

The “Mardi Gras Indians”

Essential Questions:

- Who are the “Mardi Gras Indians” and what is their importance to New Orleans’ cultural traditions?
- In a Post-Katrina world, does it matter if groups such as the “Mardi Gras Indians” survive?

Introduction:

In a city teeming with rich subcultures, perhaps none is more mysterious, yet more emblematic of the city’s unique history, than the so-called Mardi Gras Indians. In reality, the “Mardi Gras Indians” are not Indians at all, but African American residents of the city who don elaborate, magnificently beaded, hand-made costumes and masquerade as Native Americans during the annual Mardi Gras celebration. Though many of them are working-class people with limited financial resources, the Mardi Gras Indians go to significant effort and expense to create their costumes, which must be made entirely by hand and must be completely new each year.

The tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians dates back at least a century or two, to the time when “krewes” began forming to participate in street celebrations such as Mardi Gras throughout the city. Most of the krewes were exclusive all-white organizations that operated – as they still do today -- “by invitation only.” Excluded from such official celebrations, residents in poorer black neighborhoods began organizing their own social groups and planning their own parades, the routes and practices of which were known only to them.

Because the traditions of the Mardi Gras Indians, as so many traditional African-American cultural practices, were passed down from generation to generation orally, there is little concrete information about the origins of the Mardi Gras Indians. Most observers agree that they used Native American motifs to honor the Maroon communities in which escaped slaves were given shelter by Native Americans. It has also been suggested that the Mardi Gras Indians donned Native American costume because Native Americans could participate in official street festivals but African Americans could not.

Over the years, the Mardi Gras Indians produced some 40 different “tribes,” bearing names such as the “Guardians of the Flame,” the “Mohawk Hunters,” the “Wild Apache,” and many others. Each tribe is led by a “Big Chief,” and includes such officers as a “Big Queen,” a “Flag Boy,” and a “Spy Boy.” In the early days, different tribes, sometimes called “gangs,” would engage in street battles when they encountered each other during a festival. Today, these encounters have become ceremonial mock battles complete with elaborate staging and dances. Today, the competition between tribes consists mainly of

trying to produce the most elaborate costumes, which can weigh more than one hundred pounds and cost as much as several thousand dollars to create.

Though the costumes and titles of the Mardi Gras Indians largely represent Native American traditions, they also incorporate elements of traditional African culture. This is particularly true of the music and dance performances. These musical performances have had a great impact of popular American music; see Thomas L. Morgan, “Mardi Gras Indian Influences on the Music of New Orleans” www.jass.com/tom/next/indian.html. Music critic Tom Piazza also traces the importance of the Indians to New Orleans’ cultural heritage in *Why New Orleans Matters*.

Though the Mardi Gras traditions embraced by New Orleans’ wealthy white citizens are sure to survive Katrina, the prognosis for the Mardi Gras Indians in a post-Katrina world is far less certain. Much of the activity of these groups was centered in the Lower Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that remains largely empty, many of its residents scattered to other parts of the country. Much of the equipment and expensive material used in the making of the costumes was destroyed by Katrina; many Mardi Gras Indians must devote their energies to rebuilding their homes and have little time or money for sewing elaborate costumes. Cherice Harrison-Nelson, the Big Queen of the Guardians of the Flame, estimated that her tribe lost about \$100,000 worth of supplies in Katrina. Because most of the Mardi Gras Indians themselves were far from affluent even before Katrina, the effects of the storm will likely make it all the more difficult for them to revive their traditions.

In *When the Levees Broke*, viewers catch only a brief glimpse of the Mardi Gras Indians. In this lesson, students will endeavor to understand this small but important subculture of New Orleans and assess its prospects for survival in the aftermath of Katrina. They will endeavor to understand a unique cultural phenomenon that can shed enormous light on African-American cultural identity. Perhaps even more importantly, they will try to address what is at stake if such cultures – particularly cultures embraced by the country’s least privileged citizenry – are unable to survive catastrophic events such as Katrina. In short, does it matter to American culture whether or not the Mardi Gras Indians survive?

Photographer Michael P. Smith has written extensively about the Mardi Gras Indians. His beautiful photo essay, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Pelican, 1994) is still in print and widely available, and would provide an excellent text for this lesson. Numerous articles and websites are also available.

Relevant Sections of the Film: Act 3, Chapter 4 – “The Roots Run Deep”

Materials:

Rick Bragg, “Another Battle of New Orleans: Mardi Gras,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 1996, p. 1.

(This article may be found on numerous library databases carrying past issues of The New York Times or at <http://www.pulitzer.org/year/1996/feature-writing/works/mardigras.html>. A copy of the original article is preferable, since it contains several photographs not reproduced in the reprint offered by the Pulitzer Prize Board.)

Michael Smith, "Mardi Gras Indians: Culture and Community Empowerment," http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_mardi_indians.html

Michael P. Smith, *Mardi Gras Indians* (Pelican, 1994)

Tom Piazza, *Why New Orleans Matters* (Regan Books, 2005), pp. 43-54.

The following websites, if available, also provide excellent background information for this lesson, particularly in terms of how Katrina has affected the Mardi Gras Indians:

"Mardi Gras Indians Trace Roots to Slaves," NPR Interview with Cherice Harrison Nelson and her brother Donald Harrison Jr., Feb. 28, 2006.
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5236474

Cherice Harrison-Nelson, "Guardians of the Flame: Upholding Community Traditions and Teaching With Art in New Orleans," *In Motion Magazine*, Sept. 8, 1996
www.inmotionmagazine.com/flame.html

Alison Fensterstock, "Not Enough Indians," *bestofneworleans.com*, Dec. 12, 2006
http://www.bestofneworleans.com/dispatch/2006-12-12/mus_sounds.php

Yolanda Perdomo, "Tribal Traditions: Mardi Gras Indians Battle Katrina's Effects, One Bead at a Time," *NYT Regional Newspapers*, Feb. 20, 2006
<http://www.ocala.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060220/NEWS/202200308/1027>

Activities:

1. Ask students to perform an image search on a major search engine (such as Google or Yahoo) of "Mardi Gras Indians." Ask each student to describe what s/he sees in the images found. Ask students to hypothesize about who they think the people in the pictures are, and what they might be doing. What do they imagine is the purpose of the elaborate costumes the people are wearing? Where might the costumes have come from? How expensive would they be to make? What generalizations can they make about the people wearing the costumes? You may wish to ask each student to print out one image they find most intriguing and describe it in more complete detail. [Please note: if you do not have access to the Internet during the lesson, you may wish to use the beautiful color

photographs from Michael P. Smith's *Mardi Gras Indians* (see above).] These photographs may be used for the summative activities (see below).

Poll students on their general findings. Though answers are likely to vary, try to ensure that students have noticed that the costumes are very elaborate and likely very expensive to make or buy, contain many beaded and feathered elements, seem to resemble some sort of traditional Native American costume, that most of the people wearing them seem to be African American, and that they seem to be in quite a celebratory mood, perhaps participating in a festival or parade of some sort.

2. Next, ask students to read the article by Rick Bragg (see above), which was one of a series of reports that helped Bragg win a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1996. Using the article and the Internet, students will work individually, in partners, or in small groups, depending on the dynamics of the classroom, to complete the "Researching the Mardi Gras Indians" handout, below. This assignment may be used as an in-class assignment if you have access to computers during class, or as an out-of-class homework or research assignment completed outside the classroom.

At the instructor's discretion, students may be asked to complete the assignment entirely on their own by using search engines to locate relevant materials on the Internet about the Mardi Gras Indians, of which there are many. Depending on the skill level of the students, the instructor may also wish to make available the books listed above, and/or direct students to some of the specific websites listed in the "Materials" section, above.

HANDOUT: RESEARCHING THE MARDI GRAS INDIANS
1. What are the historical origins of the "Mardi Gras Indians"? Are they actually "Indians"? Why did they originally decide to dress like "Indians"?
2. Describe several ways in which the Mardi Gras Indians merge African and Indian traditions.

3. What exactly is meant by the term “masking”?

4. What do the names of the various “tribes” represent?

5. What are the titles of the various roles/officers within each “tribe”? What are these titles based on?

6. Why might it be important for Mardi Gras Indians to participate in public festivals such as Mardi Gras?

7. What do people who are “Mardi Gras Indians” do the rest of the year (what sorts of jobs do they have, etc.)?

8. Why might the Mardi Gras Indians want to keep many of their traditions and practices secret?

9. What influence has the music of the Mardi Gras Indians had on popular American music, such as jazz and rhythm-and-blues?

10. Why are the Indians willing to devote so much time, energy, and money to creating the costumes for Mardi Gras, especially since most of them are far from wealthy?

11. Why is it important for each Indian to make his or her own costume, and why must there be a new costume each year?

12. How were the Mardi Gras Indians impacted by Katrina?

Questions for Discussion:

After all students or groups have completed the worksheet, the class as a whole will discuss its findings. Please use the following questions as a guideline for discussion:

1. Based on your research about the Mardi Gras Indians, how would you summarize the importance of the Mardi Gras Indians to New Orleans' cultural heritage?
2. Mardi Gras Indian traditions have long been preserved through oral traditions. Yet recently, representatives of various Indian tribes, such as Cherice Harrison-Nelson, have made numerous efforts, such as starting a Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame, a quilt project, and an educational program for New Orleans school children, to promote understanding of this group. Why might they feel the necessity to promote such activities, even before Katrina? Does Katrina give even greater importance to these efforts?
3. Given the displacement of many African Americans after Katrina, what are the prospects for the survival of the Mardi Gras Indians?
4. Closure/Summative Question: Does it matter to New Orleans if the Mardi Gras Indians are able to survive and continue their rituals and performances in the future? Does it matter to America?

Assessment/Summative Activities/Taking Action:

1. Ask students to research the participation of the Mardi Gras Indians in the most recent Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. Have the various "tribes" been able to regroup and participate?
2. Ask students to create a collage of images of the Mardi Gras Indians from the pictures they found during the image search portion of this lesson.
3. Create a "Mardi Gras Indians Museum" by posting images and basic information about this group on a classroom or hallway bulletin board.

Enrichment Activities:

1. Ask students to research the "flip side" of the Mardi Gras celebration by viewing the documentary "By Invitation Only," which traces the traditions and practices of all-white "krewes" that participate in Mardi Gras. The film, made by New Orleans native Rebecca Snedeker, offers an unprecedented first-hand look into these exclusive clubs. The video is currently available at www.byinvitationonlythefilm.com.
2. Ask students to research some of the other important subcultures in New Orleans, such as the "Zulus," or Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, perhaps best known for appearing in blackface during Mardi Gras as a kind of parody of the racial exclusivity of traditional Mardi Gras.

Additional Resources:

Numerous recordings of music produced by various tribes of Mardi Gras Indians are available for purchase. The following website offers links from which several of the recordings can be ordered: www.satchmo.com/ikoiko/indianmusic.html