone newcomers, some of whom profited from the sugar trade. With them, a new parade culture emerged after the war—what city marketers would later brand the “greatest free show on earth.” Exclusive balls, meanwhile, served to knit together the new elite. These tableaux-vivants events, and the officially sponsored “elevated carnival” for the masses—especially for the rising tide of tourists—went hand in hand. With them, the newcomers positioned themselves against the longstanding, francophone moneyed elite and their masquerade ball culture.

A drawing of the 1867 Comus Parade, published in an illustrated magazine—Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper—highlights the recently established divide between the parade and its spectators. This new parade form juxtaposed an unruly, street-level carnival and its moving bodies with public spectacle. Here, masks became signs of faceless authority. Comus thereby invoked an allegorical court masquerade by the London poet John Milton, titled *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634: On Michaelmasse night, before the Right Honorable, John Earle of Bridgewater, Viscount Brackly, Lord President of Wales, and one of His Majesties most honorable privie counsell*. The Milton citation clearly functioned as a marker of bourgeois, anglophone, Protestant distinction—as a display of cultural capital.<sup>425</sup> It underscored the ambition to create an alternative high society, separating itself from the creolized, Romance carnival traditions both in the streets and in the long-standing dance halls. In time, its aesthetic would prove especially well suited to the emerging era of mass image distribution. Paradoxically, the citation of a courtly spectacle also helped to establish a “postcolonial,” supposedly genuine American carnival form—though deliberately stripped of its creolized character.

This masquerade spectacle negotiated contemporary claims to power through specific stagings of gender. Comus appeared in an ambiguously masculinist form.

423 On the Cowbellion de Rakin Society, a carnivalesque and secretive fraternity founded in the 1830s in Mobile, about 150 miles east of New Orleans, with connections to the German carnival of Pennsylvania and from which Comus emerged, see Cockrell, *Demons*, 1997: 36–37; on Comus and its relation to the New Orleans vigilantes and the Klan, see also Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 48, 77–108.

424 On the history of mobile platforms—wagons, floats, caravans, and the like—functioning as tribunes in Europe, see Heer, *Vom Mummerschanz*, 1986: 69.

425 On the Milton quote as an attempt “to accumulate cultural capital to complement their material success,” see Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 258.

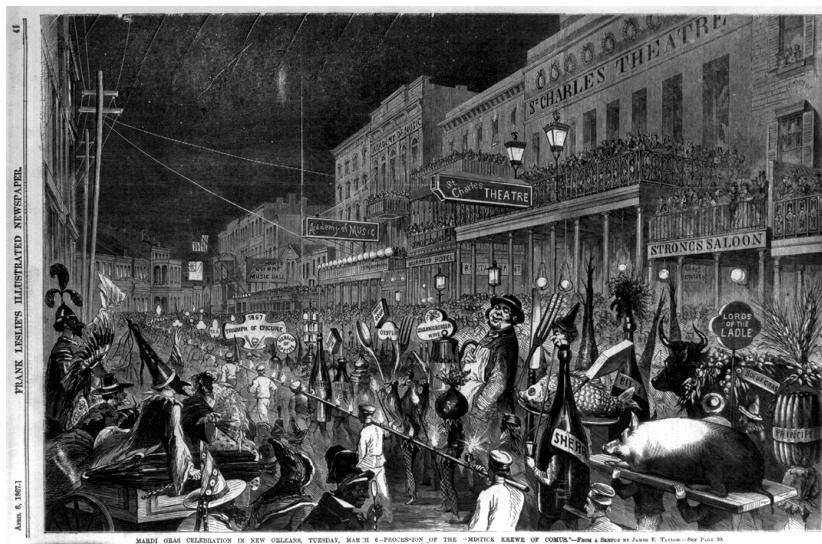


Figure 37: Mistick Krewe of Comus, Mardi Gras Parade, New Orleans, 1867. Frank Lesley's Illustrated Newspaper, April 6, 1867: 41. Library of Congress, Washington, DC (99614058).

From the outset, Milton depicts the figure who gives the secret society its name as Janus-faced. Its seemingly harmless shepherd's disguise turns out to be the deceptive flipside of sexualized violence. In Milton's puritan allegorical play of chastity—a genre pastiche of courtly theatrical forms—the sorcerer COMUS, a masked seducer, abducts his counterpart, called the LADY, who stands for spirit and virtue. Dragging her to his castle, he tries to rob her of her innocence. Right in his first entrance, COMUS leads a band of wild, beast-faced, noise-wielding monsters, whose appearance first evokes baroque creatures of hell and their colonial-racist transfigurations within the context of British expansion:

COMUS enters, with a charming-rod in one hand, his glass in the other; with him a rout of monsters, headed like sundry sorts of wilde beasts, but otherwise like men and women, their apparel glistring; they come in making a riotous and unruly noise, with torches in their hands.<sup>426</sup>

Even in Milton's play, the female figure of virtue serves as a trigger for the display of spectacular unruliness, as the first entry of COMUS and his "bestial" retinue shows. Transposed into Mardi Gras, figurations of femininity and "bestiality" enabled krewe members to adopt cross-dressing and blackface, bringing into

426 Milton, *Comus*, 1921: 10; <https://archive.org/details/comuswithintrodn00miltuoft/page/10/mode/2up?ref=ol>

play the image of white femininity as something to be protected—along with the dark threat it supposedly faces.<sup>427</sup> Against the backdrop of enslavement and the plantation, these figurations took on a distinct political signification. Milton's *Comus*—oscillating between sovereign masquerade and unleashed violence—became the king of the Mardi Gras krewe. After the Civil War, Milton's rape fantasy—cited to reconfigure carnival—could also be read as a threat of violent transgression onto those cast as a racialized, bestial menace. And it is precisely through this twisting and intertwining of allusions to violence that the history of the Comus Krewe, for their part, resonates in a particular way with the contemporary governmental right-wing carnival—while differing from the Klan's vexations.

In the end of the play, Milton has virtue and order prevail. And the Comus Krewe, in its own way, nods to a Puritan view of carnival already shaped by Ash Wednesday. Read with Umberto Eco, the Milton citation envisages a temporary form of transgression that serves to amplify an existent regime of domination.<sup>428</sup> Unlike the Klan—carnivalizing its calendar and staging a permanent state of emergency—excess is presented here as fleeting and clearly bounded, yet recalling the transformation of militant violence into societal structures potentially reactivated when needed by the new elites.

While *Comus*'s zoomorphic Mardi Gras personae—often white and female or Black and male figures, all of them played by white men—appeared only briefly every year in what we might call drag, they have a lasting counterpart: a gentlemen's club founded alongside the krewe, which to this day excludes those who are categorized as Jewish, Black, or women.<sup>429</sup> Serving the interests of an elite faction, the carnival of what are now called the Old Liner krewes has increasingly evolved into a vehicle for city branding. After the South's military defeat, the quoted courtly theatics was repurposed into a large-scale carnival spectacle—now aligned with modern commercial capitalism and new modes of entertainment. At the same time, Mardi Gras became a tool of contemporary social control.

In *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, James Gill charts the entanglement of ex-Confederate vigilante groups such as the paramilitary, unmasked White League and the Comus Krewe, despite its Northern background.<sup>430</sup> Their “elevated carnival” spectacle of street glamour,

427 On the use of blackface by *Comus* and later also by *Rex*, see Felipe Smith, “Things,” 2013: 25–26; revised reprint in Adams and Sakakeeny, *Remaking New Orleans*, 2019.

428 See Eco, “Frames,” 1984.

429 See Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 7.

430 On the White League, see Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 106–122; on the 1874 coup and the involvement of *Comus* members, see also Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 261; on the Battle of

Gill argues, lured the bourgeoisie into the streets, making the old, unruly hooliganism—with its flour fights and, most likely, urine bombs—easier to control.<sup>431</sup> This new form of Mardi Gras went hand in hand with a retroactive, yet deeply enduring mythologizing of Southernness: “The krewes have played a big part in perpetuating the myth that the South sustained a great civilization until it was destroyed by Yankee vandals.”<sup>432</sup>

In the guise of Proteus or Momus, by the 1870s—just as the first Klan was winding down—several elite krewes were springing up, modeled on Comus and helping to regulate street carnival with rolling tableaux vivants and living statues.<sup>433</sup> The modern version of carnival then finally received a respectable face in Rex, the supposedly universal, white, male Mardi Gras king—ruler of all the krewes.<sup>434</sup> Invented in 1872 as a deliberate attempt to jumpstart tourism, Rex became the figurehead of the modernized, “American” carnival. His face is bare, while Comus still hides behind a stiff white mask, punctured with holes. To this day, the Comus Krewe refuses to reveal who appears each year on its behalf, broadcast on television alongside King Rex and exclusively photographed in an ever-same way during the now-traditional Meeting of the Courts on Fat Tuesday. In embroidered royal capes with long trains, Comus and Rex perform their alliance as “Ersatz,” as surrogate, royalty.<sup>435</sup> Positioned within the social order of the South, the pairing of white mask and white face comes to expose the link between violence and wealth.

Historical sources already bear witness to this carnival’s deep ties to the Southern myth and to courtly spectacle. A 1941 photograph, taken from a bird’s-eye view by John N. Teunisson, shows the two royal couples with their

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Liberty Place, the 1874 coup by the White League against Reconstruction, see Gotham, “Authentic New Orleans,” 2007: 39.

431 See Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 36; Young, *The Mistick Krewe*, 1969: 49—50. On corresponding medieval European carnival battles and their afterlife, see Mauldin’s introduction to *Carnival!*, 2004: 17. In the Alpine and Tyrolean regions, there are complementary forms of performance involving coal-dust cudgels and soot-smearers.

432 Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 280.

433 On the statuary aesthetics of “elevated carnival,” see Young, *The Mistick Krewe*, 1969: 75.

434 On the first King Rex, Lewis Salomon, a banker from a Jewish family who converted to Catholicism, see Laborde, *Mardi Gras*, 2013: 33—34.

435 On the Meeting of the Courts, which is broadcast in full on local television every year, see Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 11, 13; on its history: 137. See, most recently, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46RclbkevBU>, accessed September 24, 2024. The white Comus mask also faintly recalls the modern signature hoods of the Ku Klux Klan with its eye holes; on the mask repertoire, see the introduction by Adams and Saka-keeny to *Remaking New Orleans*, 2019: 16. On the second Klan, founded in 1915, and its visual media politics, see Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 2019.



Figure 38: “Meeting of the Courts,” Comus, Rex, Mardi Gras 1941, New Orleans. Photo: John N. Teunisson. The Historical New Orleans Collection (THNOC 1985.233.1).

spectacular trains and entourages approaching one another—surrounded by their exclusive audience. In contrast to today’s tightly controlled close-ups from the Meeting of the Courts, Comus’s perforated white mask, though, is hardly visible in the image. Referring to the courtly appearance of Comus, the *Times Democrat* remarked on February 25, 1903, with a clear nod to the Civil War:<sup>436</sup>

Comus had gone by, with his train of mystic pageantry stretching far behind in glowing colors of many hues, and lit with the gleam of a thousand torches ... and from the throne room beyond the mystic curtain whisperings of the court drifted out to the waiting multitude.

436 A photo of the 2022 Meeting of the Courts by David Erath, showing the unsettling masking of Comus, can be found in Nell Nolan’s article “Photos: Rex and Comus Balls and Meeting of the Courts 2022”, [https://www.nola.com/multimedia/photos/photos-rex-and-comus-balls-and-meeting-of-the-courts-2022/collection\\_248d8fee-9b5f-11ec-8c0f-1771c2d8ad3d.html#16](https://www.nola.com/multimedia/photos/photos-rex-and-comus-balls-and-meeting-of-the-courts-2022/collection_248d8fee-9b5f-11ec-8c0f-1771c2d8ad3d.html#16); accessed September 24, 2024. It was not possible to obtain current images for this book. A former standard photographer, for example, first wanted to check whether my text aligned with the interests of her “clients.”

The ball, with its memories of many other Carnival balls, and with its associations of bravery and skill and of men who have gone forth to die for their country, was decked in the colors of the Carnival.<sup>437</sup>

As this quote indicates, the emerging form of Mardi Gras in New Orleans gained its political charge through its tight fusion of ballroom culture and militarism in service of the Southern myth. As early as 1873, the Comus parade featured not only overt displays of glamour but also white supremacist satire. Its tool was racist caricature, as shown in Charles Briton's elaborate watercolors of figures and floats, painted on empty backgrounds, which are now housed in Tulane University's Carnival Collection.<sup>438</sup> While the makeshift street carnival inflected by the creolized ragtag of the Atlantic has left few traces, the New Orleans archives overflow with exclusive artifacts from the so-called Old Liners: drawings, invitations, party favors, décor, and costumes from elite krewes. Among them are the remains of the 1873 Comus parade. Titled *The Missing Link to Darwin's Origin of Species*, these artifacts reimaged Milton's "roughly-headed monsters" as oversized-headed animals meant to parody new political leaders: the president, the governor, the chief of police, and so on.<sup>439</sup> By turning politicians into animalized figures, the parade staged a supposed Africanization of governance. Comus drew here on minstrel imagery, as shown in Briton's depiction of a gorilla playing a banjo, wearing a crooked hat and peacock feather, said to reference a sitting lieutenant governor. As minor, supporting characters, delicate, feminized creatures resembling butterflies appear in Briton's drawings, often with a stinger, such as the Demoiselle Fly. The krewe members likely performed these roles in blackface and cross-dressed as white women. In portraying such "Others," the use of masks became a gesture of domination. Black torchbearers and the krewe members' female relatives, by contrast, were not entitled to wear facial disguises.<sup>440</sup> The krewe masks thus

437 *Times Democrat*, February 25, 1903: 7. The newspaper merged about ten years later with the *Daily Picayune*, which still exists and maintained coverage during the Katrina disaster in 2005.

438 See Leathem, *Gender and Mardi Gras*, 1994: 59.

439 The phrase is spoken by the LADY in Milton, *Comus*, 1921: 28.

440 On the class-specific taboo against wearing masks that applied to white women in the nineteenth century, see Leathem, *Gender and Mardi Gras*, 1994: 52; see also Young on the nighttime mask ban after the Civil War and the preceding regulations targeting ball culture from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries into the 1830s; *The Mistick Krewe*, 1969: 87, 17–26. On the racist history of mask bans, which began around 1730 under Spanish rule with the Code Noir in force at the time, see Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 81–82. See the local Code Noir at <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/louisianas-code-noir-1724/>, accessed September 11, 2024. On

worked to legitimize the emerging color line by appealing to the biology of the day, and they ultimately called for a reversal of Reconstruction government.<sup>441</sup> This carnival, in other words, played an overtly political role.

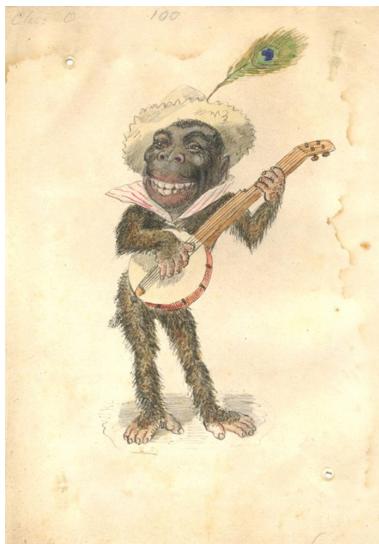


Figure 39: "Gorilla or The Missing Link," watercolor drawing for the Mistick Krewe of Comus Parade 1873, New Orleans, Charles Briton. Tulane University, Carnival Collection.



Figure 40: "Demoiselle Fly," watercolor drawing for the Mistick Krewe of Comus Parade 1873, New Orleans, Charles Briton. Tulane University, Carnival Collection.

More than a century later, in the early 1990s, those notorious depictions reemerged—this time to give an afterlife to Jim Crow-style segregation. Before Comus, Momus, and Proteus shifted their efforts solely to private, invitation-only

the Code Noir, introduced in Louisiana in 1724 and in force until the territory was purchased by the United States in 1803—which regulated the status of Blacks and free Blacks, banned intergroup marriage, prohibited enslaved gatherings, enforced Catholicism, and ultimately also excluded Jews—see Palmer, *Through the Codes Darkly*, 2012. See also Midlo Hall, *Africans in Louisiana*, 1992. Linebaugh and Rediker point out that the Code Noir did not apply on pirate ships. The transatlantic “hydrarchy,” as they call it, which mixed cultural practices from around the world, functioned more democratically than the dominant conditions on land; the mobile underclass thus became a threat to the slave trade; see Hydra, 2000: 162–167. On pirate cultures and their relation to queer lives, see also Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 2011: 18–23.

441 On the Darwin quote, see Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 261–269; Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 101–105.

balls and canceled their parades in protest over a new city ordinance—requiring the overdue desegregation of all Mardi Gras parade groups—the figures from 1873 were reinvoked in one last public spectacle.<sup>442</sup> Once again, the right to remain unseen was tied to a grotesque, hypervisibilization of those othered.

Since then, these Mardi Gras secret societies have limited themselves to a parallel world of ball culture. Overt racist provocations, such as the gorilla imagery of the early 1990s parades, vanished from the public eye. Meanwhile, krewes like Comus have continued to cultivate quasi-oligarchic business networks through their ball circuits, networks that have entrenched local racialized class structures and have contributed to keep broader social change at bay. Unlike the fraternal terror tactics of the antebellum period, this exclusive ball culture was shaped by patriarchal logic. The daughters of otherwise faceless businessmen in “drag” were presented as debutantes of high society: “especially the daughters of the krewe members become living effigies, the overdressed icons of social continuity,”<sup>443</sup> as Joseph Roach writes. In her study on gender and Mardi Gras, Karen Trahan Leathem also stresses the role of women related to the krewes, who remained unmasked: “As men disguised their identities, unmasked women representing their families defined elite boundaries.”<sup>444</sup>

Today, the complicit appearance of these young women, affiliated to the krewes within the quasi-feudal marriage market of elite ball culture can be read as the flipside of police terror aimed at Black men—racialized as public threats—whose mass incarceration and hyperexploitation under the US prison system has come to be labeled the New Jim Crow.<sup>445</sup> This marriage-market, moreover, also shows that the krewes do not operate as fraternities but as patriarchal elite formations. Having long since secured their position, they no longer need to flaunt their wealth and resentment in public. Instead, the very facelessness of their power, its transformation into structural conditions, becomes legible in their withdrawal from the streets. The elite krewes can be read as invisible “war machines”—that is, de- and reterritorializing engines of local governing. “That is why bands in general,” as Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “even those engaged in banditry or high-society life are metamorphoses of a war machine formally distinct from all State apparatuses

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442 On the persistence of patriarchal ball culture, see also Rebecca Snedeker’s documentary film *By Invitation Only*, 2006.

443 Roach, Cities, 1996: 267. By contrast, see Laborde: “the debutante tradition, which at its primal level is as innocent as a proud father honoring his daughter ... such traditions involve old-family lineages and customs and are quite healthy for a community.” Mardi Gras, 2013: 61. On the afterlife of killability, see Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 2016.

444 Leathem, *Gender and Mardi Gras*, 1994: 107. On the affirmative function of drag in the context of the elite Mardi Gras, see Ryan, *Women in Public*, 1990: 29.

445 See Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 2012.

or their equivalents, which are instead what structure centralized societies.”<sup>446</sup> Reading the Klan and the krewes with Deleuze and Guattari as complementary war machines, the kinship between the faceless rule of high society through patriarchal networks and fraternal gangs of terror comes into view.

So what exactly is the relationship between krewe and Klan? A decade after Comus was founded, the Mistick Krewe’s carnivalization of naming was subtly picked up by the Pulaski Citizen calling the local vigilantes a “mystic klan.” And despite the differences between the so-called Old Liner krewes and the early Klan, the carnivalesque functioned as a tool of power for both the hidden elite and the vigilante mob. For the Old Liner krewes, however, this came—even in the 1870s—from a position of local dominance, a dominance that had nonetheless relied on the terror tactics of vigilantes. Accordingly, the Klan’s unruly, mask-blending spectacles in the 1870s folded into what Laborde calls the “classic carnival.” Frantz points to a lynching float in the 1872 Memphis Mardi Gras—featuring Klan supporters restaging their assaults, appearing in blackface and, apparently, playing the roles of their own victims. In *Midnight Rangers*, she shows how carnivalesque terror shifted, as Reconstruction faltered, to a performative “as if” mode of Mardi Gras spectacle, increasingly interwoven with a rising new high society:

Once southern elites could gather huge crowds to witness large, splashy Mardi Gras celebrations teaming with representations of race, gender, violence, and antinorthern sentiment and could describe them in detail and without fear of reprisal in their increasingly viable newspapers, the actual Klan was of much less use to them. The Klan would dissolve easily back into the cultural realm, where it would have and continues to have an uncanny and undeniable resonance.<sup>447</sup>

Southern Mardi Gras thus evokes the kind of potential terror that can be reawakened and transposed whenever racial hierarchies are challenged—and which, as seen in the storming of the Capitol or the use of Klan masks in supermarkets, has continually been remade into new forms of right-wing carnival untethered from any calendar. In the context of Trumpism—with its grotesque recasting of the president as the white Carnival King, serving an illiberal identitarian politics of majoritarian resentment and furthering upward redistribution, fueled by a popularity born of reality TV—reading Klan and krewe in tandem opens onto broader

446 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 358.

447 Frantz, “*Midnight Rangers*,” 2005: 836.

questions: how street terror intersects with mafialike “microfascisms,”<sup>448</sup> and how carnivalesque terror can be translated into structural, into governmental, violence.

### ***Complicities (Tramps)***

Around 1900, as media technologies evolved, the first visual records of a new kind of street carnival began to appear in New Orleans: images that could be read both as signs of revolt against modern crowd control in the wake of an elevated Uptown Mardi Gras, that is, from the American Quarter, and as manifestations of carnivalized complicity with the ruling order. In the same historical moment that images began to proliferate, these early Mardi Gras photographs captured the ambivalence of the carnivalesque. I want to highlight one photo indicative of this ambivalence. It shows a rowdy carnival crew in New Orleans, which takes over the full width of the street like in a protest march. It seems to stage a kind of street-claiming act of revolt, yet probably marks the rear flank of the mobile power architecture of elite carnival and gestures to questions of co-optation.

On Mardi Gras Day 1907—February 12—the Tramps Band Local 23 grinned into a camera, wearing torn suits, off-kilter hats (some far too small), and faces variously painted or masked. As they made their way through the streets of New Orleans, they likely played rough music for the onlookers who appear at the edge of the photograph. This ragged, lumpen-looking yet neatly lined-up crew also denotes just how embedded highly gendered forms of blackface were in Mardi Gras around 1900. The street scene features all kinds of minstrel-like and related face-masking: fake beards, blackened eyes, painted faces, veils, and soot smears. In the context of US segregation, it shows how blackface functioned as the comic mask of the precarious—linked, in Achille Mbembe’s terms, to the modern Black condition of bare labor, the condition of being made into a nonperson.<sup>449</sup> A cardboard sign warning not to provoke the monkey links blackface to zoomorphic tropes and taps into the racialized visual regime of the time. The cockeyed hats, torn suits, and metal buckets used as makeshift instruments—hallmarks of this band—also signal connections to minstrel

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448 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987: 379.

449 “The transnationalization of the Black condition was therefore a constitutive moment for modernity, with the Atlantic serving as its incubator”; see Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017: 15. According to Mbembe, the invention of *le nègre* (38), the personification of the *conditio nigra*, is not a prerequisite but a response to the commercialization of the triangular trade; the figure was only biologized in the nineteenth century and, in the context of today’s genome-oriented thinking, is experiencing a comeback (39). For critiques of biological thinking and of notions of indigeneity, see also Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017; “Who Was Here First?,” 2020.

shows. **JIM CROW**—long associated with the plantation system and the figure of the runaway slave—appears to be collectively recast as a masculinist gang persona allegorizing the segregationist regime now bearing his name.<sup>450</sup>



Figure 41: Tramps, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 1907. The Historical New Orleans Collection (THNOC 1981.261.58, 12.2.1907).

In the 1830s, decades before slavery was abolished, T. D. Rice had introduced **JIM CROW** as a new figure in popular theater. His black-painted persona of a drifting tramp had served as both a trickster figure and a projection screen for a predominantly white audience that was first largely industrial working-class, then increasingly bourgeois—mainly in the urban North, along the border, and eventually overseas. This figure had stood in for an imagined elsewhere—one that invoked the terror of enslavement, but reframed it in carnivalesque terms and infused the supposedly preindustrial setting with nostalgia. Rice's burnt cork makeup had not yet been grotesquely exaggerated, however, unlike what would later characterize the post-Reconstruction minstrel shows of an era that

450 On the connection between loose assemblages and comic figures, see Menke, *Der komische Chor*, 2023. See also Kirsch on the related nomadism of chorus and HARLE-KIN, *Chor-Denken*, 2020: 505.

inherited his character's name.<sup>451</sup> In the Tramps photo, the rowdy, in-between characteristics of this syncopated singer-dancer gained a *survie*—appearing as “too slippery ... to police,”<sup>452</sup> to quote Walter Lhamon. The Tramps somehow pulled back the choral, uncontrollable, aesthetics of the comic figure, echoing an 1833 image of Jim Crow in the American Theatre on New York’s Bowery, where Rice dances in the middle of a throng onstage. But the 1907 photo of the Tramps gave Jim Crow a collective afterlife in the streets at a time when his name had already come to signify a new form of racist structural violence. This image no longer presented an imagined elsewhere—however problematic—of rural rebellion staged in the city; it marshaled a lineup of carnival revelers in blackface, already loaded with racist stereotypes, situated within a precise historical and geographic context, as the photo’s provenance shows.

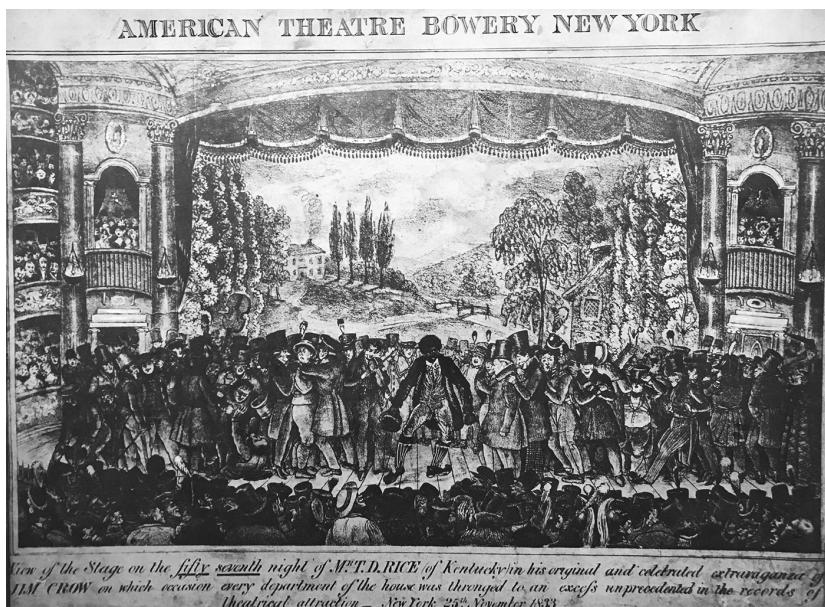


Figure 42: T. D. Rice as Jim Crow, with spectators present on the stage of the American Theatre, Bowery, New York, 1833. Harvard Theatre Collection on Blackface Minstrelsy, 1833–1906 (Houghton Library).

Filed under “Tramps Band Local 23,” it entered The Historical New Orleans Collection with no added context. But indirectly, it signals complicity. On the fourth page of the *Daily Picayune* from February 13, 1907—Ash Wednesday—a

451 See Annuß, “Blackface,” 2014.

452 Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003: 23.

photo by C. C. Cook appears at the bottom right.<sup>453</sup> Taken from another angle, it again shows the Tramps Band Local 23 walking in the Rex Parade. Respectively, this rowdy, street-claiming gang turns out to be an entourage for the dominant carnival. Like Milton's "roughly-headed monsters,"<sup>454</sup> the Tramps can be read as escorts to the white Carnival King. However bizarre their outfits, they still marched in step along the official routes of a segregated Mardi Gras:

When the sun rose and shone red and then bright he saw various queer-costumed people, little people and big people moving about, dancing and making merry, even as the day began, and as the day advanced their number increased until the whole city seemed turned into a clown's show, and everywhere there was grotesque figures, groups of figures and queer bands and single musical preparations, making the music that is typical of the Carnival when it is at its height on Mardi Gras.

... St. Charles Avenue, above Calliope, where the parade appeared at 11 o'clock, was thronged with people, including all classes, old and young, men and women and children, maids with babies, fathers and mothers carrying and wheeling their little ones. Every race and nationality of the homogeneous population of the city, mingled with the queer masked figures whose race and nationality, sex and visages all were concealed, and only the general jollity denoted that they also belonged to the happy family of Rex.<sup>455</sup>

That Mardi Gras, the *Daily Picayune*'s front page commented on the "queer-costumed people" mingling with "the homogeneous population of the city"—likely with irony, since the ostensibly happy family of Rex and the "homogeneous population of the city" officially excluded the people of the back streets, except in the form of grotesque effigies during the Jim Crow era. The choral, plebeian underside of the Rex Parade captured in the Tramps photo may thus point to a specific function of blackface at the time: negotiating a new idea of white male supremacy. Popular and everyday culture—carnival included—helped stabilize a cross-class pigmentocracy whose ideological veneer, the claim of a homogeneous population, was in fact a racist fantasy.

It was precisely after abolition that blackface took on a distinctly political role. By citing the tramp persona reminiscent of T. D. Rice's *JIM CROW*, at a time when that figure in New Orleans had become shorthand for segregation, the

453 My thanks for this information to Heather Green from THNOC.

454 Milton, *Comus*, 1921: 28.

455 "Rex Entertains the Nations with Pageant and Reception," front page of the *Daily Picayune*, Ash Wednesday, February 13, 1907.

masks worn by this male crew had become markers of possible complicity with the modernized racist order of their day. Whoever these men were, the photo gives a glimpse into how the name of a comic carnival figure came, under modern conditions, to stand in for an age of political backlash. Reading the image accordingly offers a path toward historicizing “Jim Crow”—a way to question the kinds of linear projections that treat racialized drag as fixed, as timeless across differing contexts. Hence I would suggest attending to the specific ways modes of drag are cited and the performative transpositions this entails. The Tramps in racialized drag of 1903, viewed in context of the afterlife of terror in segregationist violence, thus already allegorize a kind of *new Jim Crow*.

## Second Lining

In the back streets of New Orleans, the contemporary displays of power and authority “in drag”—which variously referenced Perchten, court spectacles, and minstrel blackface—were, by the early twentieth century at the latest, undermined by appearances in public marked by shifting conflicts. Hardly photographed in the decades that followed, but visually ubiquitous today, this Mardi Gras, again shaped by roving mobs, opens up a particular understanding of the possibility of nomadic cross-referencing. These clubs, tribes or loose assemblies were not immune from being co-opted and made hypervisible amid changing social dynamics. Yet the traces of their Mardi Gras narrate the potential for a performing otherwise of prevailing conditions. The multifarious history of this long-overlooked Mardi Gras of the subalterns operating off the official carnival routes reads as a symptom of contested social shifts and testifies to the capacity of people to relate to another against all odds—that is, to resist segregation.

## Iconoclasms (Zulu)

“There Never Was and Never Will Be a King Like Me” was a sketch performed around the turn of the twentieth century in a vaudeville show at the Pythian Temple on the edge of Black Storyville’s red-light district. Apparently, around 1909, a gang of guys from another social context than that of the Tramps captured in the photo above used this sketch to take to the streets in blackface. They also called themselves Tramps, thereby referencing Jim Crow in their own way.<sup>456</sup>

456 See Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 168; Cockrell, *Demons*, 1997: 36, here with reference to Black Mardi Gras Kings documented since 1826. On the history of the Pythian Temple, opened in 1909 and located on what is now Loyola Avenue, whose entertainment



Figure 43: Bert Williams, undated. Harvard Theatre Collection on Blackface Minstrelsy, 1833—1906 (Houghton Library).

However, this gang does not appear to have been visually documented—other than their kin decades later. They drew on the tradition of Black carnival kings and the genre of blackface-on-Black minstrelsy. As the “Royal Coon,” the Black dandy became part of contemporary music history and—with the context of the widely received Anglo Zulu Wars (1879—1896)—also came to be associated with southern Africa.<sup>457</sup> The comic blackface persona, the Jim Crow tramp, emerged as an established character type, linked to the image of rebellious Africans. “‘Zulu’ ... became synonymous with artifice and disguise,” writes Louis Chude-Sokei in *The Last “Darky,”* a study of the Caribbean, New York-based comedian Bert Williams; pseudo-Zulus thus emerged “as a stock character type that eventually entered the standard vocabulary of ethnic imagery.”<sup>458</sup> Williams had first appeared as an “Exhibition Zulu” in P. T. Barnum’s circus—essentially a human zoo—and later gained fame on Broadway performing in blackface. With songs like “Evah Darkey Is a King,” he helped shape creolized versions of the comic figure around 1900 and began to blur the color line on stage and screen. His remaining images and films bear witness to a different version of blackface—as a creolized comic figure—that would later be echoed in Baker’s performances.<sup>459</sup>

offerings and business spaces served those excluded under segregation, see Keith Weldon Medley, “The Birth of the Pythian Temple,” *The New Orleans Tribune*, October 24, 2017, <https://theneworleanstribune.com/2017/10/24/the-birth-of-the-pythian-temple/>, accessed September 24, 2024.

457 See <https://sheetmusicsinger.com/highbrownsongs/royal-coon/>, accessed September 24, 2024.

458 Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky,”* 2006: 124.

459 See especially the 1913 film *Lime Kiln Field Day*, made with an all-Black cast and restored by the Museum of Modern Art in New York; [www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-IdQ9APUHI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-IdQ9APUHI), accessed September 4, 2024.

In New Orleans, “Zulu” was used as a slur for the darker-skinned and the underclass—shorthand for the precarious.<sup>460</sup> Renaming themselves the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, in 1909 the Tramps from the Pythian Temple founded a counterpart to the high society’s Gentlemen’s Club: a carnival club and mutual aid organization—a benevolent society for those excluded from public welfare under Jim Crow.<sup>461</sup> Quoting the blackface routine noted above, they changed their name from Tramps to Zulu, highlighting transatlantic lines of flight. In reply to Rex and his Tramp entourage, they staged King Zulu and his retinue in blackface and Africanized costumes, reversing dominant local and colonial stereotypes. Dressed in improvised costumes, bent tin-bucket hats, and grotesquely exaggerated makeup, they paraded through the streets. This was not some Afrocentric imagined elsewhere. As their early spectacular appearances made clear, this blackface was, in the context of segregation-era politics, “akin to the ‘category crisis’ ... in the politics of drag,” as Chude-Sokei calls it.<sup>462</sup> Zulu affirmatively overperformed racist caricatures. The white New Yorker T. D. Rice had translated the comic figure of European folk theater into JIM CROW—a figure swaying between subaltern smartness and rural simple-mindedness. Transposing his stock character into the plantation context in the 1830s, Rice had linked the traditionally dark mask of ARLECCHINO from sixteenth-century European itinerant theater to the “second skin” of a

460 See the autobiography of Louis Armstrong, who contextualizes the term locally, and whose own appearance in 1949 as Zulu King was controversial nationwide at the time (*Satchmo*, 1954). Zulu was likely also the name given to the flambeaux carriers, the Black, unmasked torchbearers in the context of the “elevated” white uptown carnival. See also McQueeney, “Zulu,” 2018: 144. Felipe Smith refers to Zulu as “a slur against bebop musicians” and “dark-skinned New Orleanians”; see “Things,” 2013: 23.

461 On the mourning traditions of the mutual aid clubs and burial societies, see Atkins, “From the Bambooula,” 2018: 97; Celestan, “Social Aid,” 2022. For a broader historical perspective beyond New Orleans, see also Hartman, Anarchy,” 2018: 471: “Mutual aid did not traffic in the belief that the self existed distinct and apart from others or revere the ideas of individuality and sovereignty ... This form of mutual assistance was remade in the hold of the slave ship, the plantation, and the ghetto. It made good the ideals of the commons, the collective, the ensemble, the always more-than-one of existing in the world. The mutual aid society was a resource of black survival. The ongoing and open-ended creation of new conditions of existence and the improvisation of life-enhancing and free association was a practice crafted in social clubs, tenements, taverns, dance halls, disorderly houses, and the streets.”

462 Chude-Sokei is alluding here to Garber’s *Vested Interests* (1992) and discussing various codings of Blackness in the transatlantic context; *The Last “Darky,”* 2006: 138. Nyong’o argues that minstrels “refuse[s] to imagine an America without blacks”; see *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 132. The Zulu citation can thus be read as a carnivalization of segregation under globalized conditions of Black hypervisibility.

tramp-like fugitive slave. The New Orleanian Zulu Club, caught between port-city creolization and segregation, responded to this in the context of Black performers entering early mass culture and defying Jim Crow politics. Zulu blackface translated the grotesque figure—tamed by the post-Rice minstrel genre but since reimagined by Bert Williams, later also by Josephine Baker, and others—into something “faux-African.”

Here, the inherent ambivalence of blackface—its complicity in Othering versus its potential to subvert hegemonic culture—was transposed into carnival in a new way, one that resonated within the Southern Atlantic. While blackface in Cape Town’s carnival from around the same time signaled a trans-oceanic mass culture and could be read as a creolized nod to “postcolonial” US entertainment, the Zulu Club projected distorted racialized drag back onto the African continent. This blackface also served as a way to externalize racist stereotypes, by performing them within an imagined colonial scenario. Yet Zulu dragging also disrupted the frame of the official Mardi Gras. Emerging in the early twentieth century, it exemplifies those grassroots carnival mobs long ignored by official histories, gangs that challenged the established segregationist order and how it had been affirmed by hegemonic popular culture.



Figure 44: Zulu King Baley Robertson, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 1925. The William Russell Collection, The Historical New Orleans Collection (THNOC 92-48-L.77; MSS 520.3223).

While the face mask has remained largely unchanged, Zulu's status within New Orleans Mardi Gras has shifted alongside evolving local "race" politics. In its early years, the Club turned up on unpredictable routes, coming off as a fraternal band of nomadic rowdies. By 1914, Zulu began showing up at the Rex Parade, eventually taking the lead. From 1923 onward—wearing raffia skirts—they challenged the "elevated carnival" with a wild mix of blackface and African stereotypes atop eccentric floats, as a 1925 photograph from The Historical New Orleans Collection indicates. Zulu introduced a whole cast of stock characters to accompany the Zulu King, from the Witch Doctor to Big Shot Africa. In 1933 already, however, the club rebranded itself in a patriarchal mold, copying the white krewes who had done away with cross-dressing.<sup>463</sup> Like the carnival kings of high society, the Zulu King was now flanked by a female queen. Unlike in the context of the self-styled Old Liners, however, she was not obliged to appear as a virginal debutante.<sup>464</sup> Still, the regendering of the club's appearances was more a sign that the organizers were slowly aligning themselves with the prevailing carnival economy than a demonstration of advancing gender equality. Zulu thus became a marker of the shifting terrain of segregation. Today, the club is involved in municipal politics and commercially networked with the Old Liner krewes. The story of the Zulu Club—whose floats have included white members in blackface since carnival organizations desegregated in 1991—has become a lens for viewing social transformation. It raises questions about the changing role of a largely unchanged mask worn by members of a carnival club that emerged from the underclass of segregation and gradually came to bridge high society and the increasingly gentrified back streets.

Zulu's reception thus serves as a kind of seismograph for political shifts as reflected in carnival. In 1996, theater historian Joseph Roach described Zulu's performance style, in his widely cited study *Cities of the Dead*, as deconstructive. By staging an obviously fictional African tradition through a blackface citation, Roach argues, the carnival of the elites itself becomes legible as a form of whiteface minstrelsy.<sup>465</sup> The white makeup beneath Zulu's black mask, he continued, points to a kind of self-reflexiveness: a subversive laughter that, by parodying a particular image of Africa, turns Eurocentric stereotypes around. Roach celebrated the visual citation of carnivalesque mass culture—blackface and raffia skirt—as a satirical reversal of racist projections. He saw Zulu's performances as an iconoclastic strike against the white Old Liner krewes:

463 See Leathem, *Gender and Mardi Gras*, 1994: 151, 156—157; Kinser, *Carnival*, 1990: 234.

464 On the status of the Zulu Queens, see Leathem, *Gender and Mardi Gras*, 1994: 157; Felipe Smith, "Things," 2013: 27.

465 See Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 20—21. See also Cockrell's remark that blackface is "not to be taken at (white)face value, but at burlesque value"; *Demons*, 1997: 57.

Since 1909 members of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club have ... staged an annual float parade, featuring stereotypes of "Africans." In addition to "King Zulu," high officials in the organization take on such personas as "The Big Shot of Africa," "The Witch Doctor," "Governor," "Province Prince," and "Ambassador" ... Originally known as "The Tramps," the working-class African Americans who founded Zulu took their inspiration from a staged minstrel number ... They parade on Mardi Gras morning, using the same route along St. Charles Avenue that Rex follows an hour or so later. They wear grass skirts and black-face laid on thick over an underlying layer of clown white circling the eyes and mouth. In addition to plastic beads, Zulu members throw decorated coconuts, for many parade goers the most highly prized "throw" of Mardi Gras.<sup>466</sup>

Referencing Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Signifying Monkey*, Roach suggested in the 1990s that the deconstructive spirit of the West African trickster Esu lived on in Zulu's parade, though it seemed to be shaped by its adversarial relationship to Rex: "Zulu might very well have taken his present form without Esu per se, but he certainly could not exist in the same way today without Rex, nor, it must be emphasized, could Rex in the same way exist without Zulu."<sup>467</sup> Esu, in this reading, was not an "African retention" but rather "a circum-Atlantic reinvention."<sup>468</sup> Roach framed this as surrogation: as an act through which the "New World" was not discovered by Europe, but invented on site.<sup>469</sup> Such creolized performative transpositions, he argued, carry with them the memory of substitutions that would otherwise be forgotten, revealing the creativity and modernity of improvisational responses to cultural entanglements within the liminal space of a colonial contact zone.

While Roach highlighted Zulu's deconstructive potential and anchored it in a (West) Afrocentric framework via Esu, the Zulu Club came under fire as early as the beginning of the Civil Rights era.<sup>470</sup> This criticism stemmed not just from

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466 Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 18—19.

467 Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 24. On Esu, see Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 1989: 31—42. Chude-Sokei reads the West African trickster figures and their afterlives differently: "But because s/he is a liminal figure, s/he is also easily counterrevolutionary." *The Last "Darky,"* 2006: 113.

468 Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 24.

469 Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 4.

470 On statements from the NAACP beginning in 1956, and subsequent campaigns that ultimately led to a temporary suspension of the Zulu blackface, see McQueeney, "Zulu," 2018: 151—155.

a breach of respectability politics but also from the club's political cooptation.<sup>471</sup> In the early 1960s, Zulu was the only Black organization to break with the Mardi Gras boycott organized by the Civil Rights movement in protest against racist segregation. In doing so, Zulu accepted, for instance, the use of dogs by the police for crowd control during its parade.<sup>472</sup> Later, the club made a temporary effort to rebrand itself with African themes and to drop blackface. But this shift was accompanied by the distribution of tokens and souvenirs made in apartheid-era South Africa, as if to suggest an inherited tradition from the "mother continent." Meanwhile, Zulu's Mardi Gras ball permitted only formal Euro-American eveningwear.<sup>473</sup> Even during the global antiapartheid boycotts and amid widespread criticism of Mangosuthu Buthelezi for collaborating with the apartheid regime as the official Zulu leader, New Orleans entertained the idea of inviting South African Zulu delegations to march in the parade.<sup>474</sup>

At first glance, this move may seem to support newer interpretations framing Zulu as part of a transcontinental tradition. Kevin McQueeney, for example, points to increased Atlantic shipping between New Orleans and Cape Town, especially around 1900 during the Second Boer War, to buttress a claim of transoceanic relations:

Steam freighters regularly sailed between the Port of New Orleans and Cape Town in the early twentieth century, especially during the Second Boer War (1899–1902). During the conflict, the British military

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471 On retrospective critiques of a simplistic politics of respectability, see Nyong'o: "since white supremacy affected African Americans as a group, the politics of respectability and uplift cannot be read simply as a 'middle-class' imposition upon the black working class. Respectability came to the fore as response to potentially degrading behavior and spectacle. ... Carnival masks and one's Sunday best are both moments in the cycle of plebeian life. And furthermore, the work of gender in these matters must be emphasized: working class masculine culture cannot be made to stand in for working class culture as such." *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 116–117.

472 See Trillin, "A Reporter," 1964: 119.

473 See Felipe Smith, "Things," 2013: 30–32 and 34.

474 In 2006, after the flooding of primarily poor neighborhoods caused by infrastructure failure during Hurricane Katrina, twenty "authentic" Zulu warriors, "dressed in traditional garb and wielding spears and shields," were flown in from South Africa to lead the parade; see Ray Koenig, "African Zulu Warriors to Lead Off New Orleans Parade," *Times Picayune*, February 8, 2006; see also McQueeney, "Zulu," 2018: 140. In the 1970s, by contrast, the Zulu Club emphasized that there was no connection to the South African Zulus; see Felipe Smith, "Things," 2013: 30. On modern retraditionalizations of the South African Zulus as framed by African American scholarship, see Kruger, *The Drama*, 1999: 27, with attention to how they were represented in the United States as early as the beginning of the twentieth century: 31.

established their own port section in the city and sent tens of thousands of horses, mules, and other livestock to South Africa, as well as guns and additional supplies, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars. The British purchased the goods and animals in the US, as well as actively recruited for soldiers to fight in South Africa, and then shipped the cargo, along with white and black porters and muleteers from New Orleans to Cape Town.<sup>475</sup>

Starting from port connections, McQueeney traces trade routes in an effort to confirm a link between the Zulu Club and the South African Zulus: in 1905, following the end of the Second Boer War, a British army parade reportedly took place in New Orleans, featuring “ethnic Zulus who fought on their side.”<sup>476</sup> The Anglo Zulu War of 1879 had also received broad press coverage. Still, even the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club does not claim such a direct lineage from its South African namesakes. As Felipe Smith observes: “Given the many overlapping affiliations that social aid and pleasure club members maintain, throughout its history there is a disturbing consistency in the Zulu Club’s willingness to advance its own organizational interests at the expense of black community solidarity.”<sup>477</sup> Unlike McQueeney—who in 2018 cast the Zulu Club as a now-established cultural emissary with distinct ties to Africa—Smith underscores the extent to which the club had been co-opted:

Thus the Zulu Club did not adopt and perpetuate blackface masking in a vacuum, nor did they challenge its meaning or change its ritual functions as scripted by white carnival elites. They adopted blackface while it was still a white carnival masking tradition that they, like Williams and Walker, believed they could perform in a style that would improve upon the white “imitators,” and in the process they partly made their way through cunning and determination into a festival performance genre that had been evolving for half a century. ... The persistent description of the Zulu parade as a veiled critique of the Rex parade that follows it on Shrove Tuesday (an interpretation that Zulu strenuously denies) reflexively recognizes the two events as linked, but symbolically oppositional expressions of racially inflected cultural paradigms.<sup>478</sup>

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475 McQueeney, “Zulu,” 2018: 149.

476 McQueeney, “Zulu,” 2018: 149.

477 Felipe Smith, “Things,” 2013: 32.

478 Felipe Smith, “Things,” 2013: 26.

Smith argues that Zulu blackface was predisposed from the start to be absorbed into the official Mardi Gras. The Club has long functioned as a networking hub for New Orleans's Black political elite. And, for a time, it even ran as a franchising operation for "desegregated" white blackface riders, who, starting in the 1990s, could pay handsomely to ride on the floats. This shift in Zulu's function caused increasing disputes regarding its mode of appearance, which may be read as emblematic for a specific contemporary discourse on recognition.

In 2019, activists launched an attack on the club with the rallying cry, "All symbols of white supremacy must fall"<sup>479</sup>—driving a social media campaign against Zulu. Take 'Em Down NOLA, an activist collective emanating within the broader context of Black Lives Matter across the United States, demanded that the Zulu Club adopt new masks, challenging what Roach and others had described as a deconstructive usage of blackface.<sup>480</sup> Take 'Em Down NOLA featured alternative masks drawn by artist Journey Allen, latently referencing the then-new Marvel blockbuster *Black Panther*, conjuring a stylized, feudal-folkloric fantasy of Africa.<sup>481</sup> These masks bear no relation to South African Zulu masks, nor to the ornamental glitter masks that succeeded carnival blackface after apartheid's end in Cape Town. Instead, they seem to stand in for a longing to fabricate a seemingly "authentic" transatlantic tradition and invent an imagined past purified from colonial domination.

"Black makeup is NOT 'Blackface'" was the Zulu Club's official response to Take 'Em Down NOLA's tribal-style face paint designs.<sup>482</sup> This statement attempted to fight Take 'Em Down NOLA on their own terrain, framing blackface

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479 See <https://actionnetwork.org/groups/take-em-down-nola>, accessed September 24, 2024. On the preceding 2017 action "to bury white supremacy," see Maxson, "Second Line," 2020.

480 On Take 'Em Down NOLA—described by Reed as "a group organized through the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago"—see Antiracism, 2018: 106; see also A. Reed, "The Myth of Authenticity," 2019: 321–322. The local campaign was preceded by an article in the *New York Times*, perceived on the ground as denunciatory, written by a white journalist who, through selective quotations, portrayed the founder of the Backstreet Cultural Museum, Francis Sylvester, as a supposed minstrel apologist. See "A Black Group Says Mardi Gras Blackface Honors Tradition. Others Call it 'Disgusting,'" *New York Times*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/us/zulu-parade-new-orleans.html>, accessed September 24, 2024.

481 See Jeff Thomas, *Unmasked: New Orleans Community Responds to Zulu's BlackFace Tradition*. Black Source Media, March 17, 2019, <https://blacksourcemedia.com/unmasked-new-orleans-community-responds-to-zulus-blackface-tradition/>; accessed September 12, 2024.

482 [https://www.theadvocate.com/pdf\\_b6d10476-2fe7-11e9-b806-dbef4afb21d9.html](https://www.theadvocate.com/pdf_b6d10476-2fe7-11e9-b806-dbef4afb21d9.html), accessed September 24, 2024.

as an Afrocentric symbol, a representation of African tradition. The club insisted it was not invoking “symbols of white supremacy,” but paying homage to African Zulu tribal culture. While its use of blackface is nevertheless clearly legible as a grotesque minstrel pastiche, the club responded to the ensuing scandal by reinterpreting its official historiography. In effect, the Zulu Club, pretending to cite South African Zulu traditions for its grass skirts and exaggerated makeup, was leveraging the activists’ own understanding of symbolic representation.

This representational take was echoed in another initiative by activists related to Take ‘Em Down NOLA, staged after the protests against the Zulu Club: a reenactment of the long-suppressed Slave Rebellion of 1811. In the revolt of 1811, enslaved people had risen up against their disenfranchisement and brutal hyperexploitation a full fifty years before emancipation in the United States.<sup>483</sup> Staged with historical weapons and costumes, the reenactment was to evoke the *longue durée* of Black Lives Matter. Its form and function—as a representative embodiment of the past—stood in direct opposition to the grotesque minstrel mask and its play with referential confusion. Despite the differences in historical narrative, the performative commemoration of the 1811 rebellion aesthetically competed with the countless Confederate and Civil War pageants held in the South. Within the genre itself, it was to offer a symbolic counterrepresentation of the past—while drawing on established aesthetics of embodied *imitatio*. Yet the actual preparations for the 1811 revolt had taken place in disguise, under the cover of carnival masks.

The scandal around Zulu may be read as symptomatic. “Authenticating” references to invented traditions on both sides might also signal a broader contemporary forgetting of a carnivalesque-creolized *dispositif* of subaltern performativity—one that runs counter to the representational logic of the symbolic politics of the ruling class. In both cases, a practical knowledge of dynamic performative aesthetics, of minor mimesis, fades from view, even as it still reemerges in second lining, in local, collective forms of dancing along—subtly undermining dominant representationalisms of hegemonic culture and its faceist epistemology.

The specter of iconoclasm, by contrast, was already being summoned as early as 1991 by white supremacists. Neo-Nazi and former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke, who had publicly worn brown-shirted Nazi uniforms in

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483 On the revolt of 1811, which took place during carnival, see Rasmussen, *American Uprising*, 2011; Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 33; Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 253. On the reenactment initiated by a New York artist who works under the name Dread Scott, see the dedicated website [www.slave-revolt.com/](http://www.slave-revolt.com/), accessed September 12, 2023.

1970s New Orleans, called for resistance against carnival desegregation.<sup>484</sup> This desegregation, he warned, would lead to Jackson Square being renamed Stevie Wonder Square and hence to the destruction of the tourist hub of the French Quarter. At the time, Duke himself equated all opponents to Confederate monuments with Nazis. His tale of an alleged Black hijacking of New Orleans's city center was a textbook right-wing populist alt fact, overwriting the gentrification already underway in surrounding back streets. Still, the Jackson Memorial linked to Confederate propaganda remains untouchable to this day, while many in nearby neighborhoods have been displaced by incoming white middle-class families.

Duke's nightmare, however, seemed to come true elsewhere—that is, in a different way—more than twenty-five years later. Today, anyone following Zulu or the other well-known uptown parades down St. Charles Avenue to Canal Street, to the edge of the historic French Quarter, will come across an empty pedestal at Lee Circle. The middle of this traffic circle—surrounded by unsightly new buildings and nearby expressways, and right next to a still-functioning private Confederate museum—looks a bit like an open wound in the urban landscape. Since 2017, only the pedestal has remained to mark where, in 1884, a bronze statue of General Robert Edward Lee once was erected—the largest of its kind in the whole country.<sup>485</sup> The bare pedestal continues to signal how the United States, despite the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, has been littered with such revisionist monuments, even outside the Deep South. After Reconstruction, they became symbols of commemorative politics: tools for modernizing racist ideology by mythologizing the old South.

The monumentalized Lee quite literally gave the politics of Jim Crow, of white supremacy, a face—in bronze. After his death, Lee, a plantation owner himself, became the icon of the Civil War. He had helped crush the Harpers Ferry revolt, fought in the Mexican American War, and served as general in chief of the Confederate Armies. After the war, he became a hero to right-wing white supremacists. From the height of the “elevated carnival” until 2017, his enormous figure—arms crossed in command—looked north over New Orleans, that is, over the city's Black neighborhoods. Thanks to the protest by Take 'Em Down NOLA, only the massive pedestal, with its interior staircase, now towers over the area where Mardi Gras parades pass. Yet removing the statue marked a high point in

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484 On Duke, see Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 273–277. See also the photographs of Duke in SA uniform carrying a sign (Gas the Chicago 7), taken by Michael P. Smith at Tulane University in New Orleans (The Historical New Orleans Collection, 2007.0103.1.1.367).

485 On the history of the monument designed by Alexander Doyle, which around the turn of the century served as a gathering site for a lynch mob, see Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 162.

the campaign against Confederate nostalgia and the defense of white dominance. Iconoclasm then took on a life of its own when activists failed in bringing down the Jackson monument in the French Quarter, fracturing potential coalitions in a way that may be seen as emblematic of broader political developments.



Figure 45: Lee Circle, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 2020. Photo: Evelyn Annus

As the group continued seeking media attention, both iconoclastic energies and currents of symbolic politics began to turn against carnival itself—following a politics of respectability shaped by educated elites. Take 'Em Down NOLA did not attack the white nouveau riche Mardi Gras, such as the Krewe of Choctaw

and their use of “Indian” masks glossing over colonial sociocide, nor the invitation-only balls of New Orleans’s still-segregated carnival elites, themselves a parallel society.<sup>486</sup> Echoing the semantic shift of Jim Crow—the transposition of the name of a figure “too slippery … to police”<sup>487</sup> into the designation of an apartheid-like, binary classification system—Zulu Blackface instead became the central campaign target in 2019. This referential displacement transposed the shiftiness of “Jim Crow”—now reused to name today’s racist policing and systematic mass incarceration of Black male youth—into an Afropessimist narrative of a direct link between ongoing structural violence, disrespect, and the carnival.<sup>488</sup> Where the statue of Lee had surveyed the gradual gentrification of the back streets and their Black residents beginning in the late 1960s—roughly coinciding with the forced removals in Cape Town—Zulu was now being cast as a kind of mobile monument to current power structures.

Adolph Reed Jr., among others, has criticized the anti-Zulu campaign as focused on symbolic politics—as undercutting a historical understanding of shifting modes of exploitation and exclusion. In an appeal to distinguish between the plantation, Jim Crow, and today’s structures of inequality, he has named Take ‘Em Down NOLA a race-reductionist “neoliberal alternative to the left”:

The city is certainly a better place for being rid of those monuments, and having removed them from public display could be a step toward finally defeating the Lost Cause Heritage ideology that remains too useful a tool of the right for making class power invisible in both the past and the present. But, while the group’s efforts contributed appreciably to pressing the issue and mobilizing some public support for removal, Take ‘Em Down NOLA’s campaign also obscured class power, ironically in the same way as did the fin-de-siècle ruling class that erected the monuments. For Take ‘Em Down NOLA and other antiracist activists, the monuments’ significance is allegorical; they are icons representing an abstract, ultimately ontological white supremacy that drives and reproduces racial inequality in the present as in the past. The monuments, that is, are props in the broader race-reductionist discourse that analogizes contemporary inequality to Jim Crow or slavery.<sup>489</sup>

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486 For the Krewe of Choctaw see <https://www.kreweofchoctaw.com/>.

487 Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003: 23.

488 See Alexander, *New Jim Crow*, 2012; Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 2022.

489 A. Reed, “Antiracism,” 2018: 106. See also Lott: “part of the tony disgust that grew up around minstrelsy was simply a revulsion against the popular”; *Love and Theft*, 1993: 98. On the critique of “presentist views about minstrelsy, that have … polluted our understanding of the early period,” see also Cockrell, *Demons*, 1997: xi. In South

In critiquing the Afropessimist politics of the activists, Reed calls for historicizing racist policies and their class dimension, that is, for situating and differentiating them more carefully. His critique also highlights what remained absent from the anti-Zulu campaign: the question of gentrification—and with it, who attends the parades where, when, and why.<sup>490</sup> With Reed, the protest against Zulu blackface as ostensibly misrepresentational overlooks the people who take over the streets after the Rex parade ends and Zulu proceeds alone into the back streets: despite police barricades, in the very neighborhoods once under the gaze of Lee's monument, the parade becomes an occasion for celebrating together. Along the packed sidewalks, the crowd calls to mind the earlier function and form of the mutual aid clubs and burial organizations as grassroots self-help networks: as neighborhood-based assemblages of solidarity for those long excluded from public welfare. Hence, even if the Zulu Club has evolved from a fraternal gang into a kind of patriarchal surrogate royalty, its collective celebration in the back streets of New Orleans is still akin to practices of second lining and surviving manifestations of collective support—in masking, as well as funeral processions.<sup>491</sup> In spite of ongoing gentrification, the Mardi Gras hustle and bustle in the streets of these neighborhoods thus also resonates with the political and historical context in which Zulu first arose around 1900: the staking of a claim on street carnival for everyone, for *tout-monde*, through loosely shared gathering. Zulu's ambivalent spectacle thus still sparks affective energies in the streets—slipping past iconoclasm bound up with representationalism. Here, rather than at the threshold of elite carnival, an aesthetics of performing a social otherwise emerges within carnival—though maybe rather on the ground than on the floats. In the back streets, questions of transoceanic lines of flight indeed come into view.

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Africa, too, criticism was voiced against the roughly contemporaneous iconoclasm of the related Rhodes Must Fall movement; see Mbembe, "Closing Remarks," 2018.

490 On critiques of US exceptionalism in Afropessimist perspectives (e.g., Wilderson III, *Incognegro*, 2015; *Afropessimism*, 2020), see Thomas, "Afro-Blue Notes," 2018; for an earlier view, see also Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 1995; *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 2005. On critiques of the mythicization of Africa, see also Hartman: "it is absolutely necessary to demystify, displace, and weaken the concept of Africa in order to address the discontinuities of history and the complexity of cultural practice." *Scenes of Subjection*, 1997: 74.

491 On second lining in New Orleans, see Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians*, 1994; Regis, "Blackness," 2001; "Second Lines," 1999. On critiques of royalized origin stories, see Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 2008: 46, 87.



Figure 46: Zulu Parade, Mardi Gras, Tremé, New Orleans, 2020. Photo: Evelyn Annus.

According to a Mardi Gras legend said to be from the 1930s, the Zulu King set off from Cape Town the day after Christmas to journey to New Orleans. The tale seems to creolize and reframe the story of Zwarte Piet, the blackface figure who accompanies the Dutch Sinterklaas and arrives by ship from Spain to the Netherlands, now retold through a southern Atlantic lens.<sup>492</sup> It thus also gestures toward distant and now-transformed kinship relations that are obscured or blocked by invented origin myths. It is likely that creolized, carnivalesque masking practices shaped by transatlantic contact traveled into the Caribbean via New Orleans sailors, and by around 1900 had reached Cape Town. Both port cities—one at the mouth of the Mississippi, the other on the Cape—touch the Atlantic and act as related zones of contact. Their familial resemblance shows up in their colonial-era architecture, such as the cast iron balconies of Bourbon and Long Streets, each outfitted in line with nineteenth-century trade routes, bearing the architectural signature of colonial port towns. But it is also reflected in their creolized carnival repertoires, shaped by a first

492 On the figure of Zwarte Piet, who traditionally accompanies the Dutch St. Nicholas on December 6 in colonial costume and blackface, see Bal, "Zwarte Piet's Bal Masque," 1999: viii. On the narrative of the Zulus' sea voyage to New Orleans, see McQueeney, "Zulu," 2018: 146.

wave of globalized mass culture and adapted locally over time.<sup>493</sup> Read against the grain, McQueeney's interpretation of transatlantic Zulu history evokes the counterhegemonic performative transpositions of blackface that appeared in the Cape Town carnival, along with its later, postapartheid afterlife that is not Afrofolkloric but ornamental in character. To date, efforts by Cape Town's carnival organizers to establish sustained ties with the Zulu Club in New Orleans have largely failed. The similar creolized carnival practices of those labeled "Coloured" under apartheid remain unacknowledged by both the Zulu Club and Take 'Em Down NOLA. So far at least, the transoceanic lines of flight visible through Zulu have been displaced in New Orleans by arbitrary genealogies—narratives of origin, authenticity, and kinship. These narratives, can be seen not only as acts of surrogation but also as indicators of possible alliances that have been blocked so far.<sup>494</sup>

### ***Oddkinships II (Krewe du Jieux, Krewe of Julu)***

In New Orleans itself, local practices of relating hint at the potential for new forms of solidarity. In the mid-1980s, the Krewe du Jieux transposed Zulu-style blackface into a means of confronting antisemitic stereotypes. Iconic Zulu Club characters such as the Witch Doctor were reinvented as the Rich Doctor, among others.<sup>495</sup> The Krewe du Jieux repurposed old parade floats from the nineteenth-century elite carnival—which also excluded Jews—and redecorated them as “Ortho Ducks Floats” and similar tongue-in-cheek entries. Donning fake noses and Marx Brothers-style glasses, the krewe danced through the streets with bagels on necklaces during both Mardi Gras and Jewish holidays. After Hurricane Katrina, they reappeared as “wandering jieux” for Mardi Gras, calling attention to the lack of state support for New Orleans's newly homeless. In their performative parody of antisemitism, the point is not simply to deconstruct but to empty out heavy signs to spark new and previously unthinkable modes of relating to another on the street.

493 On the globalization of touring productions at the time, see Balme and Leonhardt, “Introduction” and the special issue “Theatrical Trade Routes” in the *Journal of Global Theater History* 1, no. 1, 2016.

494 On critiques of regionalist exceptionalism, see Adams and Sakakeeny, *Remaking New Orleans*, 2019, especially the introduction: 1–32.

495 See <https://www.krewedujieux.com/>, accessed September 11, 2024. On the “zulu-esque cast of character,” see L. J. Goldstein: “We take these Jewish stereotypes that are thrown at us and we embrace them and roll around in them .... Like a pig in the mud!” [www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-krewes-and-the-jews](http://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-krewes-and-the-jews), accessed September 24, 2024.



Figure 47: L. J. Goldstein und Mia Sarennna, Mardi Gras, New Orleans, 2020. L. J. Goldstein Private Collection (New Orleans).

Later on, the Krewe of Julu took up the Zulu parade reference.<sup>496</sup> These performative transpositions of Zulu parades by often short-lived, loosely organized Mardi Gras clubs—drawing links between antisemitic and racist

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496 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxHR2uBnYro>, accessed September 11, 2024.

discrimination—serve as an open invitation to *tout-monde* in the crowd to puzzle out the tangled references, to momentarily laugh away the politics of Othering and perhaps dance along. Their aterritorial, meandering mode of dragging undermines attempts to lock referentiality in place. Instead, it evokes performative unpredictability as a source of relating. Seen through the lens of how these other gangs cite Zulu, Mardi Gras here becomes a specific kind of contact zone—one that enables scattered, fluid gatherings while simultaneously calling hegemonic societal structures across different forms of discrimination into question.



Figure 48: Krewe du Jieux: L. J. Goldstein, Valerie Minerva, White Boy Joe Stern, Mardi Gras 2006, following Hurricane Katrina. L. J. Goldstein Private Collection (New Orleans).

This has produced lasting micropolitical effects. In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the authorities failed to provide aid in the so-called “city that care forgot,” it was, not least, those who had earlier borrowed from Zulu masking practices who revived the legacy of the mutual aid clubs. Allegedly, the first house rebuilt by those affiliated with the Krewe du Jieux was Ronald Lewis’s House of Dance and Feathers, a private museum

in the flooded Ninth Ward way beyond the city center.<sup>497</sup> The museum tells the story of the Black Indians—nomadic gangs of Black men in “Amerindian”-style masks—as the story of a creolized Mardi Gras that references anything and everything. Outside the spectacles of the commercial elite, the possibilities of relating fostered by carnival and the networks it produced on the ground gave rise to concrete solidarity, to collective mutual aid across different masking practices and neighborhoods.<sup>498</sup> These alternative ways of relating become legible through a shift in focus from representation and iconoclasm to allegorical dirty dragging—an unpredictable, mimetic mode of collective referencing through performative transposition.

### ***“Other” Indigenizations (Black Indians)***

“REIGN OF REX ENDS” is the headline on page 7 of the Ash Wednesday issue of the *Times Democrat*, dated February 25, 1903. Since its creation in 1872, Rex had ruled as King Carnival: the white face of a newly invented Mardi Gras that, after the Civil War defeat, increasingly aimed at mass tourism. The *Times Democrat*’s coverage of the elite Mardi Gras and its courtly pageantry played into Southern mythmaking—casting Confederates of the Jim Crow era as “men who have gone forth to die for their country.”<sup>499</sup> But visually, the politics of this narrative are oddly undercut by the eye-catching elements of the new medium of the time. Because of the images on the page, the title “Reign of Rex Ends” takes on a different resonance. The design of the page frames the text with photos of Mardi Gras from the street. Rex and Comus are nowhere to be seen on this Ash Wednesday page. As such, the version of Mardi Gras the *Times Democrat* commits to print here seems to unsettle the crowd control orchestrated by the “elevated carnival” of masked white men—at least on page 7. Thus, its headline appears to mark not so much the end of carnival but the fall of high society.

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497 See Breunlin et al., *House of Dance and Feathers*, 2009.

498 On the disastrous reconstruction policy, see Lipsitz, “New Orleans in the World,” 2011. For criticism of the lack of structural critique in corresponding volunteer activities after Katrina, however, see Vincanne Adams, “Neoliberal Futures,” 2019. On post-Katrina Mardi Gras, see Wade et al., *Downtown Mardi Gras*, 2019. Since then, the second lines have also increasingly attracted heterogeneous crowds.

499 As was already quoted, with reference to Comus, by the *Times Democrat* on February 25, 1903.



Figure 49: Times Democrat, February 25, 1903: 7. New Orleans Public Library.

And in fact, today, it is the images of roving gangs—those that took shape in the back streets during the Jim Crow era—that have come to mark the visual signature of Mardi Gras. So far, the photographs published by the *Times Democrat* have usually been considered in isolation; here, I want to treat them as a constellation to explore this other version of modern Mardi Gras and its visual-political legacy. The *Times Democrat* printed four photographs,

each positioned at the center edge of the page: the top one is titled “BAND OF MARDI GRAS INDIANS,” the bottom one reads “THE WHITE MONKEY WAS A FAVORITE COSTUME.” On the left is a bearded man dressed like a pirate; the caption is “THIS MAKE-UP CREATED A SENSATION.” On the right, a “TELLING TRIO OF CLOWNS” appears in harlequin-style costumes—evoking the tradition of whiteface clowns shaped by Joseph Grimaldi in London, an inverted prefiguration of blackface.<sup>500</sup> The Times Democrat’s captions, however, do not distinguish between the vertical reference to “Black” Mardi Gras and the horizontal reference to “white” Mardi Gras, either of which might be read into the faces depicted. Instead, the photos seem to gather different figurations of creolized carnival: vertically, gangs seemingly extending beyond the image frame; horizontally, a pirate and three clowns as quasi-transoceanic, nomadic figures. The images present street carnival in multiple forms of appearing in public: as a collective act with no front stage.

At the same time, these images feature an oddly placed *punctum*, something that subtly disrupts the boundary between onstage and offstage and draws attention to the entanglement of heterogeneous masking practices.<sup>501</sup> In the photo “BAND OF MARDI GRAS INDIANS,” a Pierrot-like figure dressed in white with a long-nosed half mask appears tucked into the lower left corner; in the image of the “WHITE MONKEYS” with their stiff dark masks, a couple wearing white face veils and flowing garments is inserted along the right edge. These images within images seem to highlight the lines of flight between the different photographs, weaving a sense of flickering presence and absence into the visual presentation. One could interpret this visual rhetoric as a reflection of the hydra-headed history of “aesthetic commoning” in street carnival<sup>502</sup>—a history pushed aside by hegemonic spectacles. In this sense, we may read the page title as suggesting that this history might still gain a *survie* after the so-called reign of Rex.

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500 On Grimaldi, who shaped the whiteface clown and also performed as a female impersonator, see Gibbs, *Temple of Liberty*, 2014: 130. On the rural etymology of the clown, corresponding to the figure of ARLECCHINO, see Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000: 333.

501 On the relationship between presence and absence see Menke’s contributions to studies on stage entrances: ON/OFF, 2014; “im aufreten,” 2016. On the *punctum* as it “pricks” the observer, see Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1981: 25–27; on its “ability to allow metonymies,” see also Wolf, “Das, was ich sehe,” 2002: 99. For criticism of Barthes’ particularistic image readings, however, see Moten, *In the Break*, 2003: 208—here referring to Barthes’ comment on the photo of the dead Emmett Till after his murder by white supremacists; Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” 1972: 101.

502 As was put in a transatlantic context by Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 18.

The text, by contrast, seems to give over the graphic montage to hegemonic laughter, as becomes clear in its reference to the “BAND OF MARDI GRAS INDIANS.” The page picks up a second article from page 3 titled “MIRTH REACHES CLIMAX.” Under the subheading “Maskers Throng Streets. Fantastically Dressed Bands Cut Up Queer Antics,” the *Times Democrat* carnivalizes its reading of the images while inserting political context. The piece, namely, expresses regret over the supposed disappearance of the “Indians,” thus linking the photo to a well-worn trope that echoes the sociocidal removals east of the Mississippi during the 1830s and to a shift in masking practices.<sup>503</sup>

From early morning until late in the afternoon happy maskers thronged the streets and kept the spectators amused by their queer antics ...

However as pleasant as was the day and as funny as were the maskers, they could not make up for what they were lacking in numbers ... The Indians in particular, who have heretofore been numerous, and who have gone through the streets in war paint, seemingly on the warpath, were lacking in numbers. There were a few, but very few. It must be that they have changed their camps, or that they can find no more stones out of which to make javellas, or that their bow and arrow have been broken.

It is not likely that they have gone to another city, because New Orleans is the only Carnival city in the Union where they can be appreciated. Let them bring back their wigwams, and their squaws and their pap-pooses. Let them wage again their merry war of mirth.<sup>504</sup>

The Mardi Gras article on the supposed fading of the Indians references forced migration and sociocide, as well as the puritanical antimasking laws in effect elsewhere at the time, and a change in carnival fashion. What comes into view are thus not only the violent political conditions negotiated through the Indian mask, but also their linking to the carnivalesque—suggested visually by the paper-nosed figure inserted like a *punctum* into the photograph.

The use of stereotypical imagery of Northern Plains Indians, which the *Times Democrat* photo vaguely recalls, has served many purposes. Such “Amerindian” masks have been deployed for the Boston Tea Party of 1773, where settlers protested British colonial rule, in nineteenth-century antirent protests, and in twentieth century’s shaman-inflected hippie escapism. This “Indianization of misrule,” as Philip J. Deloria puts it in his book *Playing Indian*,

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503 On the “Indian removals” and sociocidal settlement policy, see Bowes, *Land Too Good*, 2016.

504 *Times Democrat*, February 25, 1903: 7.

had little to do with the people stereotypically quoted.<sup>505</sup> Rather, it can be read as refiguring and exoticizing the “wild men” drawn from European, masculinist masking.<sup>506</sup> Deloria interprets the transposition of Old World European rites of rebellion into the US setting as a kind of ongoing minstrelsy:

Rough music groups acted to reinforce traditional, customary social orders, not to play on the edges of revolution. ... Old World misrule rituals remained in the customary repertoire of many colonists. Periodically rejuvenated by arriving immigrants, they could be activated and reshaped according to the needs of specific local groups.<sup>507</sup>

During the era of capitalist industrialization shaped by colonial racism and extractivism, the figure of the Indian was harnessed to signify a new, yet untouched world.<sup>508</sup> Much like the early use of blackface in the 1830s to create the tramp persona, the “Indian” responded to a contemporary craving for a premodern, nonurban, and unruly elsewhere. In contrast to Benjamin’s contextualization of new barbarism or Kafka’s literary staging of becoming-Indian—decidedly referencing to minor, nonrepresentational modes of mimesis within then globalized mass culture—this Indianized figure operates instead as a hegemonic tool of what might be called an exoticizing “self-indigenization.”<sup>509</sup> As a projection screen, it depends on the absence of actual “Amerindians”: their forced removal, their extermination, and the erasure of the survivors within the segregationist order that took hold also in New Orleans after the Civil War. In this obscene register of complicity, the culturally loaded figure of the “vanishing Indian,” already heavily mythologized by 1900, was dragged along as a kind of colonial spoils, as a mask to represent revolt.

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505 See Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 2022: 28. On the specifics of German Indianism, see the chapter on “Winnetou’s Grandchildren,” in Sieg, *Ethnic Drag*, 2009: 115–150; on its ambivalence, Balzer, *Ethik der Appropriation*, 2022; with reference to the Austrian Tresterer, Kleindorfer-Marx, “Jetzt kommen gar Indianer,” 2018. Linebaugh and Rediker, by contrast, point to a different form of “going native” in the Americas in the seventeenth century: “In search of food and a way of life that many apparently found congenial, a steady stream of English settlers opted to become ‘white Indians,’ ‘red Englishmen,’ or—since racial categories were as yet unformed—Anglo-Powhatans.” *Hydra*, 2000: 34.

506 Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 2022: 25. The translocal potential for resistance is also emphasized by Wynter, with reference to the colonized “co-identifying themselves, transethnically, as, self-definingly, Indians.” Wynter, “1492,” 1995: 41.

507 Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 2022: 24.

508 See Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 2022: 180.

509 For my discussion of Benjamin and Kafka, see the second chapter.



Figure 50: Band of Mardi Gras Indians, *Times Democrat*, February 25, 1903: 7 (detail). New Orleans Public Library.

In the carnival back streets, however, this figure took on an unpredictable afterlife—one that the *Times Democrat*'s commentary and images subtly suggest, when read against the grain. For those who, after the collapse of Reconstruction, found themselves increasingly shut out, Mardi Gras became a platform for collectively staging the promise of freedom—mediated by performative transpositions. “Playing Indian” in this sense also resonated with the masking practices of those, whose access to civic life was gradually foreclosed by Jim Crow, despite the Union’s victory and slavery’s abolition. For the people of the back streets—cultural cousins to the Atjas of Cape Town’s townships—the creolized gang figure of revolting “Indians” became an allegory of an imagined otherwise, an urban maroon existence.<sup>510</sup>

510 On Black Indians, see Breunlin, *Fire in the Hole*, 2018; Breunlin et al., *House of Dance and Feathers*, 2009; Dewulf, *From the Kingdom*, 2017; Godet, “Playing with Race,” 2016: 264–269, “La recherche,” 2022; Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019; Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, *Black Indians*, 2022, with the research overview especially in

And it is precisely in this context that the image of the “BAND OF MARDI GRAS INDIANS” can be read: the earliest known photograph of a masking practice that now plays a signature role for New Orleanian Mardi Gras. Scholars often turn to this press photo from the *Times Democrat* as a source for tracing the genealogy of the now so-called Black Indians. Instead of focusing on origins, however, I want to ask how their street appearances relate to their specific surrounding, how they are charged discursively, what affectives they schlepp along and how they become confronted with neocolonial appropriation.

As a nomadic, street-carnival gang figure, the Indians—with Kim Vaz-Deville—emerged in modern Mardi Gras after the collapse of Reconstruction, during the Jim Crow era.<sup>511</sup> Resisting the carnival’s shift into orderly, parade-style processions, they moved through segregated streets on their own terms, crossing unseen boundaries. To pick up on Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s work on transatlantic “performative commons,” their creolized citation of the figure of rebellious indigeneity might be read as “a performative intellectual act: one that made the commons thinkable in both aesthetic and political terms.”<sup>512</sup>

The earliest sources depict the Black Indians as a domain of combative masculinity: in 1895, eight years before the *Times Democrat* published its Indian photo, “a band of hostile Indians” had clashed with “some white maskers” in a way that led to their names being recorded. “On closer examination the Indians were discovered to be colored men,” the *Daily Picayune* reported on February 27.<sup>513</sup> In their book *Jockomo*, Shane Lief and John McCusker interpret this as “perhaps the earliest definitive news citation of a group of black men dressed as Indians in New Orleans on Mardi Gras.”<sup>514</sup> As they show, the gang included a veteran and sons of former soldiers in the Corps d’Afrique of the Union Army, many of whom were politically active during Reconstruction.<sup>515</sup> Pushed out of civic life in the Jim Crow era, stripped of civil rights and office, Black veterans and their descendants turned to carnival. Roaming through New Orleans, they reasserted their presence in the city: “rechanneling their shared experiences as actual warriors into a Carnival identity,”<sup>516</sup> as one reads in *Jockomo*. In contrast to the *Times Democrat*’s

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Godet, “La recherche,” 2022; Vaz-Deville, “Les Black Masking Indians,” 2022; Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians*, 1994.

511 See Vaz-Deville, “Les Black Masking Indians,” 2022. Playing Indian was part of the local Mardi Gras in New Orleans in the nineteenth century, as historical sources show. In the 1830s, Indians appeared in the street carnival alongside HARLEKIN and Turk figures, according to Lief in Lief and McCusker, referring to historical sources. *Jockomo*, 2019, 84.

512 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 214; see also: 204–205.

513 *Daily Picayune*, February 27, 1895; quoted in Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 75.

514 Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 75–76.

515 Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 97–99.

516 Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 104.

framing, these were men who had gone forth to fight for their freedom. Mardi Gras became a refuge for reimagining Black militant masculinity. This may faintly recall Kafka's literary reflection on the yearning to "become an Indian." But the Black Indians' appearance in public, like that of Zulu, belonged to a specific political context. It was a context, in which underground forms of self-organization emerged, mutual aid clubs were founded—and rivalries sometimes played out in armed proxy battles for territory.<sup>517</sup> Unlike the historical reenactment of the 1811 Slave Revolt described above, this form of nomadic, creolized "becoming-Indian," ranked in paramilitary order from Big Chief to the front-dancing Spy Boy, aimed to elude hegemonic (mis-)representation. Bypassing the elite carnival, the Black Indians, organized into separate tribes, responded to political defeat by building parallel societies via creolized figurations.<sup>518</sup> After the end of Reconstruction, they also gave an acoustic afterlife to the resistance against the plantation system:

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 (We won't bow down)  
 Down on the ground (On that dirty ground)  
 Oh how I love to hear him call Indian Red  
 I've got a Big Chief, Big Chief, Big Chief of the Nation  
 The wild, wild creation  
 He won't bow down (We won't bow down)  
 Down on the ground (On that dirty ground)  
 Oh how I love to hear him call Indian Red<sup>519</sup>

517 On the expanded understanding of abolition that came with these efforts, see Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 2022. On the survival of slavery in segregation see also Hartman: "The plantation was not abolished, but transformed ... extending the color line that defined urban space, reproducing the disavowed apartheid of everyday life." "Anarchy," 2018: 476.

518 On politics of retreat as a legacy of *marronage*, see Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 2016. A ban on feathers is documented as early as 1781, likely targeting precursors of these practices; see Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 30.

519 Quoted in Shane and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 10; for the history of Indian Red, whose composition in the early twentieth century is attributed to the Big Chief of the Creole Wild West, Eugene Honore, see also Appendix II: 134—136. On Indian Red, see the early study by Lipsitz, "Mardi Gras Indians," 1988: 108. Dewulf traces Indian Red from the Spanish to a battle song of Black brotherhoods, "From Moors to Indians," 2015: 38—39.



Allison "Tootie" Montana, Big Chief, Yellow Pocahontas, 1991 Michael P. Smith

Figure 51: Allison Tootie Montana, Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas, 1991. The Michael P. Smith Collection. The Historical New Orleans Collection (THNOC 2007.0103.2.122). Photo: Michael P. Smith.

Indian Red has become part of New Orleans's sonic branding; thanks to recordings, live shows, and the annual Jazz Fest, the song that bookends the marathon rehearsals of the Indian repertoire leading up to Mardi Gras has also entered global pop culture. At the same time, it points to both the local legacy of the maroons—who escaped the plantocracy, retreated into the wilderness, and founded independent communities—and the history of the Black Indians under Jim Crow.<sup>520</sup> Today, many tribes have to come with U-Hauls from other neighborhoods to their old, now gentrified stomping grounds, in order to hit the streets. Against the backdrop of gentrification, Indian Red, their song about refusing to bow down, has also acquired a new signification.

In contrast to the first historical photograph discussed above, the Black Indians by now appear in dazzling feathered suits adorned with handcrafted beadwork that covers and magnifies their entire bodies—radiating into their surrounding far more spectacular than the courtly pageantry of the elites and at the same time evoking a touch of revue show extravagance. The aesthetic form of their appearances also faintly relates to the transposition of blackface into ornamental glitter masks covering the whole head in Cape Town's carnival. Painstakingly created over months, the Indian suits highlight the ties of moving bodies to their environments and to other dancers. Suit colors signify tribal relations, suit variations are aligned with rank. Moving like roving gangs that—to outsiders—unpredictably appear and disappear, the Indians share traits with early Zulu formations but have never become part of the “elevated carnival.” For decades, they have faced racist police brutality and gentrification.<sup>521</sup> Where Louis Armstrong Park now stands on the flattened ground of Congo Square—the former meeting place for disenfranchised, displaced “Amerindians” and enslaved Africans—and Interstate 10 has sliced through the old back streets since the late 1960s, people's relations to another are continually renewed in

520 Maroons derives from the Spanish *cimarrón*, meaning wild or unruly, and refers to those who escaped colonial rule by forming creolized fugitive communities; on the interdependence of creolization and *marronage* see Martin, *Jazz*, 2008: 111; on the resignification of the term, which was originally colonial and racist, see Därmann, *Undienlichkeit*, 2020: 27. Michael P. Smith reads the Indians as “contemporary urban maroons”; *Mardi Gras Indians*, 1994: 13. “Madi cu defio” apparently creolizes “M'allé couri dans deser” and could be translated as “I am going into the wilderness”; see Cable, “Creole Slave Songs,” 1886: 820; see also Kein, *Creole*, 2000: 124. Indian Red, interpret in this light, is about retreating into the landscape.

521 On the depiction of Tremé, carnival, and urban politics, see also David Simon and Eric Overmyer's HBO series *Tremé* (2010—2013), as well Godet's analysis in “Multiple Representations,” 2017. On the gentrification of Tremé and the impact of Interstate 10 on the epicenter of Back Street Mardi Gras around Claiborne Avenue, see Vaz-Deville's introduction to *Walking Raddy*, 2018, xiv; “Iconic,” 2018: 149.

small bars during carnival season: through the creolized movement and sound practices, mock war dances, call and response routines—and most memorably, through Indian Red. On Mardi Gras and on St. Joseph's Night after Ash Wednesday, the tribes meet in the streets, eventually coming together like modern-day maroons in the “echo-space” beneath I-10.<sup>522</sup>



Figure 52: Big Chief Jeremy Stevenson, Monogram Hunters, meeting Big Chief Corey Rayford, Black Feathers. Mardi Gras Practice, First and Last Stop Bar, Tremé, New Orleans, 2019. Photo: Ryan Hodgson Rigsbee.

Various origin stories have been attributed to the New Orleans Indians. These stories reflect changes in dominant cultural narratives. In the 1970s, Michael P. Smith interpreted the emergence of Black Indians during Mardi Gras around 1900 as a pop-cultural citation referring to the promotional parades of the Buffalo Bill Shows, which at the time were making their way through New Orleans. Those same shows may also have left unpredictable traces among the Tresterer of Austria's Pinzgau region, whose headdresses bear a strikingly “Indian” look.<sup>523</sup> Smith, who assembled the first major photographic archive of the New Orleans's Indians, also pointed to the post-Civil War deployment of Black Buffalo Soldiers against the “Amerindian” population. In his early texts, he understood the Black Indians' practices as a kind of mimicry directed at military adversaries within a

522 On the “echo-space” below the I-10 bridge, see Carrico, “Miss Antoinette K-Doe,” 2018: 209.

523 See Kleindorfer-Marx, “Jetzt kommen gar Indianer,” 2018.

tangled colonial constellation.<sup>524</sup> In doing so, he highlighted how mimesis could be used to negotiate fluid alliances, enmities, and forms of complicity. Maurice M. Martinez, by contrast, stressed the link to maroon communities—where “Amerindians” and African American fugitive slaves lived together—in his 1976 film *The Black Indians of New Orleans*, which included the 1903 photograph. Martinez saw what some might call Indian drag as an act of political solidarity and of claiming common ancestry. He drew attention to family ties between the enslaved and the disenfranchised dating back before the Jim Crow period, even if the suits seem to cite iconic Plains Indians rather than local tribes.



Figure 53: Spy Boys, Meeting of the Tribes, Mardi Gras, Tremé, I-10 Bridge, New Orleans, 2020. Photo: Evelyn Annus.

As mentioned above, Deloria interprets the indigenous figure in dominant US culture as a transformation of Old World European “wild men” like the Perchten. Yet with regard to the Black Indians, Afrocentric origin stories have become increasingly prominent. Allusions to West African artisanal traditions have played a major role—exemplified by Fi Yi Yi, a Black Indian tribe led by

524 For material on the Buffalo Soldiers, see Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians*, 1994: 95. The Michael P. Smith Collection is held in the Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC). The Buffalo Bill Show is discussed in Gill, *Lords of Misrule*, 1997: 140; Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 69–72; and Lipsitz, “Mardi Gras Indians,” 1988: 104.

Big Chief Victor Harris until 2024.<sup>525</sup> In these Afrocentric references to a cultural “elsewhere,” the personification of indigenous revolt takes on a new role: that of asserting a history of one’s own.<sup>526</sup> The obviously invented traditions of supposedly unchanging elite Old Liners such as Comus and their ilk, for their part, might have contributed to genealogical interpellations that may actually obscure entangled histories of mimetic practices and their complex performative transpositions. Yet the desire to trace African roots, especially under the contemporary pressures of modern branding, may itself hold specific risks.

In the wake of neocolonial usages of today’s discourses on decolonization,<sup>527</sup> Black Indian masking practices face the threat of being turned into global museum artifacts. While the Indians have at times been accused of cultural appropriation on US social media, prominent European museums are buying up their most spectacular suits at steep prices as showpieces. Some of the most elaborate suits—newly designed each year for Mardi Gras and until now mainly displayed in small community-based collections, such as the Backstreet Cultural Museum founded and curated by Sylvester Francis or Ronald Lewis’s House of Dance and Feathers<sup>528</sup>—are assuming a new economic function. This shift brings not only increased competition but also changing ascriptions of meaning.

What may initially seem like long-overdue global recognition risks pulling the Indians’ masking practices out of sociopolitical context. And not least due to copyright concerns, it is reshaping relations within the tribes themselves. Their masks have become recast elsewhere, sometimes through a romanticized lens of decolonial resistance, whereas the specific context of these performances

525 On Fi Yi Yi, see Breunlin, *Fire in the Hole*, 2018; Bourget, “Victor Harris,” 2022. On the correspondence with Yoruba traditions, see Joubert, *Igba ayé*, 2022. For criticism of antimodern Afrocentric commodifications of identity in the context of New Orleans and the related fetishizing of supposed authenticity, see also the introduction by Adams and Sakakeeny: “All that makes New Orleans worthy of value and preservation is in its oppositionality to national values of progress and modernism. This antimodernism can become uneasily equated with racial primitivism, as when the performance traditions of Black New Orleanians are portrayed solely as vestiges from an African past rather than complex and cosmopolitan cultural formations ... An oddly *Volksgemeinschaft* island of twenty-first-century social analysis, New Orleans continues to generate research that fetishizes collective meanings and the bonds of sociability as truly organic.” *Remaking New Orleans*, 2019: 5.

526 “In this encounter Africa was a transformative force, almost mythico-poetic—a force that referred constantly to a ‘time before’ (that of subjection),” as Mbembe suggests with regard to US discourse, *Critique*, 2017, 26.

527 For critique, see Táíwò, *Against Decolonization*, 2022.

528 See <https://www.backstreetmuseum.org/sylvester>; <http://houseofdanceandfeathers.org/>, accessed September 24, 2024.

and their repertoire have at times been superseded. Thus, single artifacts like suit patches have become subjected to the exhibition logic of autonomous art.<sup>529</sup> The local street carnival, it seems, has entered the international museum circuit, and citations of the figure of revolt have been absorbed into a trans-continental cultural machine. “Mardi Gras Indian performances are no longer restricted to the peripheral areas of New Orleans and have moved to the world of museums and jazz festival performances,” Aurélie Godet observed early on, in 2017.<sup>530</sup> The authenticity ascribed to the Indians also tends to obscure both their new commercial value and their new role as the “real back stage” of contemporary city marketing. Further, with their arrival in European museums, the Indians have become entangled in decolonial efforts shaped by the image problems of ivory tower institutions who must deal with their looted artifacts—efforts that, paradoxically, might do more to obscure than clarify the local agency of the Indians and their street-based meetings of the tribes.

*Black Indians de la Nouvelle-Orléans* was the title of a meticulously curated 2022 exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, France’s official ethnological museum. In downtown Paris, huge billboards featured a lone nameless Indian sitting wide-legged on the steps of a typical New Orleans-style wooden house.<sup>531</sup> Instead of people roving the streets, the advertisement also serving as the exhibition catalog’s cover showed a single body frozen in time. What is lost in this emblematic visual staging is a sense of collective movement. The door behind the figure is apparently sealed with a white-painted board, echoing the color palette of the feathered costume and the pale-painted face staring into the camera. The mouth is hidden behind a half-mask, as if to illustrate the silence of the figure. The face is nearly eclipsed by the turquoise feathers and the richly beaded suit in brown hues, which brings together various signs with untethered meanings. The catalog cover makes it clear that what we are looking at is a curated ensemble, designed first and foremost to evoke familiar associations with New Orleans. One hand rests on a skull mounted on a wooden staff, invoking voodoo tropes. The photograph, enigmatically titled *Mystic Medicine Man, “Love Medicine”* by Danielle C. Miles, might also signal a claim to art photography curated for a globalized market.

529 See, for example, the handling of beaded patches from a Black Indian suit by Demond Melancon—displayed at the wall as an autonomous art piece—in the opening exhibition of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin under the direction of Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung; see Casimir et al., *O Quilombismo*, 2023: 98–99.

530 Godet, “Multiple Representations,” 2017: 230–231.

531 See <https://www.quai Branly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/black-indians-from-new-orleans-39606>, accessed September 24, 2024.

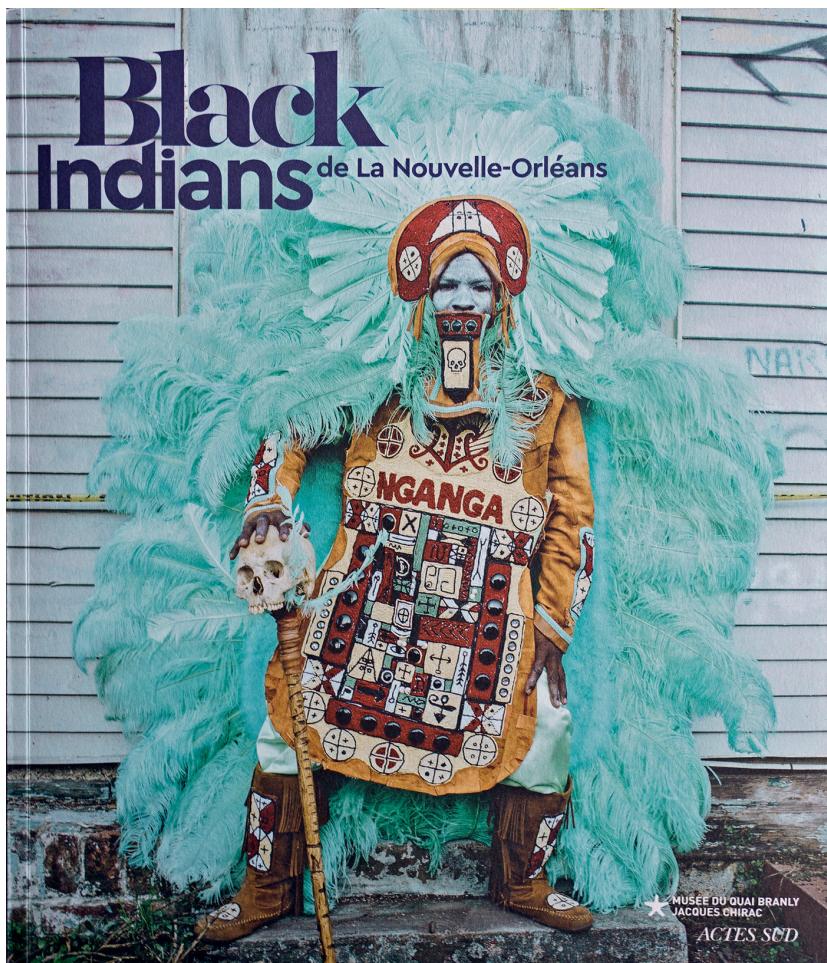


Figure 54: Catalog cover of *Black Indians de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2022.

This kind of framing paradigmatically reflects the current shift in how Mardi Gras is received: it subjects the Indians to the logic of today's museum world.

In Paris, the exhibition acquired a distinct political function in light of current calls for decolonization and France's rapid loss of influence as a former colonial power in today's Africa—a role that has rather a tangential connection to New Orleans and its French colonial past.<sup>532</sup>

532 For Mardi Gras and French colonial history, see Godet, *From Anger to Joy*, 2024.

While the Musée du quai Branly placed the Indians within the broader context of the Middle Passage, Klan terror, and racist minstrelsy,<sup>533</sup> it largely avoided addressing the concrete shifts in political and social agency—whether during the Jim Crow era or in response to today's gentrification. Instead, a focus on West African visual traditions allowed the museum to showcase its own artifacts under a decolonial banner, both in the exhibition and the accompanying conference. In the process, the museum's collections were subtly rebranded through a framing critical of colonialism. To what extent does this interpretive framing cater to the contemporary branding strategies of museums in former empires? And to what extent do such readings obscure creolized cultural practices whose power has long lain in their rejection of dominant genealogical narratives? That said, would it really be preferable not to hold an exhibition like *Black Indians de la Nouvelle-Orléans*—and risk keeping the Indians' spectacular artistry from view outside of New Orleans?

In any case, the exhibition's curatorial concept largely leaves out entanglements with early *Playing Indian* pop culture and today's creolized forms of resistance, along with questions about how segregation policies may have gained an afterlife in current gentrification and the concomitant displacement of the small neighborhood bars from which the Indians emerge. These kinds of class-specific questions of location and dislocation seem ill-suited to the terms of current European decolonial discourse and the local myth-making around indigenous knowledge, which has shaped figurations of "the Indian" since the nineteenth century. In this context, the otherwise impressive and carefully researched exhibition also gestures toward invocations of African indigeneity—maybe also an ethnologizing contemporary transposition of nineteenth-century European Indianism—and toward the epistemology of Eurocentric genealogical thinking. That may be the price for gaining international recognition for masking practices that have long been marginalized.<sup>534</sup> As it seems today, however, the figure of "the Indian" has become projected onto Black bodies in a specific way—perhaps also as a counterweight to the media erasure of the mass deaths of nameless migrants at the borders of the EU that uncannily accompanies the Blaxploitation-coined popularity of Black Lives Matter and related imagery when mobilized within Europe.

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533 See the framing of the Paris exhibition with large-scale contemporary works on the Ku Klux Klan by Vincent Valdez, Michael Ray Charles, and Philip Guston; *Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, Black Indians*, 2022: 62–67, 78–83, 94–97.

534 On the connection between recognition and gentrification of the Indians prior to the Paris exhibition, see Lief and McCusker, Jockomo, 2019: 120.



Figure 55: Le Pavillon Hotel, Poydras Street, New Orleans, postcard.  
© Le Pavillon Hotel.

What is missing in the specifically situated museal reception of the Black Indians, then, is not just the question of how a figure of revolt might be politically utilized—or, how the figure of the Indian has been reinvented as a signifier of urban, creolized maroons, for example. This omission also means that concrete references to labor or material conditions cannot be made legible.

While the Paris catalog cover foregrounds beaded imagery, the so-called downtown suits are often made of three-dimensional elements resembling ornate plasterwork or stucco. These full-body ornamental suits can be read as specifically situated materializations. They also gesture to contexts of labor, and that is, to the social environment of the Indians—in short, to the class relations that have long shaped their practices. This becomes visible in the work of Allison “Tootie” Montana: Indian icon, Big Chief of the Yellow Pocahontas, and by profession a plasterer. In 2005, shortly before Hurricane Katrina, Montana died of a heart attack at City Hall while protesting police violence against the Indians. He is remembered as transforming intertribal street clashes over territorial rights into competitions for the best suit design—and for introducing

three-dimensional elements into suit-making.<sup>535</sup> The stucco facade or ceiling work at the restaurant of the Le Pavillon Hotel on Poydras Street in today's central business district, near the former segregated entertainment quarters of New Orleans, was modeled by Montana. It indicates a connection between plastering and sewing.<sup>536</sup> Looking at Montana's work, material relations become legible: a responsiveness to one's surroundings, bound up with skilled labor. Transposed into Indian practices, these relations and their situatedness may remain largely obscured in Afrocentric genealogical narratives. To understand where the Indians come from, one might then rather need to look to the vanishing back street bars—and with them, to the specific social and labor conditions that shaped respective practices.

Yet even beyond this local New Orleanian context, new and still unforeseeable lines of flight may emerge. The African "roots" of the Indians themselves can be read as a rhizomatic blend of transcontinental entanglements—also further complicating my earlier view of creolizing. If one traces Indianized masking practices on the African continent before the Middle Passage—that is, already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—this paradoxically complicates later interpretations. It undermines a unilinear retrospective Africanization of the Indian figure, both in New Orleanian local historiography as well as the Paris exhibition. This also helps challenge the idea that the world only globalized through the plantation underbelly of "primitive" accumulation.

In his 2017 study *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Kongo Dances and the Origins of the Mardi Gras Indians*, Jeroen Dewulf unsettles romantic notions of Africa as a "virgin motherland" before the transcontinental slave trade.<sup>537</sup> Researching precreolized mimetic practices in Africa, he teases out the layered history of European expansion. Dewulf shows how Iberian-Catholic theatrical traditions were adopted by Central African brotherhoods beginning in the early seventeenth century. These brotherhoods emerged during the Christianization promoted by Alfonso I, king of the Kingdom of Kongo—predating the Middle Passage. Dewulf traces how their performances repurposed and

535 On the "Downtown Style," which differs from the figurative elements of the uptown suits, see Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 17.

536 Thanks to Big Chief Darryl Montana, who in 2019 brought me to the Le Pavillon Hotel to show me the stuccowork of his father and its correspondence with the design of the Indian suits. On his sewing and masking, see Sascha Just's documentary *Big Chief*, [https://saschajust.com/featured\\_item/big-chief/](https://saschajust.com/featured_item/big-chief/), accessed February 18, 2024.

537 See Dewulf, *From the Kingdom*, 2017; see also "From Moors to Indians," 2015; "From the Calendas," 2018; "Black Brotherhoods," 2015. On centuries-old trade relations between the African and European continents predating the Middle Passage, and related criticism of the "myth of first contact," see also McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 1995: 227.

subverted colonial *autos sacramentales*—Jesuit morality plays that dramatized battles between Christians and Moors, later recast with “Amerindian” or African figures.<sup>538</sup> He argues that these danced, fraternal masking practices may have provided a cultural space of resonance for the later creolized reception of the Indian figure in the US South, introduced to the area through early maroons who escaped from Spanish “exploration” ships even before New Orleans was founded—or, through the afterlife of these practices in Caribbean carnival.<sup>539</sup> The performative transposition of this African-Iberian substrate, he argues, was a response to the post-Reconstruction period. Mardi Gras, with its relative freedoms, offered space for forming mutual aid organizations. However, long before the Old Liner krewes and the carnival of anglophone elites, Dewulf maintains, these forms had already been carried on through Catholic Black brotherhoods on the African continent, that is, before the establishment of transatlantic slave trade routes.<sup>540</sup> Around 1900 at the latest, he then concludes, they were reactivated under new social conditions and translated into the carnival setting in New Orleans.

“Time and again,” he writes in *Black Brotherhoods*, “scholars narrowly reduced anti-colonial resistance to the attachment to pre-colonial traditions and failed to understand that, in many cases, the appropriation and reinvention of the idiom of the colonizer was a much more effective strategy in dealing with colonial aggression.”<sup>541</sup> Indeed, on second glance, the suits in the earliest known Mardi Gras photograph of the Indians in the *Times Democrat* seem to remotely allude to Orientalist aesthetics. Along with the gendered dynamics of the Indians’ masking practices, this may lend support to Dewulf’s brotherhood thesis. Highlighting alternative flight lines of mimetic amalgamations, Dewulf thus challenges simplified understandings of creolization that begin with the idea of untouched precolonial territories in Africa and Europe. What emerges instead is a sense that transcontinental contacts and entanglements were never solely shaped by European colonial hegemony. Accordingly, the creolized afterlife of what may have been a Central African “appropriation” of a European, male-coded theatrical genre also pushes back against the culturalist-retrotopian narratives of decolonization mobilized not least in the global marketing of the Indians. What in Paris seemed to be hard-won recognition of the Indians’ masking practices—practices that were indeed policed and suppressed for over

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538 See Dewulf, *From the Kingdom*, 2017: 91–93; Harrasser, “Borrowed Plumes,” 2025.

539 On *sangamentos* and mock war dances, see Dewulf, *From the Kingdom*, 2017: 37–40, 189–198.

540 For a description of a Black carnival king accompanied by “Indians” from 1823, see also Lief and McCusker, *Jockomo*, 2019: 82.

541 Dewulf, “Black Brotherhoods,” 2015: 31.

a century—may undermine their political potential: to forge multidirectional transoceanic modes of relating, defying the ongoing dirtiness of hegemonic societal conditions.

As Saidiya Hartman underscores in *Lose Your Mother*, the descendants of the Middle Passage did not come from kings and queens of some mythic ancestral continent.<sup>542</sup> They came instead from African subalterns—those brutally captured during European expansion, sold, marched across West Africa, locked in dungeons, and shipped off into the plantation system. As Sylvia Wynter also shows, people had already been marked as “without lineage” in the Kongolese caste system, consigned to enslavement, and later ruthlessly exploited by a global bourgeoisie. In her talk with David Scott, she explains: “The opposite to slave is not only being free: the opposite to slave is also *belonging* to a lineage.”<sup>543</sup> And in her essay “1492” she states:

In other words, by making conceptualizable the representation, in the earlier place of a line of noble hereditary descent, of a bioevolutionarily selected line of eugenic hereditary descent, the symbolic construct of “race” mapped onto the color line has served to enact a new status criterion of *eugenicity* on whose basis the global bourgeoisie legitimates its ostensibly bioevolutionarily selected dominance—as the alleged global bearers of a transnational and transracial line of eugenic hereditary descent—over the global nonmiddle (or “working”) classes, with its extreme Other being that of the “jobless” and “homeless” underclass, who have been supposedly discarded by reason of their genetic defectivity by the Malthusian “iron laws of nature.”<sup>544</sup>

Even so, the creolized figure of Indian-style revolt perhaps gives rightful place to a memory of the underclass that is more multidirectional than linear. The Black Indians, at any rate, evoke both unpredictable transoceanic relations and the sociocidal legacy of colonial extractivism cutting through both African and Indian reconfigurations. A reading of *Mardi Gras* that underscores

542 On the relationship between ascribed kinlessness and enslavement, see Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 2008: 5, 86–88.

543 Scott: “Re-enchantment,” 2000: 148; see also Edwards, “Wynter’s Early Essays,” 2001. On global history and the differentiation of various forms of enslavement, see Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei*, 2013; on the adoption of African elements of superexploitation in the early Iberian–African Atlantic: 690, 848.

544 Wynter, “1492,” 1995: 39–40.



Figure 56: Exhibition *Black Indians de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, Musée du quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2022. Photo: Evelyn Annufß.

multidirectional memory, moreover, does latently inform the parts of the Paris exhibition curated by Steve Bourget and his team that bring gender into play.<sup>545</sup>

Thanks to the work of cocurator Kim Vaz-Deville, references to minor feminine figures, who have only recently started gaining broader attention, accompany the exhibition of Black Indian suits: to wit, the Baby Dolls. Loosely associated with the Indians, these nomadic Mardi Gras figures do not form a single tribe, nor do they appear as Queens accompanying a Big Chief. Rather, they disrupt notions of patrilineal African heritage and heroism. Even their suits on display in Paris as sculptural costumes suggest queer-feminist, cross-cutting modes of performative transpositions. In doing so, they challenge a regime of ethnologizing validation that has dominated Europe since the nineteenth century and continues to shape its museum culture—one that the Black Indians may be encountering in the wake of their globalized recognition. It is through the Baby Dolls, after all, that creolized masking practices become legible not as “ethnic drag,” but as a dirty dragging from below—something well worth recalling in view of the current right-wing carnival.

545 On decentering remembrance, with a focus on the entanglements of colonial history and antisemitism, see Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 2009. On the reflexive role of minor figures (“Nebenfiguren”), see Menke, “hidden,” 2024.

### ***Performing Otherwise (Baby Dolls)***

By hearsay, they appear as a feminized, queer transfiguration of mob revolt: a kind of many-headed hydra of the back streets. As infamous chorines, they bear no individual names, no marks of rank that would slot them into a hierarchy.<sup>546</sup> Their backstories live almost entirely in the realm of oral fabulation. In local carnival historiography, these “worldly women” were overlooked long after their first appearances and were barely recognized outside their immediate environment,<sup>547</sup> especially since they appeared “only” by dancing—as loose ambient figures. At first, they were not pictured at all; yet as Vaz-Deville notes, they embodied “one of the first women’s street masking practices in the United States.”<sup>548</sup> As the Americanized post-Reconstruction elite carnival evolved alongside increasing segregation, masked women were associated with prostitution.<sup>549</sup> For these chorines, white elite parade floats and balls were unquestionably off limits. Branded as dirty, they were not deemed photographable by the new media of the time, mostly occupied with “elevated” spectacles. Still from the back streets, they were sung into being as figurations of sexualized desire in the era’s ragtime—and linger, specter-like, in today’s sound archives.<sup>550</sup> Though later temporarily forgotten, they belonged to the nomadic gangs of high society’s castoffs who, during Jim Crow apartheid, showed up outside official parades—interwoven with the emergence of mutual aid and pleasure clubs.

Unlike King Zulu with his procession or the Indian Big Chiefs and their entourage, they enter the scene as “queer” escorts of a creolized spatial claiming: not as bystanders,<sup>551</sup> but as moving, unruly bodies—inviting “tout-monde,” as Glissant would call the people in the streets, to dance along. They appear as a diffuse choral assembly, opening up space for others—for potentially unbounded gatherings. As a kind of supporting crowd, they move on their own terms. They do not invoke heroic gestures. Rather, they provide a collective act

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546 See Hartman’s concept of “chorines” as minor figures, which she develops from the chorus line, that is, from the enclosed stage space (“to dance within an enclosure”: 347); she defines choric performance forms as nonheroic figurations of mutual aid and collective action, as a performative promise of a different, nonhegemonic sociality, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 345–349.

547 Vaz-Deville, *Walking Raddy*, 2018: 1.

548 Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 6.

549 See Brock, “Baby Doll Addendum,” 2018; Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 51.

550 See Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 46–48; Bratcher, “Operationalizing,” 2018; Brock, “Addendum,” 2018.

551 On the term—albeit in reference to complicit behavior under National Socialism—see Barnett, *Bystanders*, 1999.

of care—celebrating the streets as sites of possible engagement. And it is here, in the streets, where their resisting potential is situated.

Their performance shifts between giving space and briefly dancing themselves out of their surrounding in solo bursts—translating their loose, collective assembly into a repertoire of unique interplays and counterplays of bodily movements. They show up and vanish unpredictably—echoing the moves of all kinds of beings in syncopated jumps, reaching beyond the people immediately present. When they touch the street while dancing, they underscore their embeddedness within this open environment. These days, they also perform for the phone cameras of the audiences they pass by, bridging the here-and-now with an elsewhere. Well beyond the local streets, they evoke the joy of spontaneous gatherings.

Dancing, they appear as minor figures who give rise to collective constellations—fluid, open, and ever-shifting. In doing so, they counteract the transposition of the proscenium stage into street carnival by the so-called Old Liner krewes of high society. It is said, that their name once directly referred to their jobs as sex workers and was later reclaimed by middle-class women as a sign of feminist empowerment.<sup>552</sup> As the tale goes, the Baby Dolls were first called so by their pimps in the 1910s and came out of Black Storyville, the segregated red-light district once known as Coon Town, just steps from what is now New Orleans's central business district, near Le Pavillon Hotel and Lee Circle.<sup>553</sup> Baby Dolls is not just a cutesy nickname; it marks the specific labor conditions of women who, after abolition, had nothing but their bodies to sell—some of whom were hyperexploited like living dolls in brothels known as circuses.<sup>554</sup>

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552 See Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 14.

553 On the history of Storyville, built in 1897 as prostitution and gambling aimed at mass tourism were legalized, which was a segregated district and presumably “the toughest environment Black women had encountered since enslavement,” see also Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 18, 66; Rose, *Storyville*, 1978. On the differing commodity character of *bare* labor in the context of plantation and prostitution, see Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 25; on the persistence of violence in social relations, see Roach: “The question is not if slavery still exists but whether people treat each other as if it did.” *Cities*, 1996: 231.

554 See Atkins on Naked Dances in the brothels and the transposition of dancing into cultural techniques of survival: “Through dancing, the Baby Dolls (and groups like them) demarcated the space they inhabited and used their bodies to generate a sense of collective survival.” “From the Bamboula,” 2018: 101–102, 104. Their sexualized forms of appearing in public allegorize resistance to what Zeuske refers to as the production of “naked capital.” *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei*, 2013: 613.

“If they were not making a scene,” Kim Vaz writes of their carnival mode, “Baby Dolls were where the scene was happening.”<sup>555</sup> The moving spatiality of the Baby Dolls lacks any frame, any fixed vanishing point. That they have become dance icons of New Orleans Mardi Gras—and are now getting scholarly attention thanks to Vaz’s work—signals a renewed political interest in what Saidiya Hartman elsewhere names *wayward lives*: “At the turn of the twentieth century, young black women were in open rebellion. They struggled to create autonomous and beautiful lives, to escape the new forms of servitude awaiting them, and to live as if they were free.”<sup>556</sup>

Branded under Jim Crow as both the “lowest of the low” and as marketable commodities, the Baby Dolls evoked the lingering echo of sexualized violence and its associated forms of blaxploitative visibilization in a city that was once the epicenter of the Southern human trade until the fall of the plantation system.<sup>557</sup> Dancing collectively in the streets, however, they also staged a kind of anarchic street performance—an enactment of potential ungovernability and shared agency. They emerged as both companion figures and counterpoints to subaltern masculinity, in the very moment that gender relations had begun to shift. Their acts of giving space can be seen as loose forms of another kind of mutual aid: a performative promise in creolized drag not to be governed as under Jim Crow.<sup>558</sup>

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555 Vaz, Baby Dolls, 2013: 8; see also Walking Raddy, 2018; on the precarious history of transmission, see the recently published “Les Baby Dolls,” 2022. The Baby Dolls examined here are—contrary to what some stylized choreographies found online might suggest—first and foremost unruly figures. In 2013, the Louisiana State Museum in the Presbytère dedicated an exhibition to them for the first time: *They Call Me Baby Doll: A Mardi Gras Tradition*, <https://louisianastatemuseum.org/museum/presbytere>, accessed September 11, 2024. See Atkins on the Baby Dolls’ repertoire, “From the Bamboula,” 2018. At the Backstreet Cultural Museum, Sylvester Francis presented their outfits alongside the suits of the Indians and references to the tradition of jazz funerals and the Northside Skull and Bone Gang around Big Chief Bruce Sunpie Barnes (*Les squelettes sont en marche*, 2022)—a gang that, on Mardi Gras Day at dawn, goes door to door through Tremé, opening the carnival of the back streets, <https://www.backstreetmuseum.org/general-2/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-INwiutEG0>, accessed September 11, 2024.

556 Quoted from the opening of Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: xiii.

557 On the afterlife of sexualized auction spectacles in the context of prostitution, see Roach, *Cities*, 1996: 224–233. On the relationship between port city and plantation, which produces both these forms of sexualized violence and forms of resistance, see Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000: 46.

558 On the critique of “being governed in such a manner,” see Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 1996, 392; see also Butler, “What is Critique?,” 2002.

Without referring to the Baby Dolls themselves, Hartman describes such collective modes of performing as “the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies.”<sup>559</sup> She places a “choreography of the possible … which was headless and spilling out in all directions,”<sup>560</sup> in the neglected zones known as “the ward”—“urban commons where the poor assemble”;<sup>561</sup> spaces where the longing for another world are performed in “wayward practices.”<sup>562</sup> From this perspective, the nomadic, choral apparitions of the New Orleans Baby Dolls evoke a *queer episteme* of nongenealogical, transoceanic, ostensibly minor—dirty—mimesis, carrying a potential for a decidedly political desire.

Doing justice to the Baby Dolls may mean not retroactively individualizing them, that is, not countering their role as collective minor figures. Therefore, this is not about giving each one a personal backstory or a singular voice, in a well-established fashion of counterhistory, nor about making them into vessels of identification through fabulated oral history. Rather, this is to bring into view the “environmental politicality” of their street appearances—opening up space to gather and exposing a collective capacity for joyful relationality. As a loose and moving chorus, the Baby Dolls help to imagine and experience entanglements that resist the violence of segregationism, of Jim Crow apartheid and its afterlife—still blocking other societal ways of relating.

In the aesthetic form their public appearance takes, they raise the question of which specific modes of production create existing separations in the first place. As indicated by their name and outfits, the Baby Dolls’ apparitions refer to a context of gendered human commodification shaped by the plantation system and furthered by Jim Crow.<sup>563</sup> In a city where the sex industry, tied to carnival, became a tourist attraction, they deliberately and ostentatiously drag along particular historical articulations of human commodification. Their outfits might read as stylized exaggerations of those of sex workers from past eras. Thus, they reflect the gender politics implied in what Mbembe, pointing to the production of precarious lives and “dirty” labor, calls the “Black condition.”<sup>564</sup> In this way, they expose the gendered aftereffects of colonial extractivism and

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559 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 227–228.

560 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 234.

561 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: 4.

562 Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 2020: xiii.

563 Dillon refers to the historical racialization of slavery: “making a body black … meant turning it into property”; *New World Drama*, 2014: 139. Nyong’o, in a different context, speaks of the transformation of hypervisibility “into a dignified shamelessness” and contrasts corresponding forms of public performance with the pain porn of feminized depictions of victims; *Amalgamation Waltz*, 2009: 101.

564 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017: 15.

racial-capitalist hyperexploitation, that is, the subjection of people to become bare labor.<sup>565</sup> Through their carnivalesque appearance, they confront the fetish character ascribed to Black bodies under the American plantation system and its aftereffects. Staging themselves collectively as unruly bodies, however, they may hint to sensing a different life for *tout-monde*.

The Baby Dolls were first reported to appear at New Orleans's Mardi Gras around 1912.<sup>566</sup> Supposedly armed, dressed in ultrashort satin skirts, wearing ruffled old-style baby bonnets and carrying baby bottles filled with alcohol, they showed up in gangs during Mardi Gras—throwing money around and hiring jazz bands, defiantly challenging their living conditions.<sup>567</sup> At a time when it was seen as unseemly for white women to mask, the Baby Dolls turned the back streets of New Orleans into stages for playful “impromptu street corner competitions” (Vaz) and open dance floors. Some of their dance moves—called drags—made visible the act of schlepping along. And with their satin suits—which also embraced older, as well as fuller, bodies—with their Victorian-style bonnets, they appeared as counterfigures to fantasies of feminine purity that thrived under industrial capitalism, middle-class family values, and racist segregation. As dancing chorines, they embodied a challenge to what Sylvia Wynter elsewhere sharply terms “lineage-clannic identity.”<sup>568</sup> The Baby Dolls responded to the subaltern condition of attributed kinlessness with a danced enactment of relations beyond genealogy.

They thus outshined the “elevated carnival” and the patriarchal white ball culture of New Orleans, where face masks are still reserved for men and so-called debutantes appear as decorative stage props for elderly gentlemen. Whereas the balls of New Orleans's elite to this day promote marriageable young women in service to their families and as figurations of white, supposedly fragile virginity tinged with plantation nostalgia, the Baby Dolls were already defying such stagings of femininity in the 1910s. By invoking the flipside of the sanitized Southern mythology—actual conditions of extreme, often sexualized

565 On the concept of “bare labor—labor stripped of the resources of social life and the capacity for social reproduction,” see Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 35, also 132. On gender-specific forms of bare labor, see Federici, *Caliban*, 2004.

566 On the historical background of the Baby Dolls, see Johnson, “Fighting for Freedom,” 2018.

567 See Atkins, “From the Bamboola,” 2018: 90; Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 26; Vaz-Deville, *Walking Raddy*, 2018: 2.

568 Wynter, “1492,” 1995: 33. On the critique of genealogical ideologies of domination and their divisive function, see also Wynter in Scott, “Re-enchantment,” 2000: 148. On the “kinlessness” of the enslaved, see Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2017: 33–34. On the critique of genealogical thinking, see also Erasmus, *Race Otherwise*, 2017: 125–132.

exploitation—they schlepp along a concrete sense of both the production of bare labor and the necessity of collective agency. Through their repertoire, they reject devaluation and open up the possibility of something beyond the bioeconomic conceptualization of the human. From the 1930s, with the emergence of a new consumer culture and the Jazz Age, images of the Baby Dolls began to circulate. Eventually, they gained broader public exposure through tourism magazines and New Deal social reform projects.<sup>569</sup> In 1948, *Holiday Magazine* printed one of several Baby Doll photos taken by Bradley Smith during Mardi Gras.<sup>570</sup> These photos emphasize gender fluidity and gang mobility. But to be pictured also meant serving as a projection screen for desires of dirtiness produced by puritanical norms under the carnivalesque state of exception—and it meant becoming a target of hygiene regulations, ideologies of social improvement, and bureaucratic control. With growing integration, rising standards of respectability, and intensified gentrification, the Baby Dolls then gradually vanished from sight. Supposedly, they first disappeared when the I-10 was built through the back streets of New Orleans, turning those neighborhoods into concrete wastelands and suburban access roads under the banner of modern urban planning. The disappearance of the Baby Dolls recalls how parts of the former Back o' Town might have begun to lose their role as a gathering place—and perhaps also the cost that came with integrating into the suburbs elsewhere. It indicates the dominance of new infrastructures, of socially engineered environmental change and its price.<sup>571</sup>

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569 With reference to the complementary, parallel universe of Hollywood white female child stars such as Shirley Temple and their clean baby-sex aesthetic, see Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 24; "Unruly Woman Masker," 2018: 132. See also Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," 1996; in a current context, see also the DFG research project by Kai van Eikels *Performance und die Macht des Schwächeren: Unpünktlichkeit, Ersetzbarkeit, Niedlichkeit*, <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/517032562>, accessed September 11, 2024.

570 "Marching clubs, both white and Negro, hold small independent parades of their own starting early Mardi Gras morning. Costumes of marchers range from Jack and the Beanstalk to bonnetted Baby Dolls." This is the caption to a Baby Doll image by Bradley Smith in Basso Hamilton's "Boom Town, Dream Town: New Orleans Retains its Old-World Charm, but Its Biggest Effort Today Is to Become a No. 1 Seaport," in *Holiday: The American Travel Magazine* 3, no. 2, 1948: 26—41 and 124—126, on 34.

571 On the deterritorialization of the street in the context of control societal developments and the new relevance of private logistics companies under conditions of globalized capitalism, see Sebastian Kirsch's current FWF research project *Straßenszenen/Street Scenes*, <https://www.fwf.ac.at/forschungsradar/10.55776/J4833>, accessed September 11, 2024; see also his book *Chor-Denken*, 2020: 507.



Figure 57: Baby Dolls, New Orleans, 1944. The Historical New Orleans Collection (THNOC MSS 536.33.3.1). Photo: Bradley Smith.

That the Baby Dolls made a comeback after the turn of the millennium—right there under the bridge of former Back o' Town—suggests a lingering desire to bring the unfulfilled promises of other social possibilities back into memory through performing, against all odds.<sup>572</sup> The Baby Dolls are said to have been

<sup>572</sup> See, for example, Baby Doll Cinnamon Brazil Black (centered in Figure 59)—dancing in a costume mixing Indian and Baby Doll suits under the bridge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xadO5ipX4w>, accessed September 24, 2024.

reactivated from a bar in Tremé: the Mother in Law Lounge, located right next to the I-10 freeway bridge that was completed in 1969. The push is said to have come from the lounge's owner at the time, Antoinette K-Doe, who was deeply involved in all sorts of mutual aid work. In New Orleans, she was best known for dragging around a life-sized doll of her late husband, rhythm and blues singer Ernie K-Doe. Antoinette even ran him in effigy for mayor after Hurricane Katrina, to protest against corrupt reconstruction policies that hit the back streets hardest.

Dancing out the door of the Mother in Law Lounge or other venues and into the street like living dolls—making an entrance into the public scene and jumping the rails—the Baby Dolls evoke performative entanglements and transpositions.<sup>573</sup> Time and again, they show up as choruses of grief and protest at jazz funerals. Their dancing pushes back against police violence, whose main target is often young Black men: those hit the most by mass incarceration and prison industry exploitation. With their syncopated jumps, the Baby Dolls aim beyond the defense of their own immediate interests toward a collective gesture: making the New Jim Crow itself dance, to borrow from Marx.

These days, they show up in varying constellations at funerals, during Mardi Gras, and on St. Joseph's Night—seizing on gatherings in the gentrified back streets as their stage. That they have gained popularity beyond these contexts may suggest a shift in the value of sexual capital, perhaps even pointing to the neoliberal aestheticization of sex work and today's image-driven feminized selfifications.<sup>574</sup> Yet if blackface and blaxploitation can be read as articulations of hypercommodified racialized visibility, the Baby Dolls show how their bodies are shaped not simply by personal autonomy but by the social conditions in which they are embedded. Their danced appropriation of visual gender codes from the Jim Crow era lays claim to a different kind of physical use value, one that defies being reduced to sexualized capital. From this perspective, they are a poor fit as icons of decontextualized individual empowerment. Much like blackface at the South African Cape around 1900, which has morphed today into full-head ornate glitter makeup, their moving bodies confront the historical dirtiness of the very societal conditions in which they move. In doing so, the Baby Dolls mediate a broader notion of gender bending, while performing in the streets. They have always featured bodies that do not represent normative femininity—whether read as female or male.<sup>575</sup> Back in the Jim Crow era, which

573 See Florence, "The World That Antoinette K-Doe Made," 2018; Carrico, "Miss Antoinette K-Doe," 2018.

574 See Illouz and Kaplan, *What Is Sexual Capital?*, 2022: 64—103.

575 See Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 7; "Iconic," 2018: 147. See also Atkins, "From the Bamboula," 2018: 90; Honora, "Dancing Women," 2018: 195—196. Pacey assumes that the official incorpo-

in many ways prefigured apartheid elsewhere, the Baby Dolls seem to have acted as an open chorus and refuge for anyone deemed sexually deviant—which is to say, queer.<sup>576</sup>

Challenging the kind of New Orleans exceptionalism critiqued by Thomas Adams and Matt Sakakeeny—which limits historiography to local framing—the Baby Dolls show a loose kinship with other carnivalesque forms of appearance.<sup>577</sup> Dewulf, for instance, traces the *diabladas*—whose name, as we will see, echoes in the Baby Dolls' punning performances—back to comic companion figures in Latin American carnival. These figures themselves evoke early Central African adaptations of *autos sacramentales* during Iberian Catholic colonialism. As Dewulf argues, this kind of performative transposition gained an afterlife in the masking practices of Black brotherhoods across diasporic histories of forced migration.<sup>578</sup> The Baby Dolls' bonnets, on closer inspection, are even faintly reminiscent of the Orientalized headdresses seen in *autos sacramentales* that first referenced the figure of the Moor—later morphing into “Indianist” configurations. In this context, the Baby Dolls conjure up clownish, comic, queer figures, tied rhizomatically to cross-dressing, blackfacing, and playing Indian—figures long performed mostly by male bodies, and continually restaged in new contexts. They speak to the transoceanic entanglements of mimetic techniques negotiating societal conditions.

Reading the Baby Dolls, then, is not about origin stories but about researching performative transpositions. It is about investigating collective modes of mimetic appearing whose functions are context-specific yet stretch beyond the local and the immediate here and now—toward a queer, creolized dragging that opens up the possibility of previously unforeseeable acts of relating. The ongoing right-wing carnival—during the pandemic, Klan hoods in supermarkets to mock mask mandates—stages a rehearsal for today’s disruptive yet authoritarian politics. In contrast, the Baby Dolls’ street performing gestures to nonlinear, global oddkinships. That can be exemplified with regard to the Latin American feminist

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ration of the so-called moffies into the Cape Town carnival corresponds with and predates developments in the New Orleans Mardi Gras; “Emergence,” 2014: 119–120.

576 On “male Baby Dolls,” see Vaz Deville, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 86–91. See also Godet, “Gender Bending,” 2025. On the history of Black queerness and the heteronormativity of respectability politics in the context of the Civil Rights movement, see Russel, “The Color of Discipline,” 2008. On the “bourgeois, neo-Victorian ideals of the African American middle class” and the “anti-erotic prudery of racial uplift” as opposed to the “naked mask,” see also Chude-Sokei, *The Last “Darky,”* 2006: 202–203.

577 See Adams and Sakakeeny, *Remaking New Orleans*, 2019.

578 See Dewulf, *From the Kingdom*, 2017; on the *diablitos*, see *From the Calendas*, 2018: 17; on the kinship of *diabladas*, *morenos* and *Indians*, see—in the context of the Bolivian carnival—also Lecount Samaké, “Dancing for the Virgin and the Devil,” 2004.

strike movement and the queer guerilla performances of Marika Antifascista during the carnival of La Legua, Chile. Wearing short satin skirts and stylized headpieces with pink horns, they dance through the streets as antifascist protest figures.<sup>579</sup> Streamed and shared around the world via social media, they seem to visually echo the Baby Dolls' outfits. In resisting the current gendered backlash of a new, sprawling, globally networked broligarchic authoritarianism, these "little antifa devils" also summon memories of resistance to the 1970s Chilean coup—signaling the early alignment of neoliberalism and fascism. The Baby Dolls' kindred street performing, then, calls attention to potential political lines of flight that have long remained unthinkable.<sup>580</sup>



Figure 58: Marika Antifascista, La Legua, Chile, 2021. Photo: Elianira Riverors Piro.

Marika Antifascista has no direct link to the contemporary Mardi Gras Baby Dolls. Nor do their dancing or their far-flung cousins map out a blueprint for political organizing. However, this dancing *as if they were free* gestures toward

579 On Marika Antifascista, queer carnival, and the connection to the feminist strike movement in Latin America, see Cabello and Diaz, "Die Straße wird queer," 2023, <https://tdz.de/artikel/593b6dfb-a0eb-48a5-a772-5ba3d88a4f2c>, accessed September 11, 2024. These open collectives are referred to as *cuerpo-territorio*; see Gago, *Feminist International*, 2020 (Chapter 3, "Body Territory": 60–77). Building on Echeverri (Territory, 2005), see also Govrin, *Politische Körper*, 2022: 173–221, on 216. On transversal practices of care, see Lorey, *Demokratie*, 2021: 161–198; *Democracy*, 2022.

580 On the connection between Baby Dolls and activist protest in the Caribbean, see Marshall, "Diasporic Baby Dolls," 2021: 10–12.

unforeseen encounters that stretch beyond simple face-to-face relations. From this decidedly nongenealogical, aterritorial perspective, it makes sense to further fabulate distant entanglements: such as with the red-costumed devil figures in Cape Town who flank the local Indians, the Atjas. Perhaps the Baby Dolls even echo the stage entrance and etymology of HELLEQUIN—the minor, comic figure from “hell” in European popular theater. Soot-smeared and personifying precarity, the figure known elsewhere as HARLEKIN, as Rudolf Münz points out, does not step onstage in an orderly fashion; likely entering the world of the *comici dell’arte*—however untraceably—via the charivaris and diableries in the sixteenth century,<sup>581</sup> their mode of making an entrance is jumping: the leap that shatters theatrical framing.

From the dancing Baby Dolls, one thus can easily make connections to all sorts of dragging, as a kind of schlepping in leaps. This includes their distant kinship with Old European Perchten parades. In Gastein, Austria, the Perchten are accompanied by a HANSWURST couple. Evoking Venetian carnival, the so-called BAJAZZL each lead a Poppin on a leash—a doll said to bring fertility, which they hurl at young girls.<sup>582</sup> The Baby Dolls’ “unruly bodies” may parody such masculinist sexualizations of carnival throws—Kamelle and all—but they also remind us that mimetic appearances can be hijacked. The amalgamations of performative transpositions they conjure are indeed dirty—too slippery to police.<sup>583</sup> No one can pin down exactly where these constantly moving figures “really” come from or what they “stand for.” As creolized figurations, they show that referencing is not a “straight practice.” In their ever-changing ways of entering the street—in nomadic forms of touching across—they evoke a desire to collectively do justice to the “rags”<sup>584</sup> by queering them.

On closer inspection, they upend genealogical stories and binary conceptions of gender. Their outfit—aligned with Mardi Gras’s carnivalesque traditions—brings a pun to the scene. Their satinwear plays with the demonization of their bodies, fusing fabric (satin) and designation (Satan)—a label akin to HELLEQUIN. Read as “little devils,” diablitas,<sup>585</sup> the Baby Dolls interweave references to newborns and sexualized femininity into living dolls that seem to take on a life of their own. They enact a practical knowledge of nonreproductive, deterritorializing, queer temporality, inherent in their appearance and scene-making. This temporal knowledge runs counter to the crude historicist

581 See Münz, *Das “andere” Theater*, 1979: 102.

582 See Hutter, “Salzburger,” 2002: 12.

583 In reference to the Jim Crow persona, see Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 2003: 23.

584 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1999, 460, N1a, 8 (in German, *Lumpen: Das Passagen-Werk*, V.1, 1991: 572; N 1a, 8).

585 See Vaz, *Baby Dolls*, 2013: 96.

logic of straight, linear “clannic identity” prized by the patriarchal high society Old Liners and their retrograde pageants. The Baby Dolls, instead, perform what might be called *a temporal dragging of transoceanic entanglements*. Their paradoxical appearance, as oversexualized babies in female-outfitted grown bodies, brings a nongenealogical concept of temporality to work. They articulate an implicit understanding of the intertwined temporalities that come with performative transpositions. By ripping masking practices out of context and putting them to new use, the Baby Dolls show how to blow off epistemologies of lineage-based identity and the territorial claims that come with it. Through danced citations, they bring to life an “alternative theatricalization of kinship.”<sup>586</sup>

Obviously, this kind of dragging carries a spatial charge that goes beyond dancing in the here and now of the New Orleans back streets. Like the Indians, the Baby Dolls are part of a larger cast of figures in creolized carnival. As early as the 1880s, they show up in Martinique and Trinidad as a three-in-one character: a doll, a child, and a “fallen” woman.<sup>587</sup> While in New Orleans the baby doll and the staging of womanhood have long fused into an embodied persona, in Caribbean carnival, people carry white, blue-eyed baby dolls and use them to mock-shame bystanders as presumed fathers, demanding child support.<sup>588</sup> This kind of street theater—akin to the carnivalesque tradition of festive begging—also links back to Kewpie: the drag icon from District Six, whose image in a baby doll outfit opens this book and whose name echoes a baby doll frequently celebrated in contemporary US pop songs. Together, these references show that dragging is always socially situated, while also offering the transformative potential of metamorphic translation—gesturing toward the possibility of global political change.

In their dancing, the Baby Dolls claim their fight against different forms of apartheid. They perform and allegorize what is known in New Orleans as second lining. Etymologically, second lining is not just about following the parade or dancing in tow; it is about seconding: dancing together in chorus and counterpoint. The Baby Dolls’ second lining thus opens space for minor, singular performances, dancers stepping in and out, while these fluid transitions of movement weave into constellations where, at least for a while, all

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586 Dillon, *New World Drama*, 2014: 189.

587 See Marshall, “Diasporic Baby Dolls,” 2021: 3; McIntyre, “Baby Doll,” 2021: 3, 12; Franco, “Women Maskers,” 2018. For the Black Indians, similar correspondences can be identified in relation to the JONKONNU festivals in the Bahamas; see Sands, “Carnival Celebrations,” 1991. On the Trinidad carnival, see also Hill, *Trinidad Carnival*, 1972.

588 See Marshall, “Diasporic Baby Dolls,” 2021: 5. See also Michael P. Smith’s photo from Mardi Gras in New Orleans, 1986, which still depicts a Baby Doll with a doll; *Mardi Gras Indians*, 1994: 74.

kinds of people can find room. The Baby Dolls come in the streets as nomadic support characters. They accompany other gangs, yet outside anyone's control. Dirty conditions notwithstanding, their dancing in drag also gestures indirectly toward the queer afterlife of that fabulous, transoceanic hydra invoked by Rediker and Linebaugh.<sup>589</sup> In deterritorializing public space and laying claim to the right to remain, to move, and to be free for *tout-monde*, they do not stand for heroic gestures, as if they might bring about change in one go. Instead, they stir a faint memory of all kinds of loose, infamous people—whose origins might not be traceable, yet who may leap up elsewhere—who, just by appearing, resist dominant separations and identitarian politics. Through their space-giving movement, the Baby Dolls become legible as carnivalesque allegories of resistance to old and new practices of boundary-making, while highlighting the scandal of violence shaping both past and present. Their dirty dragging—trailing “behind actually existing social possibilities,” as Freeman puts it elsewhere<sup>590</sup>—may also take aim at the present-day masked uprisings that push for new apartheid regimes, drawn along arbitrary lines of color and gender. Read thus, the Baby Dolls do not just take the streets; through a kind of performative materialism, they are giving rise to a sense of other possible ways of relating—from under the bridge, from a wrecked place that still, faintly, evokes the ruins of former fairy lands like Kewpie's District Six. Moving, jumping, leaping, the Baby Dolls radiate this political and epistemic potential of *dancing-with* as an affective resource of collective joy—spilling outward, to be taken up anew, figured differently and emerging again *elsewhere* ...

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589 See Linebaugh and Rediker, *Hydra*, 2000.

590 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 2010: xiii; on allegorical temporality: 69—71.



Figure 59: Baby Dolls, under the bridge, Tremé, New Orleans, 2024. Photo: Aurélie Godet.

... movement happens<sup>591</sup> ...

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591 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 2007: 248.



## **Postscript**

“We ask you ... to ensure that there is no visual similarity to the iconic logo of the brand ... belonging to our client.” The original design for the cover by Oliver Brentzel, reflecting on practices of quoting without quotation marks and on what we schlepp along involuntarily, was scrapped just before printing—another casualty of today’s crackdown on queering, the bureaucratic misuse of copyright law, and institutional preemptive obedience. Keep on Dragging ...



# Appendix

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## Archives

BARTOLOMEU DIAS MUSEUM. Mossel Bay.

BAIERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK. Munich.

Photographic collection of Heinrich Hoffmann; musical papers of Siegfried Walther Müller.

BUNDESARCHIV. (FEDERAL ARCHIVES) Berlin.

DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES MUSEUM. Berlin.

DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM. Johannesburg.

GALA QUEER ARCHIVE. Johannesburg.

Kewpie Photographic Collection.

GASTEINER MUSEUM. Bad Gastein.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, HOUGHTON LIBRARY. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Harvard Theatre Collection on Blackface Minstrelsy, 1833—1906.

IZIKO SOCIAL HISTORY CENTRE. Cape Town.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Washington, DC.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SOUTH AFRICA. Cape Town.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. Washington, DC.

Papers of Paul Colin.

NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC LIBRARY. New Orleans, Louisiana.

ÖSTERREICHISCHE MEDIATHEK, AUDIOVISUELLES ARCHIV. TECHNISCHES MUSEUM WIEN. Vienna.

ÖSTERREICHISCHES VOLKSKUNDEMUSEUM. Vienna.

PERCHTENMUSEUM. Bad Gastein.

PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF KENNY MISROLL. Cape Town.

PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF L. J. GOLDSTEIN. New Orleans.

PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF MELVYN MATTHEWS. Cape Town.

SALZBURGER LANDESINSTITUT FÜR VOLKSKUNDE. Salzburg.

Archival estate of Richard Wolfram.

SALZBURGER WEIHNACHTSMUSEUM. Salzburg.

THE PRESBYTÈRE, LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUMS. New Orleans.

THEATERHISTORISCHE SAMMLUNGEN OF THE THEATER STUDIES INSTITUTE AT THE FU BERLIN.

Berlin.

Papers of Traugott Müller.

THEATERWISSENSCHAFTLICHE SAMMLUNG AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLOGNE. Schloss Wahn.

Thingspiel Collection.

THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION (THNOC). New Orleans, Louisiana.

THE LEGACY MUSEUM. Montgomery, Alabama.

TULANE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES. New Orleans, Louisiana.

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